# 1. The Austrian far right: historical continuities and the case of the Ulrichsberg commemorations

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**Abstract**

Throughout Europe contemporary far-right activism is at least partially rooted in historical grievances and activities. Austria is no exception. Here, a far-reaching base of far-right support manifests in antisemitic and xenophobic attitudes, criminal activity, movement organisation and campaigning, and party politics. Prominent parts of the dynamics that characterise these far-right manifestations are rooted in Austria's past. This chapter focuses on that rootedness by specifying the elements of the contemporary far-right ecosystem. It looks at case of the Ulrichsberg commemorations of Third Reich military veterans and examines how that demonstration campaign is an archetype of far-right party-movement dynamics in Austria. Specifically, the commemorations long enjoyed approval, support, and even participation by prominent politicians and state officials. As the dominant perception of Austria's historical legacy shifted towards acknowledging complicity in Nazi atrocities, the Ulrichsberg commemorations became politicised and the Austrian Freedom Party (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, FPÖ) transformed into the political representative of Austria's far right.

*Keywords*: Austria; far-right; social movements; FPÖ; Ulrichsberg; demobilisation

The branches of Austria's far right are many and varied, stretching from attitudes and criminal activity to movement actors and to one of Europe's largest radical right parties—but many of these branches share common roots. An important segment of today's far-right attitudes and actors essentially stem from the origins of the Second Republic, formed after the Second World War. An early phase of denazification and anti-fascist precepts quickly withered away, leaving behind only a pair of laws prohibiting some far-right activity. Former Nazis were allowed to organise into a politically influential bloc, veterans were able to mobilise campaigns honouring the Nazi armed forces, and the tendrils of far-right sentiments spread.

This chapter is chiefly concerned with the modern far-right activism that is an outgrowth of these origins. No single case illustrates this development better than the Ulrichsberg commemorations for World War II veterans that took place annually from 1959 until 2018. This far-right campaign, which routinely drew thousands of participants to the mountains of southern Austria, proclaimed that martial comradeship is holy and that the Third Reich's military fought a noble battle against Bolshevism that preserved European freedom. But as wider political developments punctured the myth of Austria as a 'victim' of the Nazi regime,

the Ulrichsberg commemorations became politicised and the Freedom Party of Austria (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, FPÖ) under the leadership of Jörg Haider arose as the political champion of the far right.

This chapter details the elements of Austria's far-right ecosystem with particular attention to its historical rootedness, though noting several novel developments. The chapter begins by characterising Austrian far-right attitudes and individual criminal activity, identifying important movement actors, and detailing the radicalisation of the FPÖ (including how this process connects to the Ulrichsberg commemorations). Then, it presents the case of the Ulrichsberg commemorations, using it as a lens to reveal how Austria's historical legacy and prior activism shaped some important contemporary dynamics among far-right actors, particularly between the FPÖ and the movement scene.

**Elements of the Austrian far right**

Austria's far-right ecosystem consists of three parts. First, individual attitudes and activities provide a base of social support for far-right actors, as well as spurring on far-right criminal activity. Second, several social movements represent far-right attitudes in the public sphere, forming and mobilising nationalist, xenophobic, and antisemitic sentiments. The most important of these movements cluster around military veterans, fraternities, the Identitarians, and *Reichsbürger* or sovereign citizens. Third, the FPÖ provides a forceful political voice for Austria's far-right scene. Examining these elements reveals the overall shape of the Austrian far right.

*Far-right attitudes and crime*

Modern Austria harbours a deep undercurrent of far-right attitudes. Movements and parties spring therefrom, buoyed up by a fairly stable reserve of social support—as we shall see below in the case of the Ulrichsberg commemorations. These attitudes of course include concerns over contemporary issues, most prominently immigration, but also relate to conceptions of Austria's post-war history, which are enduringly contentious. Similarly registering at the individual level, far-right crime is partially traceable through citations under a handful of laws. These figures show a conspicuous rise in crime rates in recent years, suggesting that these offences are no longer the exclusive preserve of individual Austrian neo-Nazis and groupuscular leaders; there are signs that far-right violence is becoming more organised.

To begin with, an enduring grievance among Austria's far right is the now-predominant view of the country's wartime history. After the end of the Second World War Allied occupation promoted, and the citizenry took up with alacrity, the view that Austria was the 'first victim' of Nazi aggression (Art, 2006). The *Opferthese* ('victim theory') was appealing because it absolved the Austrian state and much of society of culpability for Nazi crimes; and it allowed former Nazi party members to return to political activity (Berg, 1997), joining each of the major parties and forming a particularly prominent share of the FPÖ. However, it prevented a broad reckoning with the past[1] and Austrian complicity in Second World War atrocities.

