

Austrian right-wing politician Jörg Haider dies in car crash

Markus Salzmann
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Jörg Haider, the governor of the Austrian province of Carinthia and chairman of the extreme right Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ) died in a car accident in Klagenfurt in the early hours of October 11.

Haider was driving his official Volkswagen Phaeton limousine on the way back from a meeting. He lost control of the vehicle, hit a pillar and his car turned over a number of times. At the time of the accident he was travelling at a speed of 142 kilometres per hour, more than double the speed limit for the road.

For over twenty years, Haider was the main figure in extreme right politics in Austria. He transformed the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ)—comprising ultra-right and openly fascist elements—into a party of government and for ten years he was governor of the state of Carinthia.

The statements of Austrian politicians on the death of Haider are quite remarkable. Virtually without exception, politicians, including those from the camp of the so-called "left," have refrained from any criticism, and many have praised Haider.

According to Gabi Burgstaller, leader of the Austrian social democrats (SPÖ) in Salzburg, with the death of Haider, "Austria loses one of its greatest political talents of recent decades."

The chairman of the federal SPÖ and prospective future chancellor, Werner Faymann, also declared Haider to be an exceptional politician who for years had helped shape politics in Carinthia and Austria as a whole. A similar tribute came from former chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer of the SPÖ.

The chairman of the Greens, Alexander Van der Bellen, praised Haider fulsomely. "Jörg Haider was an exceptional politician, highly qualified to inspire and win people to his side," Van der Bellen declared.

It comes as little surprise that not a single politician in the Austrian establishment is prepared to undertake a serious analysis of the man and his political role. The rise of the businessman and multi-millionaire Haider to prominent political office is inseparably bound up with the decline of the main political forces of Austria's Second Republic—the

People's Party (ÖVP) and the social democratic SPÖ.

Haider was born in a small upper-Austrian village in 1950. His parents were avid Nazis. Even prior to the annexation of Austria by Hitler, Haider's father was an illegal member of the Nazi party, the NSDAP. His mother was active in the Nazi federation of young German women.

Haider studied law at the University of Vienna, where he was employed until 1976 as a university assistant at the Institute for State and Administrative Law. He had already entered politics in 1971, becoming the chairman of the Liberal Youth Ring (RFJ). As the youngest ever delegate, he entered the Austrian National Council in 1979 and quickly made his way up the ranks of the Freedom Party (FPÖ), which at that time pursued a conservative rather than an extreme rightist line.

With the aid of the party's nationalist wing, Haider led a putsch in 1986 against party leader Norbert Steger and replaced him as chairman. Haider then turned the party into an extreme right organisation. At that point, the social democratic Austrian chancellor, Franz Vranitzky, quit the government coalition with the FPÖ.

Haider was able to use his considerable wealth to extend his influence in the FPÖ. A great uncle of Haider had used his Nazi position to confiscate the fortune of a wealthy Jewish widow. The inheritance of around 15 million euros was passed on to Haider in 1986, without the latter paying a cent in taxes. From that date on, he belonged to the wealthy elite of the country.

After an aggressively racist and anti-immigrant election campaign, Haider was elected governor of Carinthia in 1989 with the help of the ÖVP. However, two years later, Haider was forced to resign after he publicly acknowledged his admiration for Adolf Hitler and declared the "occupation program of the Nazis" to be "exemplary."

Unabashed, he continued his political career at the federal level. In 1993, he initiated a referendum under the heading "Austria first!" He called for the deportation of foreigners and asylum-seekers and promised to fight "against the flooding of Austria by foreigners."

In the state elections of 1998, Haider and the FPÖ were able to displace the SPÖ from its leading position in Carinthia and return to power in the province. In the National Council elections one year later, the extreme right took second place behind the SPÖ. The consequence was a governing coalition between Haider's Freedom Party (FPÖ) and the ÖVP.

A few months after the formation of the government, Haider officially withdrew from its ranks, but continued to pull the strings behind the scenes.

During its period in power, the real character of the FPÖ became only too clear. In its alliance with the People's Party (ÖVP) it carried out a series of attacks against the working class, including cuts in the pension and health systems and the introduction of university fees. This was accompanied by law-and-order policies, restrictions on democratic rights, and a prohibitive immigrant and asylum policy.

The party as a result lost popular support. A series of elections turned into debacles for the FPÖ. The party itself was torn apart by in-fighting. After the Lower Austrian local council election, in which the FPÖ won just 3 percent of the vote, Haider broke with the FPÖ and set up the BZÖ.

In 2006, Haider's BZÖ just managed to win sufficient votes to obtain representation in the National Council. However, the organisation was given a new lease on life by the right-wing policies of the ruling grand coalition of the social democratic SPÖ and the People's Party (ÖVP). In federal elections three weeks ago, the extreme right recorded its best results since 1945, with the FPÖ and BZÖ together gaining approximately the same number of votes as the SPÖ.

Haider's rise to prominence in the 1980s was bound up with the policies of the two parties that had long dominated Austrian politics—the SPÖ and ÖVP.

Following the defeat and collapse of the Nazi regime, the Austrian establishment had made even less of an attempt than its German counterpart to grapple with its collusion with National Socialism. The aim of all official parties was to maintain the capitalist order and get back to business as quickly as possible. To this end, the Second Republic adopted the pre-war constitution of the First Republic.

From the end of the war until 1966, Austria had been exclusively governed by a grand coalition led by the ÖVP, although in the stabilization of bourgeois rule the SPÖ played a more important role. The capitalist class had so discredited itself during the period of the Third Reich that it could maintain its rule only by making social and political concessions to the working class.

This enabled both the SPÖ and the ÖVP, whose own politics were basically of a social democratic character, to dominate the political arena. Between 1945 and 1999, the SPÖ was represented in all governments in coalition with the

ÖVP, apart from four years, 1966-1970.

So long as such coalitions were bound up with concessions to the working class, this form of government led to relatively stable political conditions in Austria. But the "reforms" introduced in the 1980s changed the situation.

In common with all other European countries, previous social gains of the working class were drastically curtailed and the social climate deteriorated. The opening up of the European Union to Eastern Europe, the entry of Austria into the EU and the effects of globalisation reduced the possibility of concessions to the working class within the framework of the Austrian system of "social partnership."

While every succeeding government carried out fresh attacks on the country's social welfare system, the network of party and state bureaucrats in the leadership of economic and political circles tightened its grip over society, encouraging the growth of corruption. At the same time, the proportional system of representation was aimed at preserving the power of the bigger parties and preventing the emergence of any opposition to government policies.

Under these conditions, sections of the middle class felt that their social status and material well-being were under threat. It was amongst such layers that the FPÖ won new supporters and voters. Haider and the FPÖ combined social demagoguery with racism and xenophobia, scape-goating immigrants for the problems confronting Austrian citizens.

The social democrats reacted to Haider's growing political influence by adopting his reactionary slogans, in order, as they said, to render him "redundant." In so doing, the SPÖ played a pivotal role in spreading the poison of racism through Austrian society and effecting a steady shift to the right in Austrian politics.



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