

Kurt Waldheim (1918-2007)

Ex-UN chief's Nazi past covered up

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Last week, former UN Secretary-General and Austrian President Kurt Waldheim died at the age of 88. His family was with him when he succumbed to cardiovascular failure.

The official obituaries have honoured him as a great Austrian and international statesman. Former Austrian Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel (Austrian Peoples Party, ÖVP) spoke of Waldheim as “a great fighter for peace and freedom in the world.” UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and diplomats from several countries expressed their sympathy for the Republic of Austria and the Waldheim family.

Nobody speaking for the United Nations has recalled Waldheim's time as a member of Hitler's National Socialist (Nazi) Party and as an officer in the Wehrmacht (German armed forces) during World War Two. According to press reports, “the clearest allusion to Waldheim's past during the Hitler period” came from Mexico's UN Ambassador Claude Heller. He spoke of Waldheim as a politician with “exceptional abilities,” as a diplomat who had belonged to a generation that experienced a “turbulent phase of history.”

This is the euphemism employed by Mexico's UN Ambassador to describe the years 1933 to 1945, in which the Hitler regime unleashed the Second World War, and in which approximately 50 million people died. This “turbulent phase of history” also included the Holocaust, in which more than 6 million Jews were annihilated. Many in the Nazi regime share responsibility for these greatest crimes in mankind's history. One of them was Kurt Waldheim. But like so many others, he was never called to account.

Throughout his life, Kurt Waldheim concealed, suppressed, played down and denied his participation in the crimes of the Nazis.

Waldheim was born the son of a teacher on December 21, 1918, in Lower Austria. After graduating from high school, he voluntarily signed up for military service. Then, from 1937 to 1938, he studied law in Vienna. At the beginning of the Second World War, Waldheim was drafted into the Wehrmacht and from December 1940 was a second lieutenant in a Cavalry Scout Unit with the 45th Infantry Division.

He participated with his division in the Russian campaign, being wounded in December 1941. After stays in military hospitals in Frankfurt an der Oder and Vienna, in April 1942 he was ordered to western Bosnia as a liaison officer with the occupying Italian troops.

From April 1943, he belonged to the Army Group E, whose officer staff was quartered in Salonika in northern Greece. As an officer in the staff of General Alexander Löhr in Salonika, he must have had knowledge of the deportation of approximately 40,000 Jews to the concentration camps at Auschwitz and Treblinka. Likewise, he would have known about the transports of Italian prisoners to the German Reich, at a time when there was no state of war between Germany and Italy.

As a staff officer in western Bosnia, Waldheim would have had knowledge of the massacres committed there of Yugoslav partisans, as well as of the destruction of numerous villages. Waldheim was familiar with the tactical, strategic and administrative orders and was responsible for producing situation reports for the army staff.

Waldheim was member of the mounted staff of the Nazis' Storm Troops (Sturm Abteilung, SA) as well as belonging to the National Socialist German Student Federation (NSDStB). In 1944, during the war, Waldheim completed his law studies and attained a doctorate in jurisprudence. From the spring of 1945 to the end of the war, he was stationed in Trieste.

Just as in West Germany, where numerous old Nazis continued their careers in the new state, nothing seemed to bar Kurt Waldheim from pursuing a glittering diplomatic career after the war's end. He entered the Austrian diplomatic service in 1945. From 1948 to 1951, he was a first secretary at Austria's embassy in Paris and headed the personnel department in the foreign ministry. In May 1955, Waldheim became Austrian permanent observer at the United Nations in New York; in March 1956, he went to Canada as ambassador.

Waldheim used his old connections to rise rapidly in the diplomatic service. Between 1960 and 1964, he headed various departments in the Viennese foreign office. Following the admission of Austria into the UN in 1955, he was a member of the Austrian delegation to the General Assembly. From the beginning of 1965, he represented Austria at the UN.

Between 1968 and 1970, Waldheim was the Austrian foreign minister, although he belonged to no political party. In 1971, he was nominated by the conservative ÖVP for the office of Federal President. Although the office of Austrian president is largely ceremonial, it is subject to direct popular election. Though Waldheim lost the 1971 election, shortly afterwards he succeeded U Thant from Burma as UN Secretary-General. He held this office for 10 years, until 1981.

In 1986, the ÖVP again proposed Waldheim for the Austrian presidency. He tried to score points by exploiting his office as UN Secretary-General—for example, producing an election poster with the slogan “An Austrian whom the world trusts,” depicting him standing before the New York skyline.

In a well-researched article at the time, Hubertus Czernin of the Austrian newsmagazine *Profil* exposed Waldheim's role during the war. Recalling the “Waldheim affair,” *Profil* writes today: “Czernin was not the first journalist to uncover the dark areas in Waldheim's CV.” In the spring of 1971—as Waldheim stood for the ÖVP in the presidential elections—the right-wing *Salzburger Volksblatt* wrote that Waldheim was a member of the “SS-Reiterstandarte” (SS Mounted Standard Bearers). “Hopefully, the ÖVP will not dissociate

itself from him, the right-wing paper demanded vigorously.”

According to *Profil*, the rumour was wrong; Waldheim had never been with the SS. But what was significant about the *Volksblatt* allegation was that nobody was interested in Waldheim’s Nazi past, and especially not the Austrian Social Democrats (SPÖ). Just beforehand, four former SS members had been brought into the SPÖ government.

