


Controversies over Austria's Nazi Past: Generational Changes and Grassroots Awakenings following the Waldheim Affair and the “Wehrmacht Exhibitions”

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Abstract

In 1945, the Austrian government constructed a new identity based on having been a “victim” of Nazi Germany. Thus, it had to hush up the fact that a majority of the population had welcomed the *Anschluss*, hundreds of thousands joined the NSDAP and served in the German Wehrmacht, and many were involved in the crimes of National Socialism. Only in the late 1980s, in the wake of the Waldheim Affair, did the years between 1938 and 1945 have to be re-interpreted. Ten years later, the exhibition “War of Annihilation: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941–1944” (short: Wehrmacht exhibition) questioned the myth of the “clean Wehrmacht.” Using the examples of the Waldheim Affair and the Wehrmacht exhibition, the article analyzes the influence of grassroots movements stimulated by these events. Since some members of the second generation defended the Wehrmacht rather than embracing the grassroots movements’ critique of earlier war myths, it will also problematize the category “generation.” Due to the leading role played by prominent Austrian Jews in these grassroots movements, the generational gap within the Jewish community is of further interest. I emphasize that the grassroots movements needed the support of Austrian political parties and from abroad to achieve a modicum of success.

Keywords: Austria; postwar; impact of Holocaust; generational gaps; grassroots movements

Introduction

On March 12, 1938, the German Wehrmacht marched into Austria. The occupation of the State of Austria did indeed contravene international law; nevertheless, a majority of the population, for a variety of reasons, welcomed the *Anschluss* and hundreds of thousands joined the NSDAP. Austrians served in the German Wehrmacht and were involved in the crimes of National Socialism. In contrast to the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), Austria had not been forced to face up to its responsibility for National Socialism. The elites constructed a new Austrian identity based on being a “victim” of Nazi Germany, which first of all was meant to serve as a useful foreign policy instrument to improve its standing during the State Treaty negotiations and to minimize compensation payments. Besides the official or strategic “victim thesis” other concepts of suffering also appeared and were transferred to the next generations. Only in the late 1980s, in the wake of the Waldheim Affair, did Austrian politicians have to re-interpret the years between 1938 and 1945 as an Austrian *and* German history and to accept responsibility for crimes committed by Austrians. The vast majority of Austrians as well as political parties, especially the ÖVP and FPÖ, needed some time to be able to accept the “co-responsibility thesis,” which provided them with opportunities to

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put forth their various interpretations. Ten years later, the exhibition “War of Annihilation: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941–1944”¹ (short: Wehrmacht exhibition) and—to a lesser extent—its revised version “Crimes of the Wehrmacht: Dimension of the War of Annihilation 1941 to 1944” questioned the myth of the “clean Wehrmacht” and thus the heroization of Austrian soldiers (in the sense of these men having made a sacrifice) as well as the narrative of Wehrmacht soldiers being *the* “war victims” (in the sense of having been made to suffer).² Therefore, the problematic issue of Austrian perpetrators and Austrians’ complicity could no longer be ignored.

Using the examples of the Waldheim Affair and the (mainly) first Wehrmacht exhibition, I will focus on the grassroots movements that were stimulated by the Waldheim Affair and the Wehrmacht exhibitions. Since those movements were dominated by the second generation (born roughly between 1938 and 1950) and to a lesser extent by the third generation (born roughly in the 1970s and 1980s),³ they are often interpreted as a symbol of a deep generational conflict. In the following, I will analyze how grassroots movements challenged the official interpretation of Austria’s role as the first victim of Nazi Germany as well as the myth of the *saubere Wehrmacht* (clean Wehrmacht). Whereas the second and third generations are often seen as homogeneous, I will emphasize their heterogeneity and the gap between those generations. Furthermore, I regard the war generation as a heterogeneous one. Since prominent Austrian Jews played a leading role in the grassroots movement during the Waldheim Affair and also in the protest movement against the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition government installed in 2000, the generational gap within the Jewish communities and the awakening of a self-confident second and third Jewish generation will be of further interest. Concerning the term grassroots movement, I refer to an organized effort undertaken by groups of individuals to bring about changes on a political level, or more concretely, by challenging the Austrian founding myth and the myth of the “clean Wehrmacht” and thus questioning the national identity. The grassroots movements discussed here are considered bottom-up rather than top-down efforts (Ekins 1992), which, as I will emphasize, needed the support of Austrian political parties and from abroad to achieve a modicum of success.

To fully understand the emotional debates caused by the Waldheim Affair and the Wehrmacht exhibitions, it is essential to start with a brief introduction to Austrian history before 1938. First of all, it has to be pointed out that in 1945, the country had to deal not only with the legacy of National Socialism but also with the impact of the homemade Austro-fascism. It is also necessary to explain the history of the official Austrian “victim thesis,” its contradictions, its instrumentalization, and the challenges with which it was confronted. Thus, the article does not aim to provide a new interpretation of the already well-researched history of the “victim thesis” and its revision; neither does it re-interpret the history of the Waldheim Affair and the Wehrmacht exhibition. Nevertheless, it advances the topic by focusing on grassroots movements. It also adds personal insights of the author, who, like many historians born in the 1950s and 1960s, not only was very much influenced by the Waldheim Affair but also served as co-organizer of the Wehrmacht exhibition in Salzburg.

“The Prequel”: Homemade Fascism

In Austria, democracy did not end with the so-called *Anschluss* in March 1938. The First Republic, which emerged from the breakup of the multiethnic Hapsburg Monarchy in 1918, collapsed in the wake of grave political and economic crises with the so-called “self-elimination of the Parliament” on March 4, 1933. Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss of the conservative-clerical Christian Social Party, with the support of the Heimwehr paramilitary organization, enacted an authoritarian, corporative constitution restricting fundamental rights such as freedom of the press, freedom of association, and freedom of assembly. The Communist Party, the Republikanische Schutzbund (the paramilitary organization of the Social Democrats), and the Nazi Party (NSDAP) were banned and the Fatherland Front was established as a unity party. The Austro-fascist⁴ government was supported by the Catholic Church. Antisemitism was widespread since 1920, when the Social Democratic Labour Party (SDAP) left the government; Austria was governed by parties with openly

anti-Semitic platforms. Nevertheless, Jews were not excluded by law and there were still essential differences between this and the annihilationist antisemitism of the Nazis. A key dilemma was the populace's meager Austrian consciousness; after the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy, many—across party lines—had sought their salvation in *Anschluss* to Germany, which was forbidden by the victorious powers (Botz 1986).

Right from the outset, the government was confronted by two political opponents: the Social Democratic Labour Party, which combined reformist practice with elements of radical Austro-Marxist theory and governed Red Vienna until 1934, and the NSDAP, which, in 1932, had garnered up to 16% of the vote in certain districts. In February 1934, a civil war claimed hundreds of lives and led to the arrest of approximately 10,000 Social Democrats. The Social Democratic Party and its subsidiary organizations were outlawed, whereby the left wing of the political spectrum was almost totally decimated and forced into a state of illegality. Leading functionaries had to flee the country posthaste; others ended up in the Wöllersdorf Detention Camp that had originally been set up to hold Nazis. In July 1934, Chancellor Dollfuss was murdered during an attempted National Socialist putsch. Thereafter, conservative circles stylized him as a martyred resistance fighter; the left, on the other hand, saw Dollfuss as the dictator who had set these evil events in motion. But years before the *Anschluss*, Austrian National Socialists and “Catholic nationalists” had already begun to infiltrate the Austrian administrative and governmental machinery and to prepare for a takeover (Botz 2018). In 1936, Austria also lost the support of Benito Mussolini, who succumbed to pressure from Hitler once Italy's conquest of Abyssinia led to closer relations between Austria and Nazi Germany. On March 11, 1938, Austrian Chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg gave in to the pressure and took his leave from the population in a radio address that concluded with the words “God protect Austria!” As a VIP, he was accorded special treatment in the Dachau concentration camp; many of his regime's functionaries arrived in his wake, though their stay was under much less favorable conditions. Representatives of Austro-fascism were without question among the first victims of National Socialism; nevertheless, their shared responsibility for the elimination of Austrian democracy and the persecution of political dissenters—the victims of 1933–34—cannot be overlooked. To this day, there is still no agreement concerning the assessment of these matters and not even on the “right” term to be used to characterize this period of Austrian history (Moos 2021).