Yet social consensus around this perspective started to breakdown in the 1980s, sparked by the heated campaign and electoral victory of Kurt Waldheim in 1986. Controversies around veteran commemorations, for example at Ulrichsberg (Arbeitskreis gegen den Kärntner Konsens, 2011), and the legacy of the Austrian military eroded the myth of Austrian victimhood. By 2011, only 37 per cent of Austrians believed the previously hegemonic notion that Austria was the first victim of Nazi aggression. (Gottschlich, 2012: 161). But that sizeable current of far-right attitudes endures too in the area of historical memory, most notably in the form of antisemitism: 28 per cent agreed that Jews were partly to blame for the history of antisemitic persecution; 38 per cent agreed Jews have too much power in international financial markets and 44 per cent believed that 'Jews rule the business world' (Gottschlich, 2012). Notwithstanding the decline of some of these sentiments, antisemitism remains a prominent part of the tableau of Austrian far-right attitudes.

<Figure 1.1 here>
Figure 1.1. Xenophobia in Austria, 1990-2017. (Data from the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th waves of the European Values Survey.) A respondent is counted as xenophobic when expressing a desire not to have neighbours that are 'Muslims,' 'immigrants/foreigners,' or people of a different race.

In recent years, antisemitic and historical memory grievances have given way to more conspicuous anti-immigrant attitudes. Data from the European Values Survey (Figure 1.1) shows that racism and xenophobia, not insignificant beforehand, rose markedly in the last two decades. However, it seems this is not a racialised manifestation of concerns about terrorism: in 2018, 'only seven per cent of Austrians were concerned about terrorism,' whereas, at 29 per cent, immigration was rated as the most important issue facing the country (Counter Extremism Project, 2018).

<Figure 1.2 here>
Figure 1.2. Criminal offences in Austria with a far-right background. (Statistics from reports of the Austrian Federal Constitutional Protection Office.)

The level of far-right attitudes goes some way towards explaining the certain rates of criminal activity in Austria. The *Verbotsgesetz* ('prohibition law') criminalises some neo-Nazi activities and Holocaust denial; section 283 of the Criminal Code prohibits religious-, ethnic-, and nationality-based incitement to hatred; the *Abzeichengesetz* ('insignia act') outlaws certain extremist symbols; sections of the *Einführungsgesetz zu den Verwaltungsverfahrensgesetzen* ('introductory act to the administrative procedures act') provides sanctions against discrimination—together, these encompass the most important elements of Austria's legal regime against the far right. Figure 1.2 shows that, although rates of these offences were fairly stable throughout the 1990s and much of the 2000s, the past decade witnessed a substantial rise in violations of the *Verbotsgesetz*, section 283, and 'other offences' (*sonstigen Delikten*). Part of this rise may be the result of more resolute application

of these laws. In particular, the conviction of long-time neo-Nazi activist Gottfried Küssel[2] in 2012 marked the extension of these legal instruments into organised far-right activism online.

To put these figures in a comparative perspective, Figure 1.3 shows the per capita rates of violent offences and propaganda[3] offences with a far-right background in both Austria and Germany. It makes clear that although there are more offences in Germany, this should not obscure a general similarity in far-right crime rates. Moreover, Austria's rate of violent far-right offences has been consistently higher than Germanys since the mid-1990s.

<Figure 1.3 here>

Figure 1.3. Comparison of per capita far-right criminal offences in Austria and Germany. (Statistics from reports of the Austrian and German constitutional protection offices.)

The visible upswing of Austrian far-right crimes since the mid-2010s reflects a surge of Islamophobia, which not only registers at an individual level but is also represented by highly visible movement actors and by the FPÖ (see below). What is more, there is a danger of further escalation. Late in 2020 Austrian and German security services seized scores of firearms and explosive devices stockpiled by right-wing extremists. Austria hosts a disproportionate degree of right-wing extremist 'plots and preparations for armed struggle' (Ravndal et al., 2021). Both far-right attitudes and far-right violence are interconnected with a set of movement organisations in Austria.

*Movements*

Austrian far-right movement activity has long been overshadowed by the political presence of the FPÖ. Minkenberg (2013) characterises Austria's movement sphere as 'weak'; compared to the prodigious German far-right movement scene (e.g., Zeller 2021), this may seem obvious, but it should not obscure the fact that Austrian far-right movements, though small, are varied and lively. As listed in Table 1.1, there are four main sets of far-right movement actors: the long-established veterans' groups and fraternities, and the newer Identitarians and *Reichsbürger* groups.

|  | **Politically influential** | **Politically uninfluential** |
|---|---|---|
| **Long-established** | fraternities | veterans' groups |
| **Newly-established** | Identitarians | Reichsbürger groups |

Table 1.1. Austria's major far-right movements.

There are two fountainheads of contemporary far-right movements in Austria. First, the end of Second World War hostilities allowed hundreds of thousands of Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS veterans to return to Austria (Manoschek, 1999, p. 193). To be sure, only a minority of these were members of the Nazi party, and few were dyed-in-the-wool devotees of National Socialist ideology. Nevertheless, returning veterans rapidly began to organise in post-war Austria. Unlike in Germany, where mobilisation was largely concerned with securing welfare

and state benefits for veterans (Diehl, 2000), Austrian veterans' groups often concentrated on commemorations and demonstrative activities, chiefly 'soldiers meetings.' Berg (1997, p. 529) explains that these meetings "took on the quality of a religious ritual, with a march/pilgrimage to a designated site where the commemoration, or celebration, of the sanctified ['front experience'] occurred, the participants dressed customarily—and illegally—in old Wehrmacht or SS garb, the procession accompanied by patriotic music and singing." These practices naturally were something of an embarrassment because their soldierly pride clashed to some extent with the *Opferthese* portrayal of the German Nazi domination compelling Austrian complicity.

