

The far-right Austrian Freedom Party under the magnifying glass

Hans-Hennig Scharsach/Kurt Kuch: Haider—Schatten ueber Europa("Haider—A shadow over Europe"), Kiepenheuer und Witsch 2000

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Since Jörg Haider and his rightwing Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) have increasingly won influence, and have even sat in a national government coalition with the Conservative People's Party (ÖVP) for over a year, journalists and writers have been busy analysing their ascent. The book by Hans Hennig Scharsach and Kurt Kuch, both editors of the Austrian weekly magazine *NEWS*, is an important contribution to this subject.

However, the authors only partially do justice to their claim to uncover the ideological core of Jörg Haider and the FPÖ. Wherever they seek to undertake a political analysis and draw general conclusions, the book remains at the rather low level of news journalism. Its strength, however, lies in the well-researched and systematically documented factual material.

Here, the book supplies much information to answer the questions that are posed in the foreword: "Is Jörg Haider a right wing extremist? Is he a racist? Is he a fascist? Is he a neo-Nazi? Above all, however, is Jörg Haider a democrat?"

The book begins with Haider's connections to National Socialism (Nazism), and quotes from his eulogies to the "dear friends" of the Waffen-SS, an elite Nazi unit that was responsible for the murder of thousands of Jews and prisoners of war.

Annual commemorations still take place on the Ulrichsberg near Klagenfurt, the capital of Carinthia, where Jörg Haider is state premier. In the late 1980s, the Austrian police confiscated no less than 50 swastikas at one of these meetings of old Nazis and their younger acolytes.

What happens at private gatherings of such Nazi circles, and the role played there by Jörg Haider, is documented in a video that a Hamburg SS veteran filmed in 1995 "for his bedridden comrades, who could no longer undertake the journey to Klagenfurt". Scharsach and Kuch use this video recording to present the following report.

"Among those present are Gudrun Burwitz, the daughter of *Reichsfuehrer* SS Heinrich Himmler, Otto Kumm, the last commander of Adolf Hitler's SS bodyguard, the Danish war criminal Sören Kam, and SS officers like Peter Timm of the notorious Dirlewanger SS brigade, or Henri Moreau of the Wallonie SS division. Haider pays a tribute to these 'dear friends' as 'decent people, who have character and who, under the most difficult circumstances, also stand by their convictions, to which they have remained faithful to this day'".

This report also reveals the extent to which Jörg Haider identifies

with his audience at this meeting of the Waffen-SS. He repeatedly talks of "us" and stresses, "we will teach this left (...) that we are not to be killed off and that decency still asserts itself in our world, even if we are not capable of gaining a majority for the moment, perhaps. But we are superior to the others..."

Haider's cultivation of such traditions and his good relations with former Nazi war criminals and their sympathisers is made clear by a multitude of such examples. The falsification of history, such as denying or minimising the Holocaust, is an everyday matter in the FPÖ and among its supporters.

In the past, the FPÖ's academic association has invited the known Holocaust denier David Irving as a guest speaker, and in 1998 FPÖ party historian and programme writer Lothar Höbelt defended Irving's theories. Höbelt, professor of history at Vienna University, told leading Austrian daily *Der Standard* that Holocaust denial was simply "historical discussion".

Following the wide reporting of his statements favouring the "orderly employment policy of the Third Reich", Haider has been a little bit more careful than his comrades in his public utterances about National Socialism. However, he still equates the annihilation of six million Jews with the expulsion of the Sudaten Germans at the end of the Second World War.

Scharsach and Kuch dedicate more than 70 pages to the racist attacks of Haider and Co. They divide this up into the old FPÖ-racism (aimed at the Jews) and the new (against foreigners). The very number of such cases that are described in detail shows clearly that racism is part of the FPÖ programme. The author's state: "The anti-Semitism of the Nazis is a firm component of Freedom Party history. Social ostracism and threats of punishment have not led to it disappearing; this has only changed its form. Instead of being articulated openly, it is hidden in linguistic rewritings and subliminal forms of expression."

In an interview, FPÖ General-Secretary Peter Sichrovsky, himself of Jewish descent, called the chairperson of the Israeli cultural community, Ariel Muzikant, an "unbelievably avaricious Jew by profession, who uses dead relatives in order to get on the television".

To mobilise his racist supporters shortly before the Viennese city council elections last month, Haider launched a vile anti-Semitic campaign against Muzikant. However, this ended up mobilising more of Haider's opponents, and the FPÖ suffered significant losses.

The FPÖ is far more open in its tirades against foreigners. In 1999 it

was able to gain a foothold in Austria's federal government. "A cruel anti-foreigner election campaign beyond the pale of all political customs and good taste enabled the FPÖ to become the second-strongest political force in the country in 1999."