Living in Contradictions: The Victimization of the Entire Austrian Nation

In 1945, the Austrian population was very relieved indeed that the war was over; nevertheless, the Allied liberation that turned into a 10-year occupation was accompanied by ambivalent feelings. It was not the events of 1945 but rather the conclusion of the State Treaty with which Austria regained full sovereignty in 1955 that is inscribed as “liberation” in the Austrian collective consciousness. The two political camps – the Social Democrats (SPÖ) and the conservative People's Party (ÖVP) – that had been mortal enemies now saw themselves forced to cooperate on the governmental level, since, in the first general elections in November 1945, the KPÖ (Communist Party) received only 5.4% of the vote and was excluded from the government in 1947.⁵ The Moscow Declaration issued by the Allies in 1943 served the Austrian government in its portrayal of the country as the first victim of National Socialist aggression. In it, the governments of the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and the United States of America declared Austria as “the first free country to fall a victim to Hitlerite aggression” and stated that it had to be liberated from German domination. Nevertheless, Austria was also called upon to accept responsibility for having fought in World War II on the side of Nazi Germany, and to contribute to its own liberation. From the Allies' point of view, the Moscow Declaration was above all a tool meant to encourage Austrian resistance; nevertheless, the Austrian government regarded it as a useful foreign policy instrument to obtain a state treaty and avoid restitution payments. Thus, the passage referring to shared responsibility for World War II was omitted from consideration and the victim role was emphasized (Bischof 1993; Karner and Tschubarian 2015).

This assertion was underpinned with references to Austrian resistance (Rot-Weiss-Rot-Buch 1946) that, in reality, had been slight on the whole.⁶ In contrast to other countries, there was neither a broad-based national resistance movement nor an Austrian government in exile. The biggest share of the organized resistance that was put up came from Communists, whose Free Austrian Movement was able to organize exiles (most of them Jewish) in many countries. Other activists included Social Democrats and leftist splinter groups like the Revolutionary Socialists, former Christian Socials and members of the *Heimwehr*, Monarchists, and Catholics. Roughly 900 Austrian Slovenes joined the armed Slovenian battalions operating in Carinthian and Styrian borderlands. The number of those arrested is estimated at 110,000; more than 9,500 men and women paid with their lives (Neugebauer 2015). Arguing that Austria did not exist as a state after 1938 and thus could not have caused damages to anyone, the government rejected not only the obligation to make financial reparations to Jewish organizations but also any form of admission of moral guilt. Leading politicians denied the existence of antisemitism before the *Anschluss* since, as they argued, nothing had ever happened to Jews as long as Austria was left alone (Bailer-Galanda 2003).

This strategy, offered by the Allied in the Moscow Declaration, turned out to be successful, which can be explained by the Cold War. Though the Western Allies did not believe in Austria's innocence, they regarded Austria as a partner of the West and treated it much more indulgently than Germany. Another factor that proved to be helpful to the Austrian cause was the position of Israel, which, pursuant to *realpolitische* considerations,⁷ concurred with the victim thesis and renounced claims to compensation payments as a state. During the negotiation process between Austria and the Claims Conference (1952 until 1960), official Israel kept more or less silent, even when leading Austrian politicians displayed blatant anti-Semitism (Embacher 2003b, 70-73). The Declaration of Independence (*Unabhängigkeitserklärung*) dated April 27, 1945, an essential document in the founding of the Second Republic, already defined Austria as the "first country to fall a victim to Hitlerite aggression," and the *Anschluss* as an act that had been forced upon Austrians "deprived of their power and will." World War II was interpreted as a "senseless and hopeless war of conquest that no Austrian had ever wanted." The State Treaty signed in 1955 by the four Occupation Powers omitted any reference to Austria's shared blame. But it must also be pointed out that the self-portrayal of the Austrian nation as a victim supported the nation-building process. It was not until the 1950s that an Austrian identity gradually began to take shape, whereby the country's effort to distance itself from Germany as National Socialist aggressor was one of the elements that played a role in this process.⁸ Furthermore, the "victim thesis" made it easier for the political parties to establish a consensus democracy. In a sort of unspoken compromise, the SPÖ remained silent about the process of dismantling democracy in 1933 and the 1934 Civil War, and the ÖVP did not bring up the fact that many members of the working class had embraced National Socialism as well as Socialist Chancellor Karl Renner's call for voters to approve the *Anschluss* in the plebiscite subsequently held by the Nazis (Botz 1990, 29-48).

Nevertheless, the official "victim thesis" was a very tenuous one, containing many contradictions. Though the occupation of the State of Austria in 1938 did indeed contravene international law and leading politicians of the Austro-fascist government as well as Communists, Social Democrats and Jewish men were sent to the Dachau concentration camp, the greater part of Austria's population joyously welcomed the *Anschluss* with various expectations—700,000 Austrians joined the NSDAP, many launched their careers as perpetrators and profiteers of the new system, and Austrians also got involved in crimes of National Socialism. Acts of violence and "wild Aryanization" were already breaking out on the night before the *Anschluss*, particularly in Vienna, where the vast majority of the approximately 200,000 Austrian Jews lived. Jews were forcibly recruited—without orders from above—to scrub away anti-Nazi slogans from the sidewalks (Safrian/Wittek 2008). Most of all, the protracted "compensation" negotiations revealed the ramshackle construction of the "victim thesis."

For the Austrian Jewish community, a tiny minority (the number fluctuated between 8,000 and 10,000, compared to over 200,000 before the war, of whom 65,000 were killed in the Holocaust), the

confrontation with the realities of postwar Austria meant bitter disappointments. Austrian officialdom launched no initiatives to facilitate the return of these exiles, aside from a few who had performed particularly “meritorious service” abroad. The presence of thousands of Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe, the return of a small number of those who had been driven out and initial demands for compensation payments were already producing widespread antisemitism (Embacher 2001). Austrians even compared their suffering to that of the Jews, and leading Austrian politicians demanded that all victims of World War II—POWs and victims of the war’s devastation as well as Jewish survivors—be treated equally, and that *Sonderrechte* (preferential treatments) ought to be avoided (Bailer-Galanda 2003). To live in Austria, many Jewish survivors tried to hide their Jewishness and led reclusive lives. But Austria was no exception in the matter of ignoring Jewish suffering and repressing the Holocaust; in most other European countries as well as in the US and even in Israel, it remained a blank space at least until the Eichmann Trial in 1961 (Withuis and Nooji 2010).

Challenges to the official “victim thesis”: Individual concepts of suffering and the heroization as well as victimization of Wehrmacht soldiers

Further threats to the official “victim thesis” were the various individual concepts of suffering based on concrete experiences during the Nazi period (Pelinka 2006). Austrians considered themselves victims because of the soldiers who had fallen in battle, the massive destruction caused by Allied bombing, and the looting and rape, mostly in the Russian Occupation Zone. (Former) Nazis regarded themselves as victims of denazification, though most ex-Nazis were rehabilitated by a 1948 law that granted amnesty to lesser offenders. The greatest challenge to the official “victim thesis” was that 1.3 million Austrian soldiers (38% of the male population) had served in the German Wehrmacht (170,000 finished the war as permanent invalids; 480,000 had been POWs). Most of them still identified with the German Wehrmacht, expressed in the widespread saying “We have lost the war.” According to the official “victim thesis,” they had been forced to join the Wehrmacht in a war no Austrian had wanted (see Declaration of Independence).

