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'47 Soviet-Bloc Bid To Recruit Waldheim As Agent Described

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In the winter of 1947-48, the Yugoslav and Soviet intelligence services attempted to blackmail Kurt Waldheim into becoming a communist agent by threatening to charge him with war crimes, according to several former Yugoslav intelligence and government officials.

These officials said in separate interviews in Belgrade last month that the Yugoslav secret police compiled a dossier of allegations against Waldheim, who served as an intelligence officer with German forces in the Balkans from 1942 to 1945.

The senior Yugoslav intelligence agent in Vienna in 1947-48, Anton Kolendic, asserted that he had planned to use this material in a "joint" action with Soviet intelligence agents to recruit Waldheim. Kolendic said he had turned Waldheim's file over to Soviet intelligence agents and that he was "absolutely certain" that the Russians had made the approach.

Another former senior official of the Yugoslav intelligence service who asked not to be identified said that the Soviets in early 1948 had advised the Yugoslavs that Waldheim had been recruited and asked the Yugoslavs to stop further interference in the matter. But The Washington Post could not establish independently that Waldheim was ever recruited by the Soviets or the Yugoslavs.

One of the former officials who said he was familiar with the Waldheim file compiled by the Yugoslavs alleging his participation in war crimes described it as legally unpersuasive, and suggested that it could have been drawn up with the purpose of trying to blackmail Waldheim. This view is supported by an examination of the document, which was obtained by The Post.

Asked to comment on the allegation that he was recruited as a Soviet or Yugoslav agent, Waldheim, now president of Austria, as-

serted through his spokesman, Gerold Christian, that "no such attempt perceivable to Mr. Waldheim was made."

"Mr. Waldheim was never approached by any country in a manner implied by the question," Christian said in a telephone conversation. The spokesman, answering questions that were submitted earlier, said that Waldheim first learned that he had been indicted for war crimes by the Yugoslav war crimes commission from news reports "at the end of March of this year." That same month he learned that his name was placed in 1948 on the United Nations' list of wanted war criminals, Christian said.

Present and former U.S. intelligence officials, when informed about the allegations against Waldheim made by the former Yugoslav officials, said there had been talk in the past inside the U.S. government about the possibility that Waldheim had a special relationship with the Soviets. But they said they knew of no evidence to substantiate such speculation.

Former Yugoslav intelligence officers, now all comfortably retired, appeared to recall vividly details of an old operation that involved plans to blackmail Waldheim, who served after World War II as personal secretary to Austrian Foreign Minister Karl Gruber. An anti-Nazi, Gruber is unlikely to have hired an accused Nazi war criminal as an assistant.

The former officials who answered questions about Waldheim appeared to feel that the passage of time and their current obscurity permitted them to discuss the subject, which stirred up old anti-Nazi emotions. However, several other former Yugoslav intelligence officers who might have shed more light on the Waldheim case declined to talk or could not be located during a recent two-week visit to Yugoslavia.

Kolendic, who was the head of Yugoslav intelligence in Vienna after the war, said he was directly involved in the Yugoslav attempt to compromise Waldheim. At the time, Kolendic said in an interview, he was formally listed as deputy chief of the Yugoslav military mission in Austria.

In the second half of December 1947, he said, "I received a list of 24 names of German war criminals along with the copies of files on them that were being sent to the U.N. Commission on War Crimes in London [which was assembling a central registry of accused war criminals]. Waldheim's name was fourth on the list and was underlined. He was described as an official of the Austrian Foreign Ministry.

"I looked carefully through his file because it was unusually detailed. We have had such lists and files coming all the time, but in the vast majority of cases, documentation was short and weak. We did not have such a well-documented file before; at least I don't remember seeing one."

Along with the files, Kolendic said he and his deputy, Vasilije Kovacevic, received instructions to "recruit" Waldheim. Kolendic said he and Kovacevic decided to do this "jointly" with the Russians. He added that he had cooperated with Soviet intelligence operatives and in particular with a Col. Gonda. "I gave the Waldheim file to Gonda," he said.

When challenged about his assertion that he was "absolutely certain" that the Russians had approached Waldheim, Kolendic said: "When you are in the intelligence business, you have a way of knowing such things. I dealt with Gonda regularly and we became quite friendly."

