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## A Scrutiny of the Odessa Myth

The legend of Odessa, a secretive SS (Schutzstaffel) organization formed in the aftermath of the Second World War in order to smuggle Nazi officials and treasure out of Germany with the intention of striking roots for the establishment of a “Fourth Reich,” has captivated novelists, the media, political groups, government security services, and dominant global personalities throughout the last half-century.[1] In his work, *Odessa und das Vierte Reich: Mythen der Zeitgeschichte*, the former West German diplomat Heinz Schneppen seeks to separate myth from reality. While he vehemently challenges the notion that Odessa actually existed, Schneppen wishes primarily to elucidate the particular factors accounting for why such a legend actually arose in the first place. In so doing, he hopes to offer insight into the genesis of myth-making itself and the formulation of conspiracy theories throughout history. For Schneppen, the idea of Odessa has been particularly durable for a variety of reasons. Certainly, ignorance has played a significant role in the myth’s persistence. Many of those individuals who have promoted the existence of Odessa, such as Simon Wiesenthal, have demonstrated insufficient knowledge concerning the sources and inadequate training required for critical analysis of the latter. Political motives, ideological bias, and