In the late 1940s, as a result of the Cold War, a paradigm shift in Austrians’ commemoration culture could already be observed. In 1948, with the end of denazification, the political parties vied for the votes of more than 500,000 former Nazis and their families and supported their reintegration in society. At the general elections in 1949, the newly founded *Verband der Unabhängigen* (VdU), which offered a political home to former National Socialists, received almost 12% of the vote. The reintegration of former Nazis went hand in hand with the marginalization of the resistance, and anti-fascism was replaced by anti-communism. The anti-fascist consensus, which had been in place until then – at least among the political elite – collapsed. Whereas Austrian resistance was instrumentalized in the immediate postwar years and still emphasized by Austrian politicians abroad, at home, resistance fighters as well as deserters from the German Wehrmacht were not honored and widely regarded as traitors. Concentration camp survivors were ousted from leadership positions and candidate lists, and replaced by *Heimkehrer*. At the same time, the image of Wehrmacht soldiers improved. They felt emboldened to go public with their version of the war – the myth of the “clean Wehrmacht” that saved Europe from communism.

In 1952, the Austrian veterans association, the *Kameradschaftsbund*, was officially founded. Whereas some anti-fascist memorials had been installed in Vienna and some other cities soon after the war, the *Kameradschaftsbund* now started to erect memorials to fallen soldiers or adapted monuments from prior wars (Riesenfellner and Uhl 1994; Embacher 1999, 97–103). As Peter Pirker emphasized, Wehrmacht soldiers were not only turned into “passive victims” but also honored for their sacrifice they had willingly made and their commitment to the “homeland.” Thus, their sacrifice was dissociated from the German Wehrmacht and transformed into exemplary patriotic behavior that served political interests: the integration of former Wehrmacht soldiers into the new Austrian Army (Pirker 2020). Pirker’s suggestion to differentiate between the various meanings of

the term victim (*Opfer*) – between “being made to suffer” and “to sacrifice or to offer to sacrifice” – is an interesting new approach to the debate about the Austrian “victim thesis.” My article will go further to point out that the *Kameradschaftsbund* did not provide a one-sided image of veterans and fallen soldiers – especially with its intensive war commemorations and war memorials – but rather offered various interpretations of World War II. Also the numerous members of the *Kameradschaftsbund* have to be seen as a heterogenous generation. Though most of them strongly identified with the Wehrmacht, not all of them regarded themselves as heroes who had made sacrifices for their “homeland” but also felt themselves to have been *the* “war victims” (Gärtner and Rosenberger 1991). Still traumatized, they chose from among the several war interpretations provided by the *Kameradschaftsbund* to make sense of their participation in a senseless war. Since many were involved in war crimes, the myths of the “clean Wehrmacht” and of the “*Kameradschaft*” (comrades’ mutual support in the most difficult situations) were of special importance to be able to live with their guilt. Unfortunately, hardly any research has been done on this subject (Manoschek 2001, 65).

However, the *Kameradschaftsbund* has to be seen as a political institution that – supported by both major political parties, the Catholic Church, and the Austrian Army (which was built up by many former soldiers in the German Wehrmacht) – monopolized how to talk about the war, about what could be said in public, and what had to be hushed up. After the State Treaty was signed in 1955, the *Kameradschaftsbund*, supported by the Austrian Army and the ÖVP (the SPÖ still kept its distance at this time), instrumentalized the official Austrian Heroes’ Memorial (*Heldendenkmal*) on Heldenplatz by commemorating the fallen soldiers of World War II as well as World War I. Thus, Wehrmacht soldiers, who according to the official “victim thesis” had served unwillingly in a foreign army, were included into the Republic’s process of honorable commemoration, once again revealing its contradiction.⁹

The Waldheim Affair and the revision of the “victim thesis”

Having been the beneficiary of massive financial subsidies from the Marshall Plan (1948–52), the Second Austrian Republic turned into an economic success story, a model of social partnership and military neutrality. But by the early 1980s, it had lost most of its luster – internationally known Chancellor Bruno Kreisky (Social Democratic Party, SPÖ) was seriously ill, the economy was suffering, and international media were reporting on various scandals. Already during the Kreisky Era, a fierce debate had raged about the SS membership of FPÖ leader Friedrich Peter. In 1985, press photos of Defense Minister Frischenschlager (Freedom Party, FPÖ) shaking hands with former SS Major Walter Reeder, who was repatriated by Italy after having served much of a life sentence, were disseminated worldwide. In the same year, the ÖVP announced that Kurt Waldheim was to be its presidential candidate in 1986. Waldheim, who was not a party member, had joined the Austrian diplomatic service in 1945 and served as foreign minister; having served as secretary general of the United Nations (1971–81), he was known worldwide. “Kurt Waldheim, the Austrian the world trusts” was the slogan on the ÖVP’s first campaign poster. The SPÖ responded by nominating Kurt Steyrer, a dermatologist who had served as minister of health and the environment. Several polls predicted a Waldheim victory, and the SPÖ knew from the start that Steyrer’s chances were very limited (Gehler 1995, 618; Botz and Sprengnagel 1994).

In the early 1970s, in connection with Waldheim’s election as UN secretary-general, evidence began to surface about his years in the German Wehrmacht, but no one dug deeper into his biography. In March 1986, the weekly magazine *profil* started to report systematically about Waldheim’s membership in the SA, the Nazi Student Union (*Nationalsozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund*, NSDStB) and in the horseback riding union (*SA-Reiterstandarte 7/90*) as well as on his years in the Balkans, information that he had mostly hushed up in his official biography. It was not long before the debate attained an international scope. In New York, the World Jewish Congress (WJC) sent out 40 press releases; from March 4 to June 15, the *New York Times* published

126 articles, some exaggerating Waldheim's position in the Balkans (Tóth 2006, 25–62). After some delay, the Israeli government as well took action by refusing to send an ambassador to Vienna after the retirement of Michal Elizur. On the whole, Israel showed little interest in the Waldheim Affair, since it was then being confronted by the First Intifada and also had to deal with the critique of having treated Austria as the first victim of Nazi Germany and not having scrutinized Waldheim's past when he became UN secretary-general. Israel also felt it was drawn into the matter by the WJC (Embacher and Reiter 1998, 57–86).

Soon, the debate focused on Waldheim's service in Yugoslavia and Greece as an intelligence officer in the Wehrmacht, especially in the capacity of aide-de-camp in Army Group E. This unit was headed by the Austrian General Alexander Loehr, who was later sentenced to death in Belgrade for committing war crimes including the killing of hostages and burning of villages. Waldheim not only denied ever having belonged to the NSDAP, SS or SA but also of having known about atrocities committed by the Army Group E in Yugoslavia. Though he had spent six months in a village very close to Salonika when 46,000 Jews were being deported to concentration camps, he vehemently disputed having witnessed the disappearance of about one quarter of the city's population (Mitten 1992, 70–71).

