

## The Waldheim Waltz: Notes from The Authoritarian Playbook

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By Wes Hopper , 10/18/2018



Published: 10/18/2018

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Ruth Beckermann's new film, *The Waldheim Waltz*, is a persuasive accounting of the life and political career of Kurt Josef Waldheim, who served as the fourth secretary general of the United Nations (1972 -1981) and later elected as president of Austria (1986-1992). The documentary not only lays bare the revelations about his World War II military service that surfaced during his presidential run, but also examines how a country's very identity can become ensnared in the debate over the misdeeds of one individual.

Berkermann, herself Austrian, narrates the film providing a calm and poetic commentary on the run-up to the 1985 election. Using a camcorder as a young demonstrator, she captures the mood of the Austrian people as Election Day draws near. This, combined with almost exclusively archival footage and photos, creates a straightforward and fact-based narrative of Waldheim, beginning with his years at the UN.

We see him standing solemnly at memorial ceremony at Auschwitz. During the recitation of the Mourner's Kaddish at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, he refuses to cover his head but declares later that he has nothing but "admiration and devotion for these people who have suffered so much." On a visit to Yugoslavia while Austrian minister of Foreign Affairs, he remarks to Communist leader Josip Tito how surprised he is by the loveliness of the country. When pressed if he had ever been there before, he insists, "No, never."

In this way, Beckermann begins to poke tiny holes in Waldheim's web of lies.

Waldheim, in fact, concealed his service in the German SA (the Sturmabteilung, translated as Assault Division, colloquially known as Hitler's Storm Troopers) and as a special missions officer for Germany's Army Group E in Yugoslavia and Greece from 1942-1944.

When an investigative journalist revealed inconsistencies in Waldheim's wartime record, the candidate went into overdrive to defend himself, even suggesting on Austrian TV that perhaps his relatives had signed him up and gotten the paperwork wrong. He portrayed himself as having been unwillingly drafted for a cause he didn't support, wounded in battle, and then discharged, spending the next few years pursuing his education and starting a family.

The World Jewish Congress presented evidence that Waldheim was implicated in Nazi atrocities and mass murder in wartime Yugoslavia and Greece, but Waldheim's political ambitions weren't derailed. The film documents how the Austrian Social Democratic Party circled the wagons, and how Waldheim's defense becomes less about the historical record and more about depicting him as a victim of a vicious smear campaign conducted by the US, and especially the World Jewish Congress, both depicted as election meddlers.

In Austria, the "Waldheim affair" soon becomes tinged with the language of anti-Semitism. Beckermann's own footage from the streets of Vienna show ordinary Austrian's invoking age-old anti-Semitic accusations.

One woman says, "Why did Hitler come in the first place? Why didn't the Rothchilds and whoever else distribute the money amongst the people so they could earn something, the jobless people. Why didn't that happen?"

In another part of the film, a particularly belligerent man declares, "Who rules the world, who? The German or the Jew? Who rules the world? Who, you smartass?"

Waldheim's playbook for defending himself should be strikingly familiar in our current political climate.

At first, Waldheim denies the accusations, then portrays himself as the victim, blaming opponents of conducting a smear campaign. When all else fails, he turns to a passionate defense of his actions and an invocation of national pride. As he says at one rally, "I stand before you with a clear conscience. I have done nothing more than thousands of Austrians in those hard times...I was an honest soldier."

The question of Waldheim's past transcends the man himself. Beckermann clearly demonstrates that the Austrian election of 1985 became not solely a referendum on Waldheim, but a national reckoning of the Austrian people with their collective involvement in World War II. As one scholar remarks, "He represents the Austrian country perfectly...but it's a shame."

The conclusion is of course foretold, but it makes it no less difficult to watch as the film marches toward Election Day. The documentary makes it clear that it takes more than just obfuscating and blaming for a candidate to overcome a scandalous past to rise to power.

It takes a complicit populace as well.

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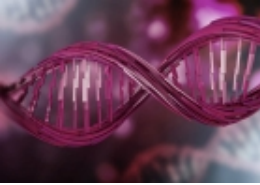
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