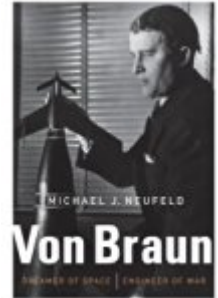


Michael J. Neufeld. *Von Braun: Dreamer of Space, Engineer of War.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. xiii + 587 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-307-26292-9.



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Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

Michael Neufeld has produced a definitive biography of Wernher von Braun, probably one of the most influential and certainly one of the most controversial figures in the history of technology in the twentieth century. The font of both fame and controversy was Braun's role as the design chief for the German V-2 missile program, in which capacity he joined the National Socialist Party and eventually the SS, and had at least some involvement--the exact degree and circumstances are in dispute--with the use of slave labor under atrocious conditions to build the missiles. These are the events which are probably of most initial interest to H-German readers; Neufeld marshals evidence to create a convincing interpretation of Braun's actions and decisions during this period. However, the book also contains an illuminating picture of the arch-conservative Junker background of Braun's early years. Likewise, once the scene shifts to the United States after 1945, where Braun headed a series of missile projects for the U.S. Army and NASA culminating with the Saturn V rocket used for the Apollo moon landings,

Neufeld's careful examination of myth-making (and deconstruction) about Braun's relationship to the Nazi past will also be of interest to many specialists on Germany.

In the two opening chapters, Neufeld places young Wernher squarely in the milieu of Prussian aristocracy. Both sides of the family--the Brauns and the Quistorps--were deeply conservative, yet cosmopolitan in appreciation of culture; deeply devoted to the notion of loyal service to authority, yet also tolerant and even supportive of such unconventionalities as young Wernher's growing enthusiasm for rocketry, influenced by the writings of Hermann Oberth and by participation in the Verein für Raumschiffahrt (VfR) in Berlin.

The next section overlaps somewhat with Neufeld's previous book, *The Rocket and the Reich* (1995), but of course concentrates on Braun's role. In 1934, the VfR was essentially closed down in the course of National Socialist *Gleichschaltung*. Its most dynamic and capable members, including Braun, were given the opportunity to work for

Army Ordnance's missile project, soon headquartered at Peenemünde on the Baltic coast island of Usedom. To speak of cooptation by National Socialism would not be correct, since, as Neufeld shows, this change was quite congenial for Braun's personal interests. Though Braun was not an enthusiast, joining the party apparently did not pose too many conflicts for him. In the Peenemünde program, Braun showed himself to be a skilled engineer, a loyal subordinate to his Army Ordnance superiors, and a good manager of an increasingly complex organization. Braun also learned--though with some faux pas--the fine art of intrigue in the National Socialist state. Expressing loyalty to his immediate army superiors and garnering support from the central regime meant highlighting the military potential of missiles while squelching expression of his own desires for space travel. In the intramural power struggles within the Nazi party and state, Braun stood clearly on the side of the regular army and Albert Speer and against the SS; Neufeld sees his membership in the latter organization as not necessarily coerced, but rather as a kind of beachhead for bureaucratic infighting against increasing SS control over the missile project. In this connection, Neufeld demonstrates that Braun almost certainly had knowledge of the brutal exploitation of slave labor, but was either incapable of or unwilling to rock the boat to make any significant amelioration. In telling the story up to 1945, Neufeld is significantly handicapped by the fact that essentially all of Braun's personal papers were lost during the closing days of the war; nevertheless, piecing together a multitude of archival and published sources, he manages a remarkably complete narrative of events.

As the war came to a close, Braun quite deliberately sought to ensure his capture by the Americans (and not any of the other Allies) and confidently assumed that his skills and knowledge would make him a valuable asset. In this, he was correct. In the latter part of the book--slightly more than half of the pages--Neufeld details

Braun's trajectory from the semi-secret, semi-irregular White Sands research site to his role as the leading missile designer of the 1950s, to his leadership of the Saturn V development program for NASA. This section of the book is a tour de force in the study of political bureaucracies. Alongside his technical capacities, Braun's skill as a manager served in him in good stead throughout the complex struggles--hardly visible to the general public--within and among the armed services, various civilian agencies, and corporate entities who all had stakes (sometimes conflicting) in the space program. A major sub-theme in this section is Braun's emergence as a public figure or indeed hero, an image cultivated by various magazines, the Disney studio, and other media outlets. Part of this process was the creation of a non- or even anti-Nazi myth for Braun. Remarkable, in retrospect, is the sheer ignorance in the United States about the basic facts of Nazi use of slave labor. As information about this activity began to capture public notice in the 1960s, the Braun myth began to erode, even as the space program itself became increasingly caught up in the social and political turmoil of that era.

Neufeld sees a persistent, almost overwhelming continuity in all these phases of Braun's life. Simply put, Braun was nearly obsessed with the dream of manned space flight. He was eager to use any and all resources and institutions that seemed to advance him towards this goal. Questions of morality or politics paled in comparison. However, as Neufeld's account makes clear, Braun was no idiot savant. On the contrary, in marked contrast to some other pioneers of rocketry, Braun was socially graceful and charismatic to an extraordinary degree, skilled in the management of large and complex organizations, astute in the calculations of strategic compromise, and capable of coordinating others' multiple agendas while not losing hold of his own. Braun was quite willing to be used by the German army, the Nazi Party, the SS, or later, by the U.S. Army or NASA--insofar as being used by powerful institutions

gave him, in turn, access to human and material resources useful for realizing his own vision of space travel.

Braun's sympathies were generally positive, or at any rate not negative, towards both National Socialist Germany (at least at the outset), as well as Cold War America. Common to both was a decided aversion towards communism. But in Neufeld's analysis, Braun's personal political inclinations (was he "really" a Nazi or not? was he "really" a convinced convert to American democracy?) were largely beside the point in explaining his actions. Likewise, the extent of his knowledge of the brutal exploitation of slave labor at Dora-Mittelbau and other missile construction facilities, his ability or inability to do anything about it, or the presence or absence of any personal ethical qualms were all, in effect, irrelevant for his continued leadership of the V-2 program. Wisely, Neufeld leaves his readers to draw their own conclusions about whether they find Braun's singleness of purpose admirable or repulsive.

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