The internationalization of the Waldheim Affair had an immense influence on the Austrian presidential election. In particular, the leading role of the WJC led to a shocking wave of antisemitism (Wodak et al. 1990; Rauscher 2006; Huemer 2006). The sometimes undiplomatic, distorted, and scantily contextualized accusations lodged by the WJC and leading US newspapers were interpreted as unfair interference into Austrian internal affairs (Lehnguth 2013, 93–94). Not only Waldheim supporters but also representatives of the SPÖ and well-known Jewish representatives regarded the WJC's strategy as going too far;¹⁰ especially when WJC representatives asked the US government to put Waldheim on its Watch List and warned that “should Waldheim be elected, the next years will be no sweet time for the Austrians” (Markham 1986). In this context, it has to be noted that the WJC had never explicitly called Waldheim a war criminal and that Waldheim contributed to overreactions by reacting to charges with denial or even lies and thus hardening the impression of having something to hide (Tóth 2006). On the whole, Austrians' knowledge about the WJC was very vague. Some members of the war generation still recalled the WJC as negotiator with the Austrian government concerning restitution payments, a memory often connected with anti-Semitic stereotypes such as “the Jews are exploiting the poor Austrian country with their excessive demands for money” (Gruber 1988, 328–331). Many Austrians imagined a world Jewish conspiracy on the basis of the group's very name.

The Waldheim Affair not only brought out antagonism between the WJC and Israeli politicians, but also between the WJC and the Austrian Jewish community, which complained that the WJC was overlooking their views and interests. Whereas some Jewish representatives were still ready to defend Austria abroad—among other reasons, to justify their presence in Austria—the WJC showed little understanding for the fact that Jews still wanted to live in this country (Embacher 1995, 258–259; Zelman 1995, 193–205). Not least of all, the WJC regarded its intervention in the Waldheim Affair as an opportunity to strengthen its status among US Jewish organizations in the wake of growing Holocaust awareness (Lehnguth 2013, 94). But there was also a personal component: WJC General Secretary Israel Singer's father was forced to clean Vienna's streets with a toothbrush before he could escape the country (Cohen and Rosenzweig 1987). Singer's fierce reaction also has to be seen in the context of a generational change within American Jewish organizations.

On June 8, 1986, Waldheim was finally elected president with 53.89% of the vote.¹¹ Throughout his six-year term (1986–92), he was boycotted – officially or informally – by nearly every country outside the Arab world and by the Vatican. On April 27, 1987, the US put Waldheim – as a private person and not as an Austrian officeholder – on its Watch List (Mitten 1992, 134). In an attempt to clear Waldheim's name and Austria's reputation, Chancellor Vranitzky appointed an independent international Historians Commission to examine Waldheim's biography from 1938 to 1945.

The report confirmed Waldheim's membership in the SA and NSDStB but found no evidence of any personal involvement in war crimes. But it was also emphasized that, in his position, Waldheim had been "exceptionally well informed" and "involved in the process of knowledge and action," and therefore could not have been unaware of any crimes taking place and must have known more than he had confessed. The commission also rejected Waldheim's assertion of having not been aware of the deportation of Jews from Salonika (Kurz et al. 1993).

Focusing on Waldheim's personal history, the WJC recognized relatively late that the problem was not Waldheim himself but Austria. It was actually Waldheim who called the "victim thesis" into question, defending himself in a press conference with the following words: "In the war, I didn't do anything different than what hundreds of thousands of other Austrians did—namely, my duty as a soldier" (Gehler 1995, 626). Aware or unaware, he repeated the long-lasting narrative that it was one's duty to serve in the Wehrmacht, which, according to the "victim thesis" and Declaration of Independence, has to be regarded as a foreign army that had occupied Austria against its will. Thus, Waldheim revealed the rift between the official version of the Austrian founding myth meant as a useful foreign policy instrument and individuals' experiences during the war. Whereas most of the war generation identified with Waldheim, who expressed their own feelings of having done their duty during the war and having fought a just war, a significant portion of the younger generation regarded Waldheim as a liar and a symbol of the country's *Lebenslüge*, the lie that Austria was living since 1945.¹² Whereas the majority of the war generation was fighting hard to rescue its reputation, there was an awakening within the next generations. Influenced by the anti-war movement and its increasingly anti-authoritarian socialization, a large segment of the children and grandchildren of the war generation showed little tolerance for the concept of having done one's duty in the German Wehrmacht.

After his election, the Waldheim Affair turned into the Austria Case, and the government was forced to react. When the 50th anniversary of the *Anschluss* was marked in 1988, the Austrian government designated the year as an official Commemorative Year to demonstrate – especially abroad – its readiness to deal seriously with Austrians' involvement in National Socialism. This also has to be seen as a reaction to US considerations of putting Waldheim on its Watch List (Lehnguth 2013, 126–134). Nevertheless, in the many official Commemorative Year speeches held by leading politicians, the "victim thesis" was hardly questioned. There were also still deep divisions within Austrian society¹³ and it was no easy task to find a new, generally accepted narrative about Austria's role in 1938 and especially during the Nazi period.

The awakening of a grassroots movement

During Waldheim's inauguration, an oversized wooden horse wearing an SS cap captured the public's attention at an anti-Waldheim demonstration on Stephansplatz, the main square in Vienna's city center.¹⁴ The project was inspired by the sarcastic reaction of Chancellor Sinowatz (SPÖ) to Waldheim's denial of having been a member of the NSDAP: "I therefore conclude that Waldheim was never in the SA; only his horse was a member!" The horse became the symbol of the *Republikanische Club – Neues Österreich* (Republican Club–New Austria) established at the beginning of the election campaign by members of the '68 generation as well as younger activists, mostly intellectuals, journalists, artists, writers, and historians. The original aim was to prevent Waldheim's election. After his inauguration, the Republican Club requested Waldheim to resign but also made many efforts to correct the official "victim thesis" by emphasizing the role of Austrian resistance fighters – regarded as the "other Austria" – as well as the persecution of the Jewish population (Rabinovici 2009; Huemer 2006). Due to the internationalization of the Waldheim Affair, the Republican Club's political actions and press releases were covered by the international press, thus enhancing the club's influence in Austria. Throughout the country, similar organizations were founded. In March 1988, a huge anti-Waldheim demonstration was held in Vienna to commemorate the *Anschluss*, and people took to the streets in various other Austrian cities. Especially in

1988, numerous discussions and symposia took place all over Austria about the *Anschluss* and the persecution of Austrian Jews. Furthermore, Austria's shameful indemnification policies could no longer be ignored (Knight 2002). Newspapers, exhibitions, and TV documentaries presented a new visual image of the *Anschluss* by not only showing organized party members with swastika arm bands or in SA uniform to welcome the German Army, but also providing a picture of mass euphoria as well as pictures of people amusingly watching Viennese Jews scrubbing streets (Uhl 2006). The awakening of this new grassroots movement has to be seen in the context of an exhilarated mood within parts of the second generation that had already emerged in the Kreisky Era and was manifested by growing feminist, anti-atomic power, anti-war, and environmental movements. In 1986, the Green Party, a predominantly young party strongly committed to anti-fascism, was elected to Parliament.

The Waldheim Affair also made an enormous impact on the younger generation of historians (Bauer 2003, 320–340), political scientists, as well as writers and filmmakers (Katya 2017; Reiter 2018). Whereas attention had previously been focused on victims of political persecution and resistance (Konrad 2003, 315–319), the perspective now began to be expanded to include Jewish victims, Jewish exile, and thus Austria's shameful indemnification and restitution policies, as well as theretofore neglected victims such as Romany and Sinti and Jehovah's Witnesses. It is interesting to note that most of this research was conducted by historians born in the late 1950s and 1960s (Bauer 2003, 320–340). More and more (Jewish as well as non-Jewish) victims – concentration camp survivors as well as resistance fighters – disclosed their stories, either as subjects of autobiographies or in the role of “contemporary eyewitness to history,” refuting the “victim thesis” with their own experiences.