"We worked closely with the Russians," he continued. "We would give them the names of people we wanted and they—in most cases—delivered them. Our enemies [anticommunist Yugoslavs] were fleeing into the American and British zones."

According to another former intelligence operative who held the rank of colonel in the Yugoslav secret police at the time, the Soviets in early 1948 told a Yugoslav intelligence liaison officer named Col. Boro Leontic that "Waldheim was recruited and that the Yugoslavs should stop their interference." Leontic could not be located in Yugoslavia.

An official indictment accusing Waldheim of war crimes was a potent weapon for any intelligence officer in postwar, anti-Nazi Vienna,

Kolendic said. When Waldheim was confronted with it, he "must have been terrified," Kolendic said. He described the atmosphere in Vienna, which in 1947 and 1948 was inside the Soviet occupation zone, although the city itself was under four-power occupation.

"It was the time of 'The Third Man.' The Orson Welles movie was set precisely at that time. Assassinations and kidnappings were common occurrences in Vienna."

In 1947, Kolendic said, Soviet intelligence suddenly began to recruit people in large numbers. "At that point they realized the weakness of the Austrian communists. Their political positions were eroding rapidly although they were still in the government. But the Russians figured that they could not count on this situation to continue for a long time and therefore began approaching people from the bourgeois parties. They could recruit people by, say, facilitating the return of your son from a Soviet POW camp; or by giving food or other favors; or by blackmail.

"They were particularly angry with [Austrian Foreign Minister] Gruber, whom they considered to be a British agent—not merely a British sympathizer but an agent. I heard Gonda and other Soviet officers, including generals, talk about an incident that could be staged to eliminate Gruber. Hence their interest in Waldheim, who was Gruber's secretary, working in Gruber's office. Don't forget, these were Stalin's intelligence agents. I am absolutely certain that Waldheim was recruited at that time."

Another former official who served as a personal aide to the late Yugoslav president Josip Broz Tito beginning in the 1960s indicated that Waldheim was turned over to Soviet intelligence. "We had to give him to the Russians," this former official said. "We were an appendage of the Soviet Union at the time [in 1947-48] although we were never a voluntary satellite."

Another former intelligence agent, who served as a personal aide to Slobodan Penecic, deputy to Yugoslav secret police chief Alexander Rankovic, said the indictment was prepared after Yugoslav intelligence discovered that Waldheim was working as Gruber's secretary and "Rankovic decided that we should try to recruit him."

"That was not difficult in those days," he continued. "You show your victim the document [such as the formal charge of war crimes]

but then you tell him everything would be fine, you'd protect him provided he would do something for you in return. And that was 1947. You have to feel the atmosphere of that year. War crime trials were still going on, people were afraid"

This source, however, contradicted Kolendic's assertion that the Yugoslav police had never attempted to recruit Waldheim. He said he had seen memoranda of conversations that Kolendic sent to Belgrade about his talks with Waldheim and with Gonda, the Soviet agent. Kolendic declined to meet a reporter a second time to discuss this source's recollection.

Waldheim was recommended to Gruber as a possible member of the new Austrian Foreign Ministry staff by a man with impeccable anti-Nazi credentials, Fritz Molden, publisher of the Viennese daily *Die Presse*. Molden had been the liaison between the Austrian underground and the Allies, and he was the son-in-law of the American master spy Allen Dulles.

Had Waldheim disclosed his three years of wartime service in the Balkans as an intelligence officer in the Wehrmacht High Command for Southeast, he most likely would not have been taken on by Gruber, a leader of the Austrian resistance. Waldheim claimed that he had been medically discharged from the Wehrmacht in December 1941, after a grenade splintered his ankle on the Russian front, and spent the rest of the war with his law books in Vienna, a story he stuck with until this year, when he acknowledged that he had remained on active duty until 1945.

The Yugoslav indictment of December 1947 threatened to expose his past. The Yugoslavs had managed to place Waldheim's name on the list of more than 36,000 war criminals compiled by the United Nations Commission on War Crimes before the commission disbanded in early 1948. Every U.N. member state at the time received an index of the 36,000 names. Austria was still an occupied country at the time, and did not join the United Nations until 1955.