At this point, the book deals with the openly racist election campaign, the anti-foreigner referendum and other xenophobic initiatives of the FPÖ. Legitimate concerns in the population about growing unemployment and sinking social standards are abused by FPÖ politicians for their xenophobic demagoguery, whereby they strongly exaggerate and twist the facts.

It is interesting in this context, to look at the authors' evaluation of the role of the then government coalition comprising the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) and the conservative ÖVP. "Under the pressure of FPÖ propaganda, the government parties begin to give in to anti-foreigner demands and—at least in part—to adopt the FPÖ's exclusivist rhetoric... The hope this would take away Jörg Haider's arguments does not prove true. On the contrary, the voters regard government policy as a confirmation of the course advocated by the FPÖ."

Finally, the FPÖ was able to drive the government further to the right. "After repeated postponements, the new aliens laws comes into effect under Interior Minister Karl Schlögl at the beginning of 1998... In spring 1999, the social democratic Interior Minister announces there will be de facto no more immigration. The FPÖ answers as it has always answered, General-Secretary Peter Westenthaler demands negative immigration."

The resulting poisoning of the social climate is clear: "The political damage of this competition for the votes of the fearful and short-changed philistines and petty bourgeois cannot be made good any more. A study published in 1999 by the economics ministry clearly shows the effects on Austrian opinion: almost half respond by expressing unambiguous hostility to foreigners".

The book also places the relationship of Haider's party to democracy under the magnifying glass. Here, Haider has coined the term the "Third Republic," a notion that inevitably brings to mind the "Third Reich". This corresponds essentially to a fascistic *führer* state, where parliament is emasculated and representative democracy is crushed.

This authoritarian structure has already asserted itself inside his party. The effect of this style of leadership is described as follows: "Haider signals to the core party layer: the *führer* principle, the necessity for loyalty when faced with an apparent external danger, the threat of his departure and the ensuing decline of the party."

In April 1998, together with Susanne Riess-Passer, Haider imposed a collective punishment on the divided Salzburg party organisation. Seven hundred officials were relieved of their office and placed under the temporary administration of the federal party manager. Political scientist Anton Pelinka is quoted saying: "There has never been such a thing in a non fascist system."

It is almost to be expected that in the interests of an authoritarian state structure, the FPÖ would begin to aggressively attack fundamental democratic rights, such as the freedom of the press and the right to demonstrate. The criminalisation of political opponents is linked with the call for a strong state that upholds law and order.

One chapter is devoted to the question of the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition government and whether it is merely rightwing or far right. The list of measures planned or already carried out makes clear that in spite of internal party crises and conflicts, the FPÖ was able to set the agenda in their first year in the federal government in all important areas, and had pushed through extremely rightwing neo-liberal policies. The

pretentious announcement by Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel (ÖVP) that he would ensure the FPÖ were integrated into "democratic responsibilities" has long been refuted. A look at the most important government measures shows that it is clearly Haider and his FPÖ that set the tone inside the government.

The first "cuts package" contains a clear redistribution that "burdens employees, the old and the sick with billions, relieving entrepreneurs, the self-employed and farmers of around the same amount." The Ministry for Women was abolished without any replacement and the money for programmes aimed at reintegrating women into work was radically cut. The regulations specifying which jobs an unemployed person can "reasonably" be expected to accept were tightened up and the long-term unemployed obliged to undertake community work. In spite of complaints lodged with the supreme court that the measures were socially discriminatory and disregarded established procedures, pension reforms, a security law, a regional radio law and amendments covering alternative civilian service to military conscription were pushed through.

The authors try to divide the planned or already implemented government programme into "democratically dubious policies" and "purely rightwing but democratic measures" or intentions. Here is where the main weakness of the book can be seen. The counterposing of the democratically acceptable and undemocratic cannot explain how the completely reactionary politics of the FPÖ, aimed at establishing a dictatorial regime, has arisen from within the parliamentary structures of the democratic system. It was precisely the parties that constantly stress their democratic character—the social democrats and the People's Party—that have smoothed the way for the far right FPÖ.

What the authors leave out completely is the class character of politics. Because all the parliamentary parties place the interests of big business and the banks at the centre of their politics, they come ever more clearly and sharply into conflict with the vast majority of the population. The growth of the FPÖ is a result of the fact that this policy of social cuts can increasingly only be carried out by less democratic means.

To defend social and democratic rights, and to fight against the influence of Haider's party, therefore, a political programme and a socialist perspective is necessary that places the needs of the population above the profit interests of the employers.



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