A negative side-effect of this important paradigm shift was that it sometimes led to a distorted and stereotyped view of Austrian Jews, including an over-identification with the Austrian resistance movement and Jewish victims. Jews were portrayed as secular, liberal, tolerant intellectuals, and at the same time Jewish life in the *Shtetl* was romanticized. As in other European countries, non-Jewish Austrians discovered Klezmer music (Reiter 2009; Lichtblau 2009; Embacher 2003a). Another tendency that could be noticed was an oversimplified image of Austria's role during National Socialism, in which perpetrators were juxtaposed to resistance fighters with little room for grey zones (Hanisch 1996). Although Waldheim himself touched upon the problematic issue of Austrian involvement in National Socialism and identification with the German Army, the perpetrator perspective and thus research on this subject was widely excluded from consideration (Bukey 2003, 399–406). Thus, it can be assumed that research about Austrian resistant fighters, emigrants, and concentration camp survivors served the second and also third generation as a way to identify with “a better Austria” in their search for role models.

It is also interesting to see that the Waldheim Affair revealed a gap within the Jewish community – roughly speaking, between Holocaust survivors and the second generation. As previously mentioned, officials of the organized Jewish Community in Vienna (IKG) kept more or less silent during the Waldheim Affair; some openly distanced themselves from the WJC and even defended Austria abroad (Zelman 1996, 197; Embacher 1995, 258–262). On the other hand, a relatively high proportion of members and supporters of the *Republican Club* were Jews (Lehnguth 2013, 135). Some grew up in left-wing families with little connection to religion and Jewish tradition; others were children of former Jewish Displaced Persons from Eastern Europe, who started a new life in Austria, often with nagging guilt for living in a country that had been involved in National Socialism. Many tried to hide their Jewishness in public. The next generation – especially those who were socialized on the political left – was no longer willing to accept antisemitism and displayed self-confidence in their participation in political debates. “The children of the survivors are no longer ready to keep silent, to have discussions with anti-Semites or to excite compassion,” Ruth Beckermann wrote (Beckermann 1989, 375). However, the awakening of a new Jewish generation should not be reduced to a new Jewish self-confidence, but also seen as process of development of an Austrian-Jewish identity (Muzicant 2009, 195; Rabinovici 2009, 12–27).

Finally, the Waldheim Affair revealed the heterogeneity of the postwar generation. In 1988, Jörg Haider, born in 1951 and socialized in a milieu of former Nazis, took over leadership of the right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ), which was supported by many young people. Haider also became one of the most popular defenders of the war generation, including members of the Waffen SS. The core of his political platform consisted of xenophobia and an anti-EU course; nevertheless, Haider repeatedly came out with provocative statements that were anti-Semitic and downplayed the evils of National Socialism (Schiedel and Neugebauer 2002, 11–32). In 1992, the Republican Club as well as representatives of the Jewish community and the newly founded SOS Mitmensch played a leading role in organizing a demonstration against the FPÖ's Foreigner Referendum (*Ausländer Volksbegehren*); 300,000 people joined the demonstration on Heldenplatz (Muzicant 2009, 195–196; Rabinovici 2009, 193–194). This so-called Sea of Light turned out to be the biggest demonstration ever held in Austria. It also has to be mentioned that leading ÖVP-members – mostly representatives of the second generation – were defenders of Waldheim; in their own words, they had enjoyed the good fortune of having been too young during these times that tried men's and women's souls (Khol, Faulhaber, and Ofner 1987, 8).

Defense strategies and the revision of to the “victim theory”

As Pirker pointed out, Waldheim did not represent himself as a war victim, but referred to the second meaning of victimhood, to sacrifice in the form of doing one's duty. Only when his supporters started to defend him was the official “victim thesis” once more solidified (Pirker 2020, 155). In the eyes of Waldheim's supporters, the *Republican Club* and its followers were seen as *Nestbeschmutzer* and thus accused of besmirching the good name of their own country (Rabinovici 2009). When, in spring 1986, the debate about Waldheim's “missing years” in the Balkans threatened to spin out of control, the ÖVP plastered Austria with a yellow poster bearing the following message: “We Austrians elect whomever we want! Now more than ever Waldheim.” The hidden message was that Austrians have to thwart a Jewish conspiracy by voting for Waldheim (Pick 2000, 161). The campaign poster also expressed the newly developed ÖVP defense strategy: Blaming their political opponent, the SPÖ, for the centrally planned, hateful, and dirty campaign orchestrated by the Socialists with the WJC to destroy Austria. Thus, the ÖVP wanted to avoid taking a position on Waldheim's silence and reacting to the many new documents that journalists and historians had discovered in various archives and that repeatedly confronted Waldheim. The aim was to turn Waldheim *and* Austria into innocent victims of political opponents in Austria, of foreign aggressors and – consciously or unconsciously – of the Jews (Tóth 2006; Mitten 1992, 189–245). In doing so, patriotism was mixed with xenophobia and antisemitism, which surfaced and shocked observers by its extent. “Just as Austria as a country, Kurt Waldheim was doubtlessly a victim of National Socialism” were the words of Andreas Khol (Khol 1987, 189), legal expert and member of parliament, which typified the mindset of many ÖVP politicians, mostly representatives of the second generation (Gruber 1988; Gruber, Krapfenbauer and Lammel 1992; Göllner 2009). To underpin the “victim thesis,” he, like many others, recalled Austria's heroic fight for an autonomous state between 1934 and 1938, and also stylized Chancellor Dollfuss as the first victim of the Nazis and martyr for the cause of Austria. Historians who brought up the fascist character of the Dollfuss government were discredited as betrayers of the fatherland and accused of working together with Austrian Jewish emigrants holding influential positions in several countries in an effort to spread a distorted image of the “heroic defensive struggle” in 1938 (Khol 1987, 187). Thus, the authoritarian character of the Austro-fascist government and the long tradition of antisemitism were ignored, and the Austrian resistance reduced to the relatively small resistance movement connected to the Christian Socials. As already mentioned, the biggest share of the resistance that was put up came from Communists, Social Democrats, and leftist splinter groups like the Revolutionary Socialists. Politicians from the ranks of the ÖVP also dealt in anti-Semitic undertones by calling representatives of the WJC a “dishonorable lot” and “a slander-spewing mafia.” Antisemitism was also

expressed by using codes, such as references to “certain circles in the US” and the “American East coast” (Rabinovici 2009; Gehler 1995, 627). General Secretary Helmut Kukacka (born in 1946), for example, rejected the report of the independent international Historians Commission as unfair by arguing that there were “three Jewish members” (Knight 2009, 73). A similar position was held by ÖVP politician Karl Gruber, who had been active in the resistance movement and had served as foreign minister (1945–1953) and ambassador in Washington, Bern, Bonn, and Madrid (Gruber 1988, 341).

Waldheim himself attributed critical reports in international newspapers to the “fact” that the “international press is dominated by the Jewish World Congress.” As late as 1996, Waldheim still held the opinion that the Jews govern the US and that an “almighty Israeli lobby” dominates the WJC (Embacher and Reiter 1998, 267). It is interesting to note that, on one hand, the WJC was portrayed as the motor of a world conspiracy against Austria, and, on the other hand, ridiculed as an unimportant organization with little influence among US Jewish organizations. The ÖVP denied any anti-Semitic undertone and rejected all charges of antisemitism; it interpreted the accusations as part of a campaign against Waldheim. Only General Secretary Michael Graff (born in 1937) was forced to resign after stating that “Waldheim has to be regarded as innocent as long as it can’t be proved that he had strangled three Jews with his own hands” (Gehler 1995, 627–628). Except for the *Salzburger Nachrichten* and *profil*, all influential publications supported the ÖVP. Hardly any critique could be heard within the party.