Initially, the first government of Austria's Second Republic, elected in late 1945, took action against some of the more ostentatious shows of old military allegiances. Prohibitions against displaying Third Reich symbols and wearing uniforms were implemented (Berg, 1997, p. 525). The Allied occupation authorities also ordered several veterans' organisations to disband, often soon after forming, justifiably wary of large congregations of veterans. While this did not prevent large-scale political organisation of veterans, these measures limited their mobilisation capacity. But after 1955, after the signing of the *Staatsvertrag* ('state treaty') ending occupation and restoring Austrian sovereignty, there was a surge of veteran mobilisation. Below, the case sketch on the Ulrichsberg commemorations details the legacy and enduring political importance of this era of veteran mobilisation. Suffice it here to say that veterans of Third Reich military service had a significant influence on the development of post-war Austrian socio-politics, generally; their imprint on some parts of the far-right scene endures to this day.

Second, Austrian 'fraternities' (*Burschenschaften*, *Korporation*, or *Studentenverbindung*), generally bastions of right-wing attitudes (Katzenmaier et al., 2017), in several instances maintain close connections to the FPÖ and comprise an influential far-right network (cf. Lasek, 2015; Peham 2015). Numerous fraternities espouse German nationalist ideologies, some going so far as supporting a new *Anschluss*, unifying German and Austria; not surprisingly, since many fraternities originated in nineteenth century as clubs of German nationalists. Yet several are conspicuous for their egregious far-right views and their strong links to the FPÖ.[4]

Two incidents are exemplary. For many years a coalition of Vienna-based fraternities (the *Wiener Korporationsring*) organised a ball—part of the Austrian capital's ball season in late January and early February—that gained notoriety for catering to far-right fraternities and public figures. Apart from Austrian participants, leaders and representatives of France's Front National party, the radical right Swedish Democrats, and the Flemish nationalist party Vlaams Belang attended on several occasions. In 2012, though, after public pressure persuaded the venue operators to no longer extend the fraternities' rental—at that year's ball, the FPÖ leader Heinz-Christian Strache made a notorious comparison about public opposition to the ball, saying 'we are the new Jews'—the event was forced to demobilise (Zeller, 2021). Without missing a beat, the FPÖ has organised since 2013 a replacement event (the *Akademikerball*), with the same conspicuous far-right profile, but with an unassailable prerogative (as a lawful political party) to rent the venue.[5] This episode typifies the close, mutually supportive cooperation of far-right fraternities and the FPÖ.

A recent scandal is indicative of the ideological extremism represented by some fraternities. In 2018, an Austrian magazine revealed the songbook of the *Germania zu Wiener Neustadt* fraternity contained several antisemitic lines and positive allusions to the Nazis (Reuters, 2018), notably including the line "Then the Jew Ben-Gurion stood in their midst: step on the gas, you old Germanics, we can make it to seven million." Lest this be thought a singular case, the songbook of another fraternity (*Bruna Sudetia*) was obtained weeks later; it too contained antisemitic invective (Pearson, 2018). Together, an extensive array of fraternities, with thousands of members and alumni, often occupying important offices and positions, provide an influential far-right network that is deeply embedded in Austrian public life.

Whereas veterans and fraternities represent long-established parts of far-right scene, there are two important newcomers in Austria: the Identitarians (*Identitäre Bewegung*) and 'Reich Citizens' (*Reichsbürger*) or sovereign citizens.[6] The Austrian branch[7] of the transnational Identitarian movement was founded in 2012 and is led by Martin Sellner. The group espouses the 'new right' ideology of ethno-pluralism, arguing that the indigenous ethnic populations of states (particularly in Europe) must be preserved and protected from multiculturalism. Unsurprisingly, given this foundational tenet, the group propagates the 'great replacement' conspiracy theory that elites are replacing indigenous national ethnic inhabitants with immigrants in order to more easily control the population.

The Identitarians are not a traditional mass movement organisation, trying to amass broad social support. In his regular contributions to the German far-right magazine *COMPACT*, Martin Sellner frequently alludes to the 'silent majority' that already supports the goals of the Identitarians. Accordingly, given the supposedly already extant support base, Sellner casts the Identitarians as a sort of revolutionary vanguard organisation. Austrian state authorities reported (as of 2019) there are only a few hundred actual members of the Identitarian organisation (BVT, 2020). This corps engages in three main modes of activity: intellectual work, street action, and party politics (Strobl & Bruns, 2016, p. 107). The group, and Sellner in particular, thrives off making highly visible acts of symbolic protest that attract attention and stimulate donations. Members have organised short-lived occupations of sites, disrupted theatrical productions, unfurled banners at iconic sites, and chartered a boat in 2017 to monitor refugee assistance operations in the Mediterranean.

