

Der Wiener Narrenturm.

Die Geschichte der niederösterreichischen Psychiatrie von 1784 bis 1870.
By Daniel Vitecek. Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2023. pp. 442.

Daniel Vitecek's monograph on the development of psychiatric care in Lower Austria with a particular focus on Viennese institutions, which is based on the author's dissertation defended in 2022 at the Medical University of Vienna, fills a long-standing gap in Austrian medical historiography. While sporadic research has been done on Lower Austrian institutions, most of these works either remained sketchy¹ or were steeped in myths and speculations around Vienna's first purpose-built asylum,² exploring the early decades of the so-called "Narrenturm" (Fools' Tower) without much historical grounding. Vitecek is the first researcher to undertake this admittedly challenging task with a purely source-based historical methodology, reconstructing the evolution of the institutional network of mental health care in the Lower Austrian region in meticulous detail, from the pre-history of psychiatric care in the medieval and early modern periods until the 1870s. While archival sources, especially for the early period, are fragmentary and scattered, Vitecek makes creative use of narrative sources, including travelogues, eyewitness accounts, and newspaper articles and reports detailing institutional life, complemented by medical literature, royal and regional decrees regulating admission, treatment, and finances, and institutional statistics scattered among archival sources and printed material.

The volume, after an introductory section in which Vitecek addresses the lacunae in the secondary literature and the consequences of these for the largely unwritten history of Austrian psychiatry³ and its links to other

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1 Cf. Dieter Jetter, "Wiener Irrenhausprojekte," *Fortschritte der Neurologie-Psychiatrie* 49, no. 2 (1981): 43–52; Eberhard Gabriel, "Psychiatrische Einrichtungen im Erzherzogtum unter der Enns (Niederösterreich) im 19. Jahrhundert. Vom Irrenturm in Wien zu den Heil- und Pflegeanstalten für Geisteskranke im Licht zeitgenössischer Darstellungen," *Virus: Beiträge zur Sozialgeschichte der Medizin* 16 (2017): 193–207. doi: 10.1553/0x003bb5d1

2 Cf. Alfred Stohl, *Der Narrenturm oder die dunkle Seite der Wissenschaft* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2000).

3 Tyrol and Styria are among the better-researched regions in Austria, see for example: Carlos Watzka, *Vom Hospital zum Krankenhaus: Zum Umgang mit psychisch und somatisch Kranken im frühneuzeitlichen Europa* (Cologne–Weimar–Vienna: Böhlau, 2005); Carlos Watzka, *Arme, Kranke, Verrückte: Hospitäler und Krankenbäuser in der Steiermark vom 16. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert und ihre Bedeutung für den Umgang mit psychisch Kranken* (Graz: Landesarchiv, 2007); Elizabeth Dietrich-Daum et al, *Psychiatrische Landschaften: Die Psychiatrie und ihre Patientinnen und Patienten im historischen Raum Tirol seit 1830* (Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press, 2011).

regions of the Habsburg Monarchy, employs a chronological approach to the evolution of institutions and broader health care measures aimed at the mentally ill, a patient group with rather fluid and loose boundaries. In the first part of the book, Vitecek reconstructs what he terms “decentralized psychiatric care” in Lower Austria from the medieval and early modern periods, exploring the origins of mental health care in the poor relief system tied to Vienna’s numerous institutions offering both shelter and basic medical care. Vitecek’s aim here is to debunk the long-existing myth that the establishment of the Narrenturm in 1784 was a radical “zero hour” in psychiatric institutionalization in Lower Austria.

Joseph II’s reforms centralized existing forms of care embedded in hospitals, almshouses, and religious institutions, bringing the scattered practices into the new General Hospital, where the Narrenturm served as the designated space for the mentally ill. Its architecture, round and cellular, reflected Enlightenment ideals of order but also the imperative of security and the practice of segregation characteristic of contemporary approaches to the treatment of mental disturbances. The early decades were marked by custodial confinement with limited therapeutic ambition, though practices gradually professionalized under dedicated physicians and the 1792 addition of the infirmary (the Lazarett, a former plague house delivering care to patients diagnosed as more “peaceful,” which by 1803 had its own medical staff. Vitecek, as a detour from the strictly chronological narrative focusing on the evolution of institutions, also turns to how the institution was perceived from the outside, showing the ways travel reports from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries shaped the enduring image of the Narrenturm as both an Enlightenment curiosity and a place of misery.

By the 1820s and 1830s, the Narrenturm had become a “contested space,” marked by persistent overcrowding resulting in ineffective treatment, the widespread use of coercive methods, idleness, and isolation from the outside world. Efforts to alleviate pressure led to the creation of an institution for the incurable “peaceful” patients in Ybbs an der Donau (1817) and to repeated, unrealized plans for a more modern asylum in Bründlfeld. At the same time, private initiatives also appeared on the market of mental health care. Former Narrenturm physician Bruno Görge’s private institution, the first viable undertaking of this kind at Oberdöbling (later associated with university professors Maximilian Leidesdorf and Heinrich Obersteiner), offered an alternative model of more individualized and genteel care for paying patients. While this period, from the establishment of the Narrenturm until the mid-

nineteenth century, is described as the era of “centralized psychiatric care,” Vitecek emphasizes how the institutional landscape was already diversifying into public, private, and branch facilities, giving way to further decentralization from the mid-century in a more professionalized, expertly manner and against an institutionally more feasible backdrop.