But leaders of the SPÖ were also not yet ready to question the “victim thesis” per se. Peter Jankowitsch, SPÖ member and foreign minister for a very short term, asked 10 leading Austrian historians to reply to the “hair-raising thesis” about Austrian history that young British historian Robert Knight published in the *Times Literary Supplement* on October 3, 1986. Knight, whose Jewish mother had to flee from Austria in 1938, did nothing more than critical historians in Austria had done. Like them, he regarded the Waldheim Affair as an integral part of Austria’s history and wrote that, after Waldheim, it would no longer be possible for Austria to portray itself as a Nazi victim by inflating the resistance it had put up. Jankowitsch was very scared that Knight’s letter could lead to a radical new evaluation of the Second Republic and wanted to avoid proliferation of the debate in academia. All 10 historians refused to contradict Knight’s findings (Knight 2009). But, in contrast to the ÖVP, more critical voices questioning the “victim thesis” could be heard within the SPÖ. However, it was not until 1991 that Chancellor Franz Vranitzky (SPÖ) made the first official acknowledgment of Austria’s shared responsibility for National Socialism in the Austrian Parliament. In his speech, he acknowledged a share of responsibility for the pain brought upon other people and peoples, not by Austria as a state but by citizens of this country. Thereby, National Socialism was no longer seen as foreign rule imposed from outside but as a genuine part of Austria’s history. In 1993, Vranitzky was also the first Austrian chancellor to officially visit Israel, and many other leading Austrian politicians followed suit. In his “historic speech” at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Vranitzky apologized to the Israelis and the whole world for the crimes committed by Austrians in World War II. Speaking about the “dark years,” he included the time from 1934 to 1938, rejected collective guilt but accepted moral responsibility since many Austrians had welcomed the *Anschluss* and supported the Nazi regime. The Hebrew University awarded him an honorary doctorate (Embacher and Reiter 1998, 273–279).

Nevertheless, the revision of the “victim thesis” into a “co-responsibility thesis” (Uhl 2006) was a gradual process that has to be seen as a result of the various individual concepts of suffering that were still present in the historical memory and could still be mobilized politically. Whereas a mainly younger and liberal segment of the population reluctantly accepted the “co-responsibility theory,” many conservatives supported by the ÖVP were strengthening the “victim thesis” when portraying Waldheim and Austria as victims of National Socialism. During the Waldheim Affair, it also was obvious that the new awakening grassroots movement represented only a minority, which needed international support as well as support of Austrian political parties to gain at least some success. Thus, it was the internationalization of the Waldheim Affair as well as the WJC’s tactic (whatever

one might think of its strategy) to make Austria adopt a more honest approach to its history and to question the founding myth (Pick 2000, 163). Not least of all, the internationalization of the Waldheim Affair also has to be explained in terms of a new global Holocaust consciousness in the US (Levy and Sznajder 2006; Ecker 2006), where debates about the installation of a Holocaust museum in Washington had already started in 1978 and continued in the 1980s. This process – and let us not forget the influence of the film “Holocaust” in the late 1970s – had an impact on Austria. There was also some influence on the part of the US-Jewish second generation, which could increasingly be heard in the 1980s and was not without some impact on younger European Jews.¹⁵

The end of the myth of a “clean Wehrmacht”

“War of Annihilation: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941-1944” triggered a very emotional debate about the participation of 1.3 million Austrian soldiers in the Wehrmacht and their identification with it. Financed and put together by the well-known Hamburg Institut für Sozialforschung, it was shown from 1995 to 1999 in 27 German cities as well as in Vienna, Innsbruck, Klagenfurt, Linz, Graz, and Salzburg. Right from the start, it became a media event and sparked fierce debates. Approximately 800,000 persons visited the exhibition, more than 100,000 of them in Austria (Kannonier and Keplinger 1997; Uhl 2003; Manoschek 2001; Pollak 2002; Gaisbauer 2000).

The exhibition was based on research that had been conducted since the late 1970s by esteemed scholars in several countries; their results, however, had not come to the attention of a broader segment of the German and Austrian population. Focusing on the crimes of the 6th German Army in Ukraine, the occupation of Belarus, and the partisan war in Serbia, the exhibition showed that war crimes and massacres of Jews were committed not only by the SS but also by ordinary soldiers. Hence, it concluded that the Wehrmacht did not wage a “normal war” but a war of annihilation against Jews, prisoners of war, and civilians, and that it was involved in the Holocaust. Thus, the myth of the “clean Wehrmacht,” whereby it maintained a distance from Hitler, and its soldiers did their duty with “decency and dignity,” had become untenable (Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung 1996).

As to the exhibition’s concept, the central themes were presented on 92 panels; a restrained text supplying basic information was underpinned with historical sources such as military orders of the German Army and field mail letters written by ordinary soldiers, as well as photographs. Of a total of 1,435 pictures, 20% were taken by professionals in the Wehrmacht Propagandakompagnie (PK) and 80% were snapshots found in wallets and uniform pockets of dead soldiers and POWs. Ordinary German and Austrian soldiers photographed the daily life of war, such as situation briefings and their contact with civilians, but also – though strictly forbidden – scenes in which Jews were tortured and soldiers shaved the beards of orthodox Jews, depictions of the clearance of ghettos, naked men and women immediately prior to their execution, and resistance fighters or ordinary civilians who had been hung from trees. Thus, the crimes of the Wehrmacht were documented from the perspective of the perpetrators, often revealing a cynical, sensational, and voyeuristic view of the victims. For the first time, anonymous snapshots that had been kept in basements or hidden in private albums entered the public sphere (Brink 2003).

The pictures had a very emotional effect on exhibition visitors. Reminiscent of images in family albums, they created closeness and intimacy; it was hard to keep distance. Former soldiers were afraid of being recognized in one of the pictures; many were confronted with their own war experiences and haunted by memories they could no longer repress. Some brought their own album or pictures and handed them over to the exhibition organizers. Children and grandchildren were scared of discovering images of their father or grandfather and started to question their innocence. On the other hand, many reacted by defending their fathers and grandfathers (Bopp 1999).

Those who criticized the exhibition also focused on the pictures. Whereas some regarded all of them as fakes, more serious critics complained, for example, that they were not contextualized, too sensational, and lacked a didactic concept (Lehnguth 2013, 355–356). In fact, it is difficult to

research the history of private pictures, to identify the photographer and his motive as well as the concrete time and place at which they were taken. Apart from a small circle of photo theorists, debates on this subject had only started in the early 1990s; until then, historians had used pictures uncritically as illustrations or were skeptical about them (Brink 2003). In 1999, as criticism multiplied, the Hamburg Institut für Sozialforschung set up an independent historical commission, which came to the conclusion that 20 pictures did not belong in the exhibition and some of the captions were wrong. But it also emphasized that the organizers did serious work and that the main points made by the exhibition – that the Wehrmacht waged a war of annihilation and was involved in the Holocaust – are doubtlessly true (Bartov et al. 2000).

The battle of memory

Almost 10 years after the intensive debates that had taken place during the Waldheim Affair, the collapse of the Iron Curtain and Austria's admission to the EU in 1995, it seemed that the time had come to broach the difficult subject of Austrians' involvement in the German Army (Manoschek 2006). But the emotions were still very strong, and it soon became clear that, despite the revision of the "victim thesis" into a "co-responsibility thesis" as well as greater sensitivity to Jewish victims, it was still very difficult to talk about the perpetrators and especially to touch upon the participation of ordinary soldiers in crimes committed by the Wehrmacht.