The last few years have dealt a series of blows to the Austrian Identitarians, though. In 2018, Sellner and nine other Identitarians were charged with operating a criminal organisation. Though the activists were eventually acquitted, it did not spell the end of state action against the Identitarians. The group remains under observation by state security services and the Identitarian lambda symbol was banned under Austrian law in mid-2021.[8] Of greater consequence are the actions taken by mainstream social media companies. In 2020—notably, after it came to light that the 2019 Christchurch mosques attacker had donated to the Identitarians and had personal contact with Sellner—Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube suspended the accounts of Sellner and the Identitarians for repeated violations of the platforms' user agreements. Attempts to sue these companies were fruitless, so Sellner has been relegated to alternative platforms such as Telegram, VKontakte, Gab, and BitChute (Fielitz & Schwarz, 2020). Although Sellner has effectively drawn a large number of followers to these alternative platforms, particularly Telegram (Gartner, Peter, & Walchhofer, 2020), deplatforming has significantly decreased his reach: he had more than 180,000 YouTube subscribers when his account was suspended; as of late 2022, he has amassed just

over 60,000 subscribers on Telegram. This consequently limits the capacity of Sellner and the Identitarians to attract attention and raise money. Nevertheless, the group remains active, most recently as regular participants at protests against COVID-19 restrictions.

The other newcomer to Austria's far-right movement scene is a set of *Reichsbürger* groups.[9] Similar to their German counterparts,[10] these groups declare the Austrian Constitution illegitimate and repudiate the state's authority. Members often receive pseudo-legal training and guidance in shirking taxes and other state duties. The largest group is the *Staatenbund Österreich* ('States Confederation of Austria'), with approximately 3600 members (Haselbacher, Mattes, & Reeger, 2021). It is currently the target of far-reaching criminal prosecution (cf. BVT, 2019, pp. 66-69). In 2017, the government revised the criminal code to include a provision outlawing the anti-state movement (article 247a). In 2019, particularly as a result of plans to occupy and replace the Graz Criminal Court in 2017, the group's two principal leaders were sentenced to lengthy jail sentences for convictions of high treason; several other conspirators received short sentences (BVT, 2019, p. 66). The state also pursued legal action against hundreds of other individuals involved in the movement (*ibid.*). Though this forceful state action has disrupted the *Reichsbürger* movement, a sizeable cohort of activists and sympathisers endures. While violent far-right protest is rare in comparison to other countries (e.g., Berntzen & Weisskircher, 2016), the example of the *Staatenbund Österreich* reveals the willingness of some far-right movement contingents to take aggressive, violent action.

Though each of these movement sets—veterans, fraternities, Identitarians, and *Reichsbürger*—are important components in Austria's far-right scene, the fraternities and Identitarians are particularly conspicuous for the political influence they have through connections to the FPÖ. But as we shall see below, this is a model of party-movement cooperation that was honed through the FPÖ's engagement with the Ulrichsberg commemorations.

*Party*

It is just as well here to refer to Austria's far-right party rather than parties. Although other examples exist—Aktion Neue Rechte and the Nationaldemokratische Partei were notable right-wing extremist parties, both proscribed in the 1980s (Zeller & Vaughan 2021), as well as Jörg Haider's breakaway party from the FPÖ, the *Bündnis Zukunft Österreich*, which endures in some localities—and the other largest parties also have histories spattered with 'brown spots' (Böhmer, 2019), it suffices to focus on the Freedom Party.

The FPÖ shares its origins with post-war veterans groups. The early phase of Allied occupation, 1945 to 1947, saw the most insistent implementation of denazification. But this faded. Though barred from participating in the 1945 elections, "over 500,000 registered Nazis were allowed to vote at the 1949 General Election" (Bailer-Galanda & Neugebauer, 1996, p. 2).[11] Following the election, many of these voters organised under the *Verband der Unabhängigen* ('Association of Independents,' VdU). The organisation split along ideological lines in 1955, with much of the large German nationalist faction forming the FPÖ. Unrepentant former Nazis and committed German nationalists filled the top roles of the young party: the first two leaders, Anton Reinthaller and Friedrich Peter, were both former

SS officers (Bailer-Galanda & Neugebauer, 1996, p. 3). Yet it did not adopt extremist or even particularly radical positions.[12] The party was sufficiently moderate—and commanded fairly stable support hovering between five and eight per cent—to support Social-democratic Party (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs*, SPÖ) governments in 1970 and, as a junior coalition partner, in 1983. So the radical right turn ushered in by Jörg Haider's takeover in 1986 was also something of an ideological coup.

| | 1990 | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 | 1999 | 2002 | 2004 | 2006 | 2008 | 2009 | 2013 | 2014 | 2017 | 2019 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| National Council | 16.6 | 22.5 | 21.9 | | 26.9 | 10.0 | | 11.0 | 17.5 | | 20.5 | | 26.0 | 16.2 |
| European Parliament | | | | 27.5 | 23.4 | | 6.3 | | | 12.7 | | 19.7 | | 17.2 |

Table 1.2. FPÖ vote percentage in national elections.

