

Theatre for the Republic?

The Burgtheater and its Significance for cultural identity formation in the First Republic

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When the Austrian Republic was declared on 12 November 1918, the status of the court theatres also changed. In late November control of the theatres was transferred to the state administration and funding henceforth no longer came from the court exchequer but from the budget of the young republic. The former k. u. k. (Imperial and Royal) Court-Burgtheater was now simply the Burgtheater. No longer charged with the representation of the ruling dynasty and its pluricultural realm it needed to redefine its purpose. Under the helm of the Jewish Social Democrat Leopold Jessner the former Wilhelminian Court Theatre in Berlin, re-vamped as the Prussian State Theatre, adopted a clear programmatic course, positioning itself as a “Theatre for the Republic”. The Burgtheater of the young Austrian republic, by contrast, rather than adopting a new programmatic platform, based its identity on the perpetuation of the myth that it was the “best German-language stage”.

The research will focus on the legal and administrative framework for the takeover. How was it discussed and implemented? Was there an opinion-forming process? Did the politicians heed public discourse in their decision-making process? Did public discourse favour one particular option? Were there alternative options? Were the consequences assessed? How was the new status of the Burgtheater perceived and interpreted by the administration, directorate, and ensemble? Was the response controversial or consensual? How did this affect the programme and ensemble politics? What can we say about the composition of the audience, not least, given that many of the highly educated bourgeois owners of subscriptions had sustained heavy losses by acquiring war bonds?

Drawing on the holdings of the State Archive and the art pages of the daily newspapers of the time we will systematically examine these momentous decisions and reconstruct the relevant interaction of governmental and non-governmental institutions. The project focuses on the self-understanding of the Burgtheater and the ways in which it was perceived by others and enlisted to underpin a range of cultural identity constructions during the First Republic. We will pay particular attention to the upheaval of 1918/19, when the relationship between the state and civil society was fundamentally renegotiated.

<https://www.oeaw.ac.at/en/ikt/research/theatre-and-theatricality/theatre-for-the-republic/>