Maurice Benyowsky – lover, adventurer or proto-colonialist?

Some remarks on his perception in Austrian memorial culture before 1945

In his personal diary, meticulously conducted throughout several decades, the Viennese bureaucrat Matthias Perth in May 1826 refers to the 40th anniversary of the passing away of Count Maurice Benyowsky, „known in history by his restless activities and various extraordinary destinies“. 1 Perth often converted local media reports into diary entries, and it is likely that he did this also in this case, under the heading „Historical Calendar“. Benyowsky was indeed popular in the so-called Austrian Vormärz, and for two reasons. On the one hand, he had become a literary figure due to August von Kotzebue’s drama „Graf Benjowsky oder die Verschwörung auf Kamtschatka“ (1795). This play based on Benyowsky’s autobiography served as a regular feature in the repertoire of Austrian theatres. Perhaps its first performance took place in Graz in 1807 2, and quite a number of theatres in Vienna, Linz, Baden and other cities were soon to follow. „Benjowsky” was widely on stage indeed from the 1810s till 1848.

On the other hand, biographical information became increasingly accessible as well. Admittedly (as far as we know), there had been little reporting in Austria about Benyowsky in his lifetime. His autobiography, in the English (1789), French (1790) or German (1790) versions, might have been studied and was even published in Vienna in 1792, but there was not much coverage in the media. Only in 1780, the official Wiener Zeitung reported about the Count’s efforts to increase Austrian beef exports to overseas regions which was seen as a sort of strange project but beneficial to the Austrian economy 3, and in 1788 – two years after it had actually happened! – the same newspaper mentioned his death. 4 So factually, there was not much known about Benyowsky’s biography. It is therefore not surprising that mainly the love story in Siberia shaped his commemoration: That fact people were familiar with, due to Kotzebue’s drama. 5

Things started to change however, as the Morgenblatt für gebildete Stände published a series on

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1 XXXVIII. Band meines Tagebuches, 18. 12. 1825 – 1. 7. 1827 [manuscript, Wien Bibliothek], p. 431.
2 Wiener Theater-Zeitung, 15. 6. 1807.
3 Wiener Zeitung, 18. 10. 1780.
4 Wiener Zeitung, 28. 6. 1788.
5 Cf. Der Wanderer, 29. 9. 1824.
“Madagaskar und Benjowsky” in 1824. Some time later Joseph von Hormayr mentioned the death of Benyowsky's widow in combination with news on their family, including their stay in Madagaskar. There might have been similar reports as well from which Perth – apart from the theatre play – probably took his inspiration. When Ida Pfeiffer, the famous Austrian female traveller, went to Madagaskar from 1856 till 1858 she was able to put Benyowsky in context of (failed) French efforts to get colonial control over the island; what an irony of history that she was to become part of a similarly failed French-inspired coup d'état in Madagaskar herself.

After the suppression of the revolution, and the establishment of the neoabsolute regime in the Habsburg monarchy, Benyowsky's commemoration changed. Kotzebue's play was hardly performed any more; press reports mention it as „touchingly buried in oblivion“ or simply as „outdated“. Therefore, an important – maybe the most important – mechanism of commemoration lost its value. True, new interests did emerge, on the one hand in the military where options to become active outside Europa had some relevance, and on the other in context of travellogues regarding various world regions which mentioned Benyowsky in passing. Both these directions of reporting – partly propaganda, partly marketing – were instrumental to the colonial efforts of parts of the regime (in particular the commander of the Imperial navy, Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian), but had too low profile to be able to compensate. Furthermore, these efforts largely ceased during the so-called liberal era of Austrian (and Austrian-Hungarian) domestic politics. Albeit Benyowsky's commemoration did not totally vanish as new cultural productions (the opera by Franz Doppler and the novel by Louise Mühlbach) emerged it did certainly diminish. Furthermore, his image as an adventurer which we have partly seen already in Perth's perception was strengthened. Only when France towards the end of the century finally could bring Madagaskar under her imperial control, Austrian media sometimes – but not

6 Morgenblatt für gebildete Stände, 13.-17. 11. 1824.
9 Wiener Zeitung, 15. 4. 1854.
10 Innsbrucker Nachrichten, 6. 12. 1864.
12 Wiener Zeitung, 23. 2. 1859 (concerning Russia), or Wiener Zeitung, 15. 4. 1859 (concerning Formosa). From a later period, but in the same category, see Salzburger Volksblatt, 16. 3. 1886.
always – referred to Benyowsky, the „courageous Hungarian“, as a forerunner of European colonialism. In France, Benyowsky was re-discovered and re-interpreted in a similar way.

During the First Republic (1918-1933/38), Benyowsky was hardly remembered in Austria by anyone. Different however, was the situation in Nazi Germany, where in the framework of colonial interests (directed at the establishment of a so-called „Mittelafrika“ under German control) the name Benyowsky again played a certain – but modest – role. In 1937, another novel was published together with a summary of his appearance in literature. After Austria's occupation by fascist Germany in 1938, one finds traces of this use (or rather misuse?) of Benyowsky's commemoration in some journals. All in all however, his name appears rarely.

To summarise our findings: As usual with historical persons, also Count Maurice Benyowsky's commemoration in Austria had its ups and downs. Once quite well-known, his commemoration faded away since the 2nd half of the 19th century. Unlike in Hungary, Slovakia or Poland he does not feature prominently any more in Austrian collective memory. In addition, his image has always been fluctuating between the clichés of a banned convict rescued by a loving lady, of a fearless unpolitical adventurer or of an early colonial hero, depending on political or social interests. Hardly at any time, at least in Austria, did he come into the focus of serious academic research – a gap in our understanding of Austrian (Central European) global aspirations which should and hopefully will be closed soon.

14 J. Audebert, Madagaskar vom Standpunkt des Handels und der Colonisation, in: Oesterreichische Monatsschrift für den Orient (1884) 263-266 and 298-300.
19 Neues Wiener Tagblatt, 9. 5. 1942; Der Landbote, 2., 12. 1944.