Under Haider's leadership the FPÖ became the prototypical populist radical right party. It pushed for anti-immigration policies and elevated divisive socio-cultural issues, such as disputes over erecting bilingual (German and Slovenian) road signs in southern Austria, and shifted from pan-German nationalism towards Austrian nationalism.[13] More conspicuously, anti-immigrant, nationalist, and (later) anti-EU rhetoric, all couched in anti-establishment populism, signalled the party's shift. And most infamously, Haider was forced to resign from his role as Carinthia's governor in 1991 after favourably comparing the Third Reich's employment policies to the then-governing SPÖ-led coalition's. In retrospect, we may well describe Haider as a culture warrior, elevating an ethno-nationalist conception of Austrian history and society. At any rate, he succeeded in broadening the party's electoral support, both at regional (Figure 1.4) and national (Table 1.2) levels. National vote shares rose from five per cent in 1983 to upwards of 25 per cent in the late 1990s. Support mounted in virtually every regional election, too.

<Figure 1.4 here>

Figure 1.4. FPÖ vote share in Austrian regional (*Länder*) elections since 1985.

The party spiralled into disarray not long after forming a coalition government in 2000. Incompetence and inexperience of several representatives undermined the party's role in government and infighting eventually resulted in a split (Fallend & Heinisch, 2016). Yet suppositions that the FPÖ was dependent on Haider's charisma were disproved as another charismatic leader, Heinz-Christian Strache, ascended to party leadership in 2005. A member of *Burschenschaft Vandalia*, a history of participating in a right-wing 'military sport group' (*Wehrsportgruppe*), and even open praise for the Identitarians—Strache epitomised the symbiosis of the FPÖ and the far-right movement scene. Retaining and even intensifying its populist radical right narratives and strategy under Strache,[14] the party steadily regained its previous levels of support. After the 2017 election, in which the FPÖ won more than a quarter of the vote (Table 1.2) and subsequently entered into coalition with the Austrian

People's Party (*Österreichische Volkspartei*, ÖVP), Martin Sellner crowed that Sebastian Kurz and the ÖVP won only because Kurz 'became Strache,' referring to his anti-immigration stance (Sellner, 2017). And it is hard to gainsay this interpretation (cf. Hadj Abdou & Ruedin, 2021; Hadj Abdou, Bale, & Geddes, 2021).

Recently, the FPÖ has once again fallen on (somewhat) hard times. In what has since been dubbed the Ibiza Affair, Strache, along with FPÖ deputy leader Johann Gudenus, was secretly filmed in July 2017 meeting with a woman purporting to be the relative of a Russian businessman, discussing means of enhancing the party's political power in return for favourable government consideration. Publication of the video led to the resignation of Strache and Gudenus, the collapse of the governing coalition, and snap elections in which the FPÖ lost ten per cent of its vote share. Though additional footage released in 2020 showed Strache and Gudenus rejecting any illegal actions, the damage was long done.

Nevertheless, the FPÖ is here to say. It suffered in the wake of the Ibiza Affair, but retains a solid constituency, built off its representation of interests connected to rural constituents, working class voters, pensioners, and members of the police and armed forces (Heinisch & Werner, 2019).[15] The party's strength in polarised contexts bodes well for its future prospects (Jansesberger, Lefkofridi, & Mühlböck, 2021). Most of all, the FPÖ thrives off its symbiotic relationship with movement organisations, both supporting and supported by the far-right movement scene.

### The Ulrichsberg commemorations: archetype of the Austrian far right

The evolution of Austria's far-right scene is well symbolised by the commemorations of Second World War veterans at Ulrichsberg. Though this social movement campaign has now demobilised (Sebestyen, 2018; Zeller, 2021), its history reflects long-standing strains of far-right attitudes in Austria, exemplifies the confluence of two movement sectors (veterans and fraternities), and exhibits the transformation of the FPÖ.

For ten years after the war Allied occupation restricted the scope of veterans' social mobilisation. Admittedly, veterans succeeded in politically mobilising for elections under the aegis of the VdU, but otherwise their activities were mostly limited to small, discrete memorial ceremonies.[16] In other words, their attempts at 'memory work,' honouring the fallen and their own service, were restricted (Hurd, & Werther, 2016). The signing of the *Staatsvertrag* and restoration of Austria's sovereignty in 1955 opened opportunities for veterans. In 1959, a coalition of veterans' groups called the *Ulrichsberggemeinschaft* ('Ulrichsberg community') organised a commemoration for the fallen and the veterans of the Second World War.