Above all, the Wehrmacht exhibition called into doubt not only the narrative of veterans as heroic defenders of the homeland but also the widely accepted view that soldiers killed in action had been *the* "war victims" or, as it was often put, powerless pawns at the mercy of a terrible system. Many veterans, who still very much identified with the Wehrmacht – among other reasons, to impart meaning to their suffering and often-traumatic experiences – were put off and felt defamed and criminalized, expressed in numerous letters to the editors of newspapers and in the publications of the *Kameradschaftsbund* (Manoschek 1999; Embacher 1999). Furthermore, the war generation had to recognize that it had lost its influence in society and could not prevent the touring of the Wehrmacht exhibition. Thereafter, political parties assumed the role of their defenders. Whereas the FPÖ and ÖVP (with some exceptions) rejected any support for the Wehrmacht exhibition and sided with the war generation, the SPÖ – after a short period of hesitation especially among older members, who sometimes did not follow the party line – and especially the Green Party stood behind it. The *Kameradschaftsbund* (with approximately 300,000 members) functioned as mouthpiece of the Wehrmacht generation, often in collusion with ÖVP and FPÖ politicians as well as representatives of the Austrian Army (Manoschek 1999, 2001). Thus, it has to be noted that numerous members of the *Kameradschaftsbund* had not served in the Wehrmacht but rather in the postwar Austrian Army. This revealed a problematic continuity from the Wehrmacht, which had been involved in a war of annihilation, and the Austrian Army, an institution of a new democratic Austrian state. The *Kameradschaftsbund* also received prominent media support from the *Kronen Zeitung*, a tabloid with the highest circulation in Austria; its editor, Hans Dichant, who had done wartime service in the German Navy, was a strong voice supporting the Wehrmacht generation, and thus a fierce opponent of the Wehrmacht exhibition (Lehnguth 2013, 372).

In Austria, the central arguments against the Wehrmacht exhibition can be summed up as follows: it was too provocative; it was an over-generalized judgment and thus criminalization of every former soldier; and it ignored that these had been victims of a terrible system and gone on to rebuild Austria with their hard work, as could be read, for example, in *Kameradschaft aktiv*, the official publication of the Salzburg *Kameradschaftsbund*. There were many warnings that the exhibition would drive a wedge into society, especially between the generations. Waltraud Klasnic (ÖVP), governor of the State of Styria, argued that one should support an exhibition that makes people happy and they like to visit and that does not lead to confrontations (Brunnbauer 1999, 14).

The organizers were often disparaged as left-wing historians and “ungrateful children of prosperity without any respect for the generation of the soldiers” (Embacher 1999, 101; Sandner 1999, 33–33).

Once again, Austrian society was divided, but this time the debate challenged the collective memory that collided with historical research presented in the Wehrmacht exhibition. Until then, attacks had mainly been directed against prominent Nazis, war criminals, and Waldheim, who turned into a symbol of how Austria had dealt with its Nazi past; now, the focus was on the average soldier who, as the snapshots in the exhibition demonstrated, took part in war crimes or witnessed them. This also triggered intense discussions within families, as children confronted their fathers with critical questions they had long been unable to formulate (Botz 2016; Reiter 2006). This was no easy task after a long period of silence; many veterans were still traumatized, unable to find the right words to talk about their war experiences and feelings of guilt. Many aggressively defended the myth of the “clean Wehrmacht” and thus perpetuated National Socialist stereotypes, prejudices, and antisemitism. Even historians and political scientists who had been working on this subject for many years and played prominent roles in the anti-Waldheim movement confessed that they did not dare to commence research on the Wehrmacht history of their own fathers (Manoschek 2006). The internationally known historian Gerhard Botz regards his fight against Waldheim as a proxy war waged instead of a confrontation with his own father and the role he had played in the anti-partisan war (Botz 2016). But children and grandchildren also felt the need to defend their fathers, which revealed that there was also a gap among the generations born after the war.

“My father was no murderer!”

Salzburg’s Governor Franz Schausberger, a member of the postwar generation who had advanced degrees in history from the University of Salzburg, was one of the most prominent defenders of the entire Wehrmacht generation. Arguing against financial support for the Wehrmacht exhibition (which he had not even seen), he instrumentalized his 93-year-old father as his witness proving that no crimes had been committed by the Wehrmacht during the partisan war in Yugoslavia. Schausberger emphasized that he refused to permit criminalizing his father and portraying him as a supporter of the Nazi regime as was being done in this “shameful exhibition.” Furthermore, he pledged to the entire Wehrmacht generation that he would defend their honor (Kameradschaft aktiv, 12.12.1997, 2; Lichtblau 1999, 136–138). Franz Wirrer, like Schausberger born after the war and an ÖVP city council member who headed the Salzburg *Kamerschadtschaftsbund*, used a similar strategy to defend his father; while insisting that his father “was no murderer,” he confessed to not knowing too much about what he actually had done during the war. At least historian Schausberger should have been aware that oral history is not a suitable method to falsify historical facts (Messerschmidt 1999, 79–95).

Attempts to refute the Wehrmacht exhibition and thus historical research, which was damned as distorted and even fake, and juxtaposing it to individual former soldiers’ memories that were regarded as *the truth*, were not unique to Salzburg but rather were typical of the entire debate. What made Salzburg special was the *Arbeitskreis für Kultur und objektive Geschichtsforschung* (Working Group for Culture and Objective Historical Research) that was founded by the *Kameradschaftsbund* and supported by prominent ÖVP and some FPÖ members. Ignoring the research that had been done by serious historical scholars, the organization spread the “hypothesis” of a pre-emptive war and regarded the Wehrmacht as having defended Europe against Stalin’s aggression. This has to be seen as a victim-perpetrator reversal. An art exhibition about the suffering of Austrian POWs in the Soviet Union was organized as a form of public relations, despite the fact that the painter, Walther Gross, had been a member of the *1st SS-Panzerdivision Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler*; after 1945 he had served as *Brigadier* in the Austrian Army (Sandner 1999, 38–39). Thus, the ÖVP moved decidedly to the right, which can be interpreted as political maneuvering since elections were to take place a year after the Wehrmacht

exhibition opened in spring 1998 in Salzburg. Obviously, the ÖVP was fighting for the vote of the war generation and the 36,000 *Kameradschaftsbund* members, a phenomenon that could also be observed in other Austrian states.

The debate about the Wehrmacht exhibition very clearly demonstrates that, despite the many discussions that had been taking place since the Waldheim Affair and the official introduction of the “co-responsibility thesis,” major segments of the Austrian population as well as leading politicians did not follow this new narrative or were only willing to accept parts of it. Whereas the participation of some Austrians in the persecution of Austrian Jews and the involvement of *some* Austrians in National Socialism were widely accepted, the myth of the “clean Wehrmacht” was still alive and consolidated. Leading ÖVP and FPÖ politicians (as well as some SPÖ politicians) and representatives of the Austrian Army hardly distanced themselves from the Wehrmacht when defending the entire Wehrmacht generation, stylized as innocent, brave, and even peaceful soldiers with scant possibilities to avoid involvement in war crimes.

Nevertheless, the debate concerning the Wehrmacht exhibition also revealed the influence of grassroots movements in Austria. Since it was very hard for the organizers to get financial support from local governments, the exhibition’s run was financed by numerous individuals (a significant number of whom had been born after the war), NGOs, and university departments (Lehnguth 2013, 371). The massive propaganda campaign propagated by its opponents was one of the main reasons why there was a huge influx of visitors in all cities where the Wehrmacht exhibition was shown. Among them were many school classes as well as veterans. It also became clear that the war generation was not a homogeneous one; in letters-to-the-editor of various newspapers, former soldiers described how they had taken part in war crimes or had to witness them (Embacher, Lichtblau, and Sandner 1999, 22–25, 242–252; Besl 1999, 135–148). Many did not follow the boycott-call of the *Kameradschaftsbund* and spent several hours, often in absolute silence or talking to younger people, trying to explain why they often enthusiastically joined the Wehrmacht and did not resist or desert the army. Some also hoped for a kind of absolution when confessing that they had taken part in crimes similar to those shown in the exhibition. Others brought their own photo albums to compare them with pictures in the exhibition. Younger visitors were often relieved when listening to former soldiers who broke their silence, a moment many had been anticipating for a long time in the confrontation with their own fathers.¹⁶ In the words of a journalist for the leading local daily, *Salzburger Nachrichten*: “Visiting the exhibition, one could feel the gap between the overheated public debate and individual needs” (Rolinek 1999, 182–205). Former soldiers going public – or at least semi-public – with their renditions of experiences during wartime had, not least of all, to do with the fact that the warrior generation was weakening and changes were taking place within the *Kameradschaftsbund*, whereby the Wehrmacht exhibition was also emblematic of a changing of the generational guard.