However, things were different in 1986. Waldheim had just published an autobiography entitled *In the Glass Palace of World Politics (Im Glaspalast der Weltpolitik)*, which contained very little about his activities under Nazi rule and during the Second World War, while including many falsehoods. He concealed his membership in Nazi organisations like the SA Reiterkorps (SA Mounted Corps) and the Nazi student federation, as well as his activities as an officer in Salonika from 1942 to 1943. Waldheim claimed he had been wounded at the eastern front and had spent the remainder of the war in Austria. No word can be found in Waldheim’s book concerning his collaboration with Wehrmacht general Alexander Löhr, who was condemned to death on February 16, 1947, in Yugoslavia as a war criminal.

Waldheim himself had granted a viewing of his armed forces records to Czernin, who was able to confirm his membership in the SA and Nazi student federation. According to *Profil*, two months before the election, Czernin had wanted to interview Waldheim about his Nazi past, driving one evening to the Ebreichsdorf Castle near Vienna, where the aristocratic Drasche family was holding a swanky reception for Waldheim. “I sat in the entrance hall and waited,” Czernin later recalled. “Suddenly, Waldheim came up to me, put his hand on my shoulder and said: ‘Don’t worry about it,’ ” claiming he also could not explain the notes in his military records.

Clearly, Waldheim badly misconstrued the situation. Since the journalist Czernin came from an “aristocratic family” and Waldheim had known his grandfather well—the industrialist Franz Josef Mayer Gunthof—he obviously believed Czernin only wanted to warn him.

But two days later, on March 3, 1986, Czernin’s article appeared under the title “Waldheim and the SA.” Just one day later, the *New York Times* also published an article about Waldheim, illustrating it with a photo showing Waldheim in a Wehrmacht uniform at the side of SS-group leader Artur Phleps in Podgorica, Bosnia.

Somewhat later, Czernin also found out that Waldheim had been given the Zvonimir medal, an honour bestowed by the fascist Ustasha regime in Croatia, which collaborated with the Nazis.

Waldheim’s first reaction was denial. Later, when this was untenable, he turned to the defensive: “I did nothing more in the war than hundreds of thousands of Austrians; I did my duty as a soldier.” Waldheim claimed the exposures were part of a massive slander campaign. “You will find nothing. We [!] were decent.” Moreover, he asserted, it was “a scandal to pull decent soldiers through the filth in such a manner.”

He sued the chairman of the Jewish World Congress (WJC), Edgar M. Bronfman, who had called him “a part and a cog of the Nazi killing machine.” Waldheim only withdrew this action in 1988, after Bronfman said that the WJC was prepared to stop its campaign against him. In the meantime, the US had put Waldheim on its so-called Watch List because of his past as a Wehrmacht officer in the Balkans in the Second World War, an action that equated with a ban on travel to the US. He remained on the list until his death.

Waldheim’s supporters spoke of a “dirty campaign.” Within the ÖVP there were those who saw Waldheim as the victim of “certain

circles on the East Coast,” a common anti-Semitic shorthand for Jews. The tabloid newspapers were full of anti-Semitic readers’ letters. Michael Graff, at that time Secretary-General of the ÖVP, said: “As long as it cannot be proved that he personally strangled six Jews, there is no problem.” A short time later, Graff had to resign from his position as ÖVP secretary-general. Nevertheless, the official slogan in Waldheim’s presidential campaign was “Now more than ever!”

Waldheim won the election. Up to the end of his term of office in 1991, he was only able to visit Arab states and the Vatican. In all other countries, he was regarded as an unwanted guest. Shortly after Waldheim’s election, the Austrian government under Kurt Vranitzky (SPÖ) established an international historians’ commission. This was unable to find evidence of any direct participation by Waldheim in war crimes. The commission proved Waldheim’s membership in the SA and the National Socialist German Student Federation (NSDStB) as well as his having been stationed as a staff officer and member of the central intelligence service of the Army Group E in the Balkans, which Waldheim had denied.

In its final report, the commission wrote: “The commission has received no knowledge of any case in which Waldheim raised an objection or protested against an injustice which he clearly would have known about or undertook any sort of countermeasure to prevent such an injustice or at least to make its implementation more difficult. On the contrary, he participated repeatedly in illegal procedures and thus facilitated their execution.”

With justification, in its obituary of Waldheim, the German newsmagazine *Der Spiegel* calls to mind the Filbinger case: “The case recalls that of the recently deceased, former Prime Minister of Baden-Württemberg Hans Filbinger, whose past as a Nazi naval judge in combination with his egregious and fatal utterance (‘What was justice at that time, cannot be an injustice today’) forced his resignation from office in the 1970s.”

Indeed, Waldheim—just like Filbinger—never dissociated himself from the Nazis. In his testament, written shortly before his death, he denies any responsibility and paints a picture of someone who did nothing more than his duty. “Yes, I also made mistakes,” Waldheim wrote. “But these were certainly not those of a fellow traveller let alone the accomplice of a criminal regime.” He sees the “reason for dealing with these happenings too late” particularly in “the hectic nature of my overloaded international life—over years and decades.”

“It was, however, probably that state policy, which we had to represent as diplomats in the early postwar period, and which had opened the way to freedom and constitutionality for us Austrians as ‘Hitler’s first victims.’ ” The “monstrous accusations” against him had nothing to do with his life and his thinking. He was shocked, insulted, even appalled “by the contents and extent of these accusations.”

Waldheim’s death reminded us how strong the political influence of a whole layer of incorrigible old Nazis was in the post-war history of Germany and Austria.



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