Centered on an ancient hilltop religious site in central Carinthia—a region that would become a FPÖ stronghold under Haider's leadership—the commemoration of Third Reich military veterans at Ulrichsberg long enjoyed the material and moral support of Austrian politicians and the army, which provided transportation up to the summit as well as a military band and honour guard. The event was regularly attended by several thousand veterans, their families, uniformed fraternity members, and distinguished guests; over the years several keynote speakers were sitting governmental ministers and even, in 1967, Chancellor Josef Klaus

(ÖVP). It was a commemoration steeped in historical triumphalism and historical grievance. As concerns the former, events often honoured the efforts of ethnically Austrian Carinthians in a 1920 referendum to ensure, amid the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, that the region remained an Austrian (rather than Slovenian) territory. Strident and exclusionary regional patriotism was a prominent component of the Ulrichsberg commemorations. Yet more importantly, embossed in the rhetoric and iconography of the event from its inception was the stamp of the *Opferthese*: the organisers and speakers (comprised of members from all three major political parties) praised the comradeship of soldiers, compelled to fulfil military duty, and portrayed the Second World War, particularly its latter stages, as a noble struggle to protect Europe from the evils of Bolshevism. This revisionist fiction underscored the "inherent tension between the internationally sanctioned notion of Austrian victimization during the Nazi years and the pride of many Austrian veterans in having performed their soldierly duties" (Berg, 1997, p 513); it eschewed any Austrian culpability in the crimes of the Third Reich and recast Nazi military aggression as justified defence.

Although Soviet attachés and an opposed veterans' group (the *Vereinigung Demokratischer Soldaten Österreichs*) complained about the event, for three decades the Ulrichsberg commemorations enjoyed the support of all three major political parties as well as the military. This was the consensus of the *Opferthese* in action. The roll of keynote speakers at the demonstrations is tellingly varied, listing governmental ministers and legislative representatives from the ÖVP, SPÖ, and FPÖ as well as speakers representing the military or veterans organisations.

Tectonic political shifts in the late 1980s eroded the consensual foundations of the Ulrichsberg commemoration. The 1986 presidential campaign of Kurt Waldheim, himself a Wehrmacht veteran, though not involved in any organised veteran activity, ignited public debate about Austria's wartime history. Coming in the wake of revelations about his service in the Balkans from 1942 to 1945, Waldheim's claims that while serving he had no knowledge of atrocities and, like many veterans, he merely did his duty did little to assuage public concern. Old sins cast long shadows. Though elected, President Waldheim as well as Chancellor Franz Vranitzky went on to acknowledge that Austrians had been 'victims and perpetrators,' subverting the *Opferthese*. It also led to amendment of the *Verbotsgesetz* to include prohibitions against 'denying, grossly downplaying, approving, or justifying' Nazi genocide or crimes against humanity, which was later applied (among other instances) in the prosecution of David Irving.

Running in parallel to this process was the rise of Jörg Haider and the concomitant transformation of the FPÖ. Previously, the party supported the Ulrichsberg commemorations in the same way as the ÖVP and SPÖ: representatives legitimised it as an apolitical memorialisation of the fallen, spoke at events, and voted for cultural funds to be directed to the *Ulrichsberggemeinschaft*. There was nothing exceptional in it. Haider represented an unwavering and often strident defence of the *Opferthese*. Speaking at the 1990 Ulrichsberg commemoration, he averred (emphasis added),

> It cannot be the case that those on the winning side are celebrated as heroes, while those on the losing side are labelled criminals. ... Our soldiers were not culprits, they were at best victims. ... There is *nothing to reproach this generation of soldiers*.

With such stances, Haider positioned the FPÖ as defenders of veterans and the Ulrichsberg commemorations just as other parties were turning away from this tradition.

These parallel political shifts stoked an emerging politicisation of Ulrichsberg. After Haider's controversial speech at the 1990 event, active[17] SPÖ politicians stopped participating. Given the heightened controversy surrounding the commemorations, the decision of Werner Fasslabend (ÖVP), the sitting Minister of Defence, to speak at Ulrichsberg in 1995 whipped up a new storm of public debate. Although his remarks were quite moderate compared to previous speeches, Fasslabend was criticised for his decision to participate at all; as a sitting governmental minister, his critics argued, he conferred legitimacy on Ulrichsberg's historical revisionism.[18] More choice comments from Haider at a preliminary event (the veterans' meeting at Krumpendorf) only exacerbated matters (Eidlhuber, 2000):

> In these busy times there are still decent people who have character and who stand by their convictions even in the face of great opposition, and have remained true to their convictions to this day. And that is a foundation, my dear friends, which is also passed on to us young people. A people that does not honour their ancestors is doomed. But since we want to have a future, we will teach those people, the politically correct ones, that we are not to be killed and that decency in our world is always worthwhile, even if we are currently not able to win a majority, but we are spiritually superior to the others . (...) We give money to terrorists, to violent newspapers, to work-shy rabble, and we have no money for decent people.