The 1840s form the centerpiece of the book, with the figure of Hungarian-born physician, Michael Viszánik at its core. Viszánik, who led the institution from 1839, becoming a central figure in mental health care in Lower Austria, combined in his work administrative and health care reform with public advocacy. His 1845 account on the Narrenturm, which is one of the most comprehensive and widely cited sources on the history of the institution, with a retrospective account of the first roughly 50 years of its history, including statistical data and a selection of case histories, describes a mid-century institution in flux. As primary physician, Viszánik introduced hydrotherapy, an early form of “occupational therapy,” and educational schemes. With these comparatively innovative steps, he sought to humanize conditions, and he portrayed himself publicly as the reformer who had freed patients from chains, much like his Parisian predecessor, Philippe Pinel. Yet his efforts coincided with severe structural constraints, including overcrowded wards, inadequate buildings, and scarce resources. Polemical publications such as Oscar Mahir’s sensationalist 1843 account painted the tower as a place of barbarity and neglect, shaping the “black legend” that would dominate its afterlife in both medical and historical discourse. Vitecek carefully disentangles contemporary criticism, self-promotion, and later retellings of this account, showing how the institution’s image became a battlefield between reformist claims and public scandal.

The final chapters offer a careful, source-based reconstruction of the gradual displacement of the tower by newer institutions, providing entirely new perspectives into the planning and building history of the Provincial Asylum in Bründlfeld, which finally opened in 1853. The institution, following the Prague model developed largely by Josef Gottfried Riedel (who was appointed to serve as the first director of the Viennese institution in 1851), embodied the “relatively connected model,” combining healing and custodial functions in an approach that became the main model for mental health care by mid-century, following the examples of the Illenau Asylum in Achern in Baden-Württemberg and the Halle-Nietleben Provincial Asylum in Saxony. However, this model soon revealed its own shortcomings. In this period, Ybbs evolved into a more integral psychiatric establishment, while the Narrenturm persisted only as a residual care

facility for the “unclean and dangerous” until its closure in 1869, replaced by a newer institution in Klosterneuburg. With this transition, Viennese psychiatry entered a multilateral phase that extended to Gugging-Kierling (1885–1890), Mauer-Öhling (1902), and ultimately Am Steinhof (1907), giving way to a new decentralized phase in psychiatric care in Lower Austria on an entirely new and more professional footing.

The narrative part of the volume is complemented by an impressively detailed and meticulous statistical reconstruction of the patient population in the different phases of institutional development in Lower Austria, from the early period of the Narrenturm until the 1870s. Vitecek reconstructs admission and discharge tendencies, diagnoses, and their changing conceptual and terminological framing, as well as the social composition of patients along with their geographical origin. This part is accompanied by appendices with maps, timelines, and primary sources that anchor the narrative in rich documentation, and illustrations are provided throughout the book from each phase of this history, from contemporary depictions of the institutions to ground plans and even photographs depicting the current state of the remaining buildings, such as the Narrenturm functioning as a museum today or the asylum in Klosterneuburg.

While the well-researched, carefully structured, and precisely detailed book offers the most comprehensive account of the first roughly eight decades of psychiatry in Lower Austria and thus serves and will hopefully continue to serve for many years as an important handbook and an eminent reference for historians of psychiatry in the Central European region, where the influence of Austrian psychiatry was extensive and enduring, some shortcomings should also be addressed. The volume’s overreliance on statistical data and charts sometimes overshadows analysis, and while the main tendencies are largely made visible in a quantitative manner, their qualitative analysis and contextualization remains sketchy. The narrative fails to offer in-depth explanations of, for example, the geographical distribution of patients or gendered diagnostic categories. It also offers little analysis, and while the book presents an impressive array of information and data, it does not situate this information in broader tendencies in mental health care—neither regional nor wider European tendencies. Thus, the history of the asylums in Lower Austria is left disconnected and decontextualized, even from their immediate surroundings. This partly stems from Vitecek’s overreliance on the Austrian historiography of medicine, and while the anti-psychiatry “movement” of the 1960s is shortly mentioned in the introduction, its relevance to the social historical turn in the history of medicine,

and especially psychiatry (which gave new impetus to critical reflections, in the 1970s and 1980s, on the history of institutions), remains somewhat understated and overlooked. These critical reflections notwithstanding, however, Daniel Vitecek's book merits praise as a serious undertaking, offering the first sourced-based account of early psychiatric institutionalization in Lower Austria and hopefully inspiring more in-depth analyses of the history of mental health care both in Austria and beyond.

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CONTENTS

<i>Centralizing Custody and Curing by Chance</i>	CARLOS WATZKA	493
<i>The Beginnings of Pediatric Psychiatry in the Czech Lands</i>	HELENA CHALUPOVÁ	537
<i>The Discourse on Canines in Nineteenth-Century Medical Studies in Porto</i>	MONIQUE PALMA	563
<i>Neurasthenia and Masculinity in the Hungarian Medical Discourse</i>	GERGELY MAGOS	588
<i>Reform Psychiatry, Habsburg Legacies, and Identity-Making in the Upper Adriatic Area</i>	FRANCESCO TONCICH	615



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