Kolendic's direct superior in Belgrade, Slavko Odic, would not respond directly when asked if the documents that passed his desk at the time showed that Waldheim had been recruited by the Yugoslav and Soviet intelligence.

But Odic indirectly confirmed that the original Yugoslav indictment against Waldheim was designed to frame him. "All that evidence, all that testimony [in the 1947 Yugoslav indictment] is by and large [legally] useless," he said.

In the 1947 indictment, a document of more than 4,000 words, the evidence to support the charge of "murder and massacre" against Waldheim is tenuous. It is based on the general testimony by seven German POWs held in Yugoslavia. Several of them were later executed as war criminals.

Waldheim's superior, Lt. Col. Herbert Warnsdorff, who is also mentioned in the indictment, was not accused of war crimes, although theoretically he should have borne more responsibility than Waldheim for the purported crimes. He currently lives in West Germany.

Another curious aspect of the document, dated Dec. 18, 1947, is that it described Waldheim's whereabouts as "on the run."

As mentioned earlier, Kolendic received the document from Belgrade in the second half of December with the notation that Waldheim was employed in Gruber's office at the Austrian Foreign Ministry.

Another document in the Waldheim file adds weight to the theory that it may have been assembled to blackmail him. It is a Dec. 12, 1947, note from a war crimes commission investigator to the Yugoslav Foreign Ministry describing charges against Waldheim and identifying him as an Austrian diplomat who "belongs to the entourage of Dr. Gruber." It adds: "This fact is certainly of considerable value to the [Yugoslav Foreign] Ministry."

Moreover, the file, number F 25572, includes a letter written Dec. 18, 1947, by Dusan Nedeljkovic, president of the Yugoslav war crimes commission, to the Yugoslav Embassy in London. It accompanied lists of war criminals to be registered with the U.N. Commission on War Crimes, which was located in London.

Nedeljkovic wrote: "You should first of all make efforts to register Waldheim, reason being that the evidence is good and the indictment is fully sufficient, but also because from another point of view it is especially useful politically."

The urgency attached to Waldheim's case was all the more interesting given the fact that several far more significant Nazi figures were on the same list—among them Konrad Schubert, chief Nazi political officer in the German Embassy in Zagreb.

When the rift between Stalin and Tito became their total preoccupation in 1948, the Yugoslav secret police lost interest in Waldheim. "At that stage we were engaged in the struggle for our survival," Kolendic said. He was recalled to Belgrade in the summer of 1948 to work in the directorate for anti-Soviet propaganda.

Waldheim's diplomatic career flourished. He was appointed to the No. 2 job at the Austrian mission in Paris in 1948 and was named chief of the Foreign Ministry's personnel office in 1951. When Austria regained its independence in 1955, Waldheim was sent to New York to lead the Austrian mission to the United Nations. In 1968, he was appointed foreign minister.

By the time Waldheim became a candidate for U.N. secretary general in 1971, there were only a few persons in the Yugoslav elite who remembered the postwar Waldheim episode. By then Tito had demolished the orthodox wing of his party, which was led by secret police chief Rankovic. Rankovic was ousted in 1966 and his entire security establishment was subsequently purged.

If indeed Rankovic had tried to compromise Waldheim in 1947, did Tito know about that episode? None of the former Yugoslav intelligence officials interviewed for this story

could answer that question with certainty. One of his close collaborators who retained personal ties until Tito's death in 1980 said in an interview that Tito must have known about it. "He loved such things. Don't forget that Tito himself was involved in conspiratorial work [as a Comintern agent]. He loved to have information from someone on the inside."

Two men in Tito's immediate entourage said in separate interviews that Tito had known about the compromising aspects of Waldheim's past and that he had regarded him as a "Soviet man" who also had likely ties to the United States. But, one said, Tito viewed him as "a convenient figure for the U.N. job." Waldheim, one source quoted Tito as saying, was a "pliable" man.

Mirko Milutinovic, Tito's long-time chief of staff, said in an interview that "I knew that Waldheim had been compromised." But, he continued, "Tito did not regard Waldheim as a war criminal"—though neither Tito, nor any Yugoslav at that time, knew about Waldheim's service at Kozara in Bosnia, where a massacre took place in 1942, or knew other fresh details of Waldheim's wartime service that have come to light this year.