Irrespective of Haider's advocacy for the 'decent people' assembled at Ulrichsberg, the famous Wehrmacht exhibition (entitled 'War of annihilation. Crimes of the Wehrmacht, 1941 to 1944') that toured Germany and Austria from 1995 to 1999, visiting Klagenfurt (near Ulrichsberg) in the month before the 1996 commemorations, discredited the notion of the 'honourable Wehrmacht' that was uninvolved in Third Reich atrocities. The events between 1985 and 1996—most prominently, Haider's ascent to FPÖ leadership and his speeches at Ulrichsberg, Waldheim's divisive election campaign, the nonparticipation of SPÖ representatives, the controversial participation of Werner Fasslabend, and the displays of the Wehrmacht exhibition—thoroughly politicised the event, eliminating the consensual support of all major parties and instead pushing it into the political domain of the (newly) radical right FPÖ.

Yet the commemorations showed few signs of facing demobilising pressure. Events still attracted thousands of participants. State and governmental actors, regardless of politicisation, tenuously preserved the status quo: the Austrian army still provided a band and an honour guard for the commemorations, as well as jeeps to transport participants up to the memorial site. Even after the Ministry of Defence issued new rules[19] in 2001 that seemingly prohibited it, army support and participation at Ulrichsberg continued.

The dam broke when anti-fascist researchers revealed in 2009 that the organising group's leader, Wolf Dieter Ressenig, was selling Nazi memorabilia online—such activity violates the *Verbotsgesetz* and the *Abzeichengesetz*—the government excluded any further army participation. Besides depriving the campaign of two central elements of the Ulrichsberg ritual, the army band and the honour guard, the withdrawal of the army's transportation support meant that the later events literally went downhill: unable to transport infirm

participants to the summit. Participation, which had stagnated through the 2000s, never surpassed 500 people after the incident.

The sword stroke of withdrawn state support did not immediately end the campaign, though. Small events were held throughout the 2010s, but were smaller and organised at venues other than the Ulrichsberg summit that were more readily accessible without army support. State funding, which the campaign had enjoyed throughout its history, was terminated in 2014. Though the organisation attempted to recruit new members to make up for this shortfall (Martinz, 2015), the efforts did not meet with much success (Sterkl, 2016). The organising group, the *Ulrichsberggemeinschaft*, gave up the ghost in 2018 when its chairman, Hermann Kandussi, discontinued the event.

Over the course of the 2010s, the pressure of lost participation (Zeller, 2020) due to veterans dying out, the inability of organisers to attract new participants, and the withdrawal of essential state support caused the demobilisation of the Ulrichsberg commemorations. This far-right campaign, lasting for nearly six decades, drew legitimacy from its longevity: a tradition of venerating the 'honourable service' of veterans. The mechanism that brought about its demobilisation is closely intertwined with Austria's re-examination of its own far-right history as well as with the modern origins of the FPÖ, one of the largest and most influential radical right parties in the world. Politicisation that began in the late 1980s eventually culminated in the withdrawal of state support and the Ulrichsberg campaign's demobilisation. But that same politicisation helped raise the profile of Jörg Haider and propelled the transformation of the FPÖ. Long the third party in Austria's bipartite political system, the FPÖ became a potent political presence and positioned itself as the defender of Austria's far-right movement scene. Even as veterans have become a less important constituency in Austria, the pattern of party-movement relations that they set endure today in the FPÖ.


## Conclusion

Austria's far right is broad and deeply rooted. Enduring antisemitism and heightened anti-immigrant attitudes reveal the wide base of social support for far-right politics. A multifaceted movement scene thrives off this social support and uses it, as well as embeddedness in longstanding institutions, notably including several fraternities, to bolster their activism. Most importantly, these attitudes and movements provide resilient bases of support for the FPÖ, a prototype of European radical right parties whose levels of support make it a perennially significant political player.

The case of the veterans' commemorations at Ulrichsberg illustrates how Austria's contemporary far-right ecosystem was formed. The simultaneous collapse of the 'victim myth' about Austria's Nazi past and the transformation of the FPÖ into a radical right party under Jörg Haider generated politicisation of the campaign at Ulrichsberg. As other parties turned away from this veterans' event, the FPÖ was left as *the* political voice of far-right movements. What is more, the imprint of Ulrichsberg endures: past participants in the campaign remain influential in contemporary activism. For instance, Martin Rutter, a far-right legislator and the keynote speaker at the last Ulrichsberg commemoration in 2017, was a leading organiser of conspiracist anti-COVID-19 demonstrations.

Today, Austria, like many other states, is faced with the challenge of addressing more extreme strains of the far-right scene. In answer to this challenge, the government in 2017 created an institution tasked with counter-extremism and deradicalisation (the *Bundesweites Netzwerk Extremismusprävention und Deradikalisierung*) and established an 'exit' programme to support people leaving violent extremist groups. And a pair of laws (the *Kommunikationsplattformen-Gesetz* and the *Hass-im-Netz-Bekämpfungsgesetz*) aim to limit hate speech and illegal activity of social media platforms. Yet these laws and policies require committed implementation if they are to disrupt far-right activism in Austria.

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[1] In Germany, the phenomenon known as *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.