“Crimes of the Wehrmacht. Dimension of the War of Annihilation 1941 to 1944” – A revised version in a new political context

The revised version of the Wehrmacht exhibition “Verbrechen der Wehrmacht. Dimensionen der Vernichtungskrieges 1941 bis 1944” opened in 2001 in Berlin and toured through several German cities. In April 2002, it was shown in Vienna with the support of the SPÖ and was overshadowed by political tumults. In 2000, the ÖVP had formed a coalition government with the FPÖ, which met strong protests and (short-term) sanctions by the 14 EU member states; Israel recalled its ambassador. In Austria, 250,000 joined a demonstration on Vienna’s Heldenplatz mainly organized by the Republican Club, the Demokratische Offensive, SOS Mitmensch, and the IKG, whose president Ariel Muzicant was the first president born after the Shoah (Muzicant 2009; Rabinovici 2009). In November 2002, new elections had been held

due to internal divisions in the FPÖ. Thus, the government showed little interest in debates about Austria's Nazi past.

However, the Wehrmacht exhibition had an unexpected side effect, when Neo-Nazis protested on Heldenplatz against the exhibition and were opposed by antifascist groups. Unexpectedly, this drew attention to the annual commemoration of the fallen German soldiers in World War II by right-wing fraternities at the official Austrian Heroes' Memorial (Heldendenkmal) on Heldenplatz on May 8th, the day of liberation. Old and new grassroots movements contested this ritual, which garnered it intense attention for the first time. Since 2013 – pursuant to a proposal by the Mauthausen Committee (successor to the Mauthausen concentration camp survivors organization) and the IKG – the city of Vienna and the Austrian government has been staging a “Fest der Freude” (Day of Joy), a free concert by the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and thus occupying the whole of Heldenplatz (Uhl 2021).

In 2002, there were also some positive changes concerning the image of deserters from the Wehrmacht. The National Fund recognized them as victims of National Socialism, which meant that they were entitled to compensation, and in the same year, the committee “Gerechtigkeit für die Opfer der NS-Militärjustiz” (Justice for Victims of Nazi Military Justice) was founded. The establishment of this group had been initiated by students at the University of Vienna in the late 1990s. In 2014, a monument commemorating these victims was installed on Vienna's Ballhausplatz (Pirker and Kramer 2017; Manoschek 2003).

Conclusion

In the late 1980s, Austria, like other European countries, had to question its founding myth, which was a gradual process that has to be analyzed in an international context: the globalization of the Holocaust (e. g. the introduction of Holocaust Memorial Day as an official day of commemoration by the EU and most of its member states), the end of the Cold War and international debates about belated reparations in the 1990s, and, not least of all, generational changes. As shown here, the vast majority of Austrians as well as most political parties, especially the ÖVP and FPÖ, needed some time to be able to accept the “co-responsibility thesis,” which provided them with opportunities to put forth their various interpretations. In this way, it was possible for them to talk about the persecution of the Jews and, at the same time, identify with the Wehrmacht despite its involvement in the Holocaust. However, the Waldheim Affair as well as the Wehrmacht exhibitions led to rifts within society: between the war generation and the second and third generation, within the Jewish community, and, as needs to be pointed out, within the various generations too. Furthermore, the Waldheim Affair also has to be seen as the awakening of a grassroots movement in a country in which civil society had been underdeveloped. As shown in this article, it started from the bottom up and needed partners such as the SPÖ, the Green Party, representatives of the churches, and the Jewish community.

Finally, I want to point out the long-term effects of the Waldheim Affair and the debates triggered by the Wehrmacht exhibitions, as well as efforts made by the Austrian government to deal with the Nazi past. As in many other countries, concrete knowledge about the Holocaust, World War II, and the Wehrmacht as well as about Austro-Fascism and the persecution of the left is very vague, especially among the younger generation (Edtmaier 2020). As I argue, the debates were very much dominated by emotions; intense research on Jewish history as well as on perpetrators and the Wehrmacht has not been internalized by broader segment of the population.

Disclosures. None.

Notes

- 1 The exhibition was put together by the Hamburg Institute für Sozialforschung.
- 2 Concerning the various meanings of victim (*Opfer*) see Pirker 2020 and 2021.
- 3 There are various definitions concerning the concept “generations”: a central criterion for the second generation was whether the parents were or could have been involved in National Socialism or were Nazi victims, and the influence of the 1968 movement (see, for example, Reiter 2006).
- 4 To this day, historians and political scientists are divided by disagreement on the proper designation of the authoritarian system that prevailed in Austria from 1934 to 1938. The standard work in this field is Tálós (2014).
- 5 The SPÖ and ÖVP ruled in the form of a coalition until 1966 and the ÖVP ruled alone from 1966 to 1970; then, the SPÖ ruled alone from 1970 to 1983 under Chancellor Bruno Kreisky, a Jew who was persecuted during Austro-fascism and survived in Sweden.
- 6 The semi-official anti-fascist exhibition *Niemals vergessen!* (Never Again!), which was presented at Vienna’s *Künsterlhaus* in autumn 1946 by the ÖVP, SPÖ, and KPÖ, can be seen as evidence of a short-term anti-fascist consensus. Altogether, the exhibition had scant impact on the general public.
- 7 Austria played a key role above all as a waystation for Eastern European Jewish Holocaust survivors. Vienna, as the last outpost on the Western side of the Iron Curtain, had tremendous importance for Israeli diplomacy since official diplomatic relations with the FRG were not established until 1965. After having been granted a 30-million-Schilling loan by Austria and successfully concluded reparations negotiations with the FRG, the Israeli Government officially renounced claims to reparations payments from Austria. Research on this subject was done by Embacher (2003a, 70–73).
- 8 In initial polls conducted in 1946, 46% of Austrians still declared themselves to be members of the German people and only 49% professed an Austrian identity. In 1980, 67% affirmed an Austrian nation (Botz 1986).
- 9 Unfortunately, it is impossible to go into detail here about the history of and controversies surrounding the Austrian Heroes’ Memorial (*Heldendenkmal*) on Heldenplatz. For further reading, see Uhl/Hufschmid/Binder (2021).
- 10 Among them were Simon Wiesenthal and Social Democrat Bruno Kreisky.
- 11 On the first ballot in May 1986, Waldheim received 49.64%, Steyrer 43.66, Freda Meissner-Blau of the Green Party 5.5% and the extreme right-wing candidate Otto Scrinzi 1.2% (Gehler 1995, 630).
- 12 A prime example of this attitude is Ruth Beckermann’s 2019 film “The Waldheim Waltz.”
- 13 The fierce debates held in 1988 about “Heldenplatz,” Thomas Bernhard’s play performed in Vienna’s Burgtheater, and artist Alfred Hrdlicka’s *Mahnmal gegen Krieg und Faschismus*, cannot be addressed here.
- 14 The horse was designed by Alfred Hrdlicka; cartoonist Manfred Deix was responsible for the cap (Knöbl 2009).
- 15 The term “second generation” was coined by Helen Epstein in 1977 with an article published in the New York Times-Magazine. In 1979, her book *Children of the Holocaust* was published by Penguin Books. Concerning Germany, see Freimüller (2020).
- 16 The author was a co-organizer of the Wehrmacht exhibition’s run in Salzburg and spent many days in the exhibition listening to former soldiers.

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