[2] Küssel is a typical far-right 'movement entrepreneur' (Erb, 2006), an activist serving important networking and leadership functions (Virchow, 2013) for several decades in Austria. As early as the 1970s, he was a member of (subsequently proscribed) right-wing extremist organisations like *Kameradschaft Babenberg* and *Aktion Neue Rechte* (Zeller & Vaughan 2021). He has now twice served long-term prison sentences for neo-Nazi activism in violation of the *Verbotsgesetz*, most recently for operating the extremist website, 'alpen-donau.info.'

[3] Whereas German state security services report 'propaganda offences' (*Propagandadelikte*), in Austria a similar statistic is derived by totaling the offences against the *Verbotsgesetz*, *Abzeichengesetz*, and Article III of the *Einführungsgesetz zu den Verwaltungsverfahrensgesetzen*. This is the statistic represented in Figure 1.3.

[4] English-language studies of Austrian and German fraternities are few. Nevertheless, perusing the frequent references to *Burschenschaften* in Lasek's (2015) catalogue of Austria's far-right functionaries may give a helpful indication of how the country's far-right scene is rooted in fraternity networks.

[5] That venue is the publically owned Hofburg Palace. The company managing the events space may reject private rental requests, but not requests from lawful political parties like the FPÖ.

[6] It is perhaps tempting to include a part of anti-COVID-19 protesters in Austria's far-right scene. However, it is unclear at time of writing whether this series of protest mobilisations will solidify into enduring activism.

[7] NB: the French branch was proscribed in 2021 (Zeller & Vaughan 2021)..

[8] See §1 Z 10 and 11 of the Symbole-Gesetz. Available online: https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/GeltendeFassung.wxe?Abfrage=Bundesnormen&Gesetzesnummer=20009040.

[9] NB: within this movement distinctions are often made between *Reichsbürger*, referring to past German imperial territory, and 'sovereign citizens,' encompassing several rejections of state authority that are not necessarily rooted in any historical state. I refer only to *Reichsbürger* in the interest of simplicity.

[10] Germany proscribed several *Reichsbürger* groups in 2020 (Zeller & Vaughan 2021).

[11] This massive bloc of voters stirred competition between the two predominant parties (i.e., the Austrian People's Party and the Social Democratic Party of Austria). Numerous 1949 election placards, particularly from

the People's Party, demonstrate the fervent attempts to placate and woo former Nazis, often simultaneously demonising anti-fascist actors and policies.

[12] In this aspect, the FPÖ is a contrast to neo-fascist parties like the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* and the *Sozialistische Reichspartei Deutschlands*, peopled by former Nazis *and* adopting a radical agenda.

[13] The dispute over *Ortstafeln* was mostly concentrated in Haider's region of Carinthia. The Austrian state was legally bound by the terms of the *Staatsvertrag* (specifically, Article 7 §3) to install bilingual road signs, as part of other measures recognising Slovenian ethnic minorities. Throughout his political career, Haider continually resisted this legal obligation, going so far as ignoring binding decisions from the Constitutional Court.

[14] On the particulars of FPÖ discourse, see especially the work of Ruth Wodak and co-authors (e.g., Forchtner, Krzyżanowski, & Wodak, 2013; Wodak, 2015; Wodak, & Rheindorf, 2018).

[15] Tracking polls show that the FPÖ has steadily recovered from the fallout of the Ibiza Affair: https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/austria/.

[16] The only major exception to this observation in fact pertains to a forerunner of the Ulrichsberg commemoration. In 1946, Blasius Scheucher (later the driving force behind the Ulrichsberg campaign) helped found the *Heimkehrerbund* ('Returnees association'), with one of its goals being the establishment of a commemoration for veterans at Zollfeld in southern Austria. It was quickly dissolved by the Allies (Rencher, 1999). A successor organisation, the *Heimkehrer-Hilfs- und Betreuungsstelle* ('Returnees help and support centre'), was similarly dissolved not long after its formation, but its members continued to push for a commemoration, including by honouring veterans at a 1947 event at Zollfeld that attracted as many as 20,000 participants (Arbeitskreis gegen den Kärntner Konsens, 2011, pp. 78-79).

[17] A few members of the *Ulrichsberggemeinschaft* who were also SPÖ members, such as Rudolf Gallob, continued to participate, though they no longer represented the party in any legislative bodies

[18] Fasslabend's participation was not exceptional, though. His predecessor as Minister of Defence, Robert Lichal, spoke at the 1989 Ulrichsberg commemoration.

[19] This refers to the so-called 'Traditions decree' (*Traditionserlaß*), point 3.c. of which declared, 'The participation of clubs or associations of troops or troop units of the former German Wehrmacht as well as other organisations of the state or party of the Third Reich between 1933 and 1945 is prohibited within the framework of the tradition of the Austrian Armed Forces. Likewise, insignia of such associations, their replicas and other symbols of the Third Reich may not be carried at military celebrations and events of the federal army. Participation of soldiers of the armed forces in uniform as well as carrying insignia of the armed forces to events of such associations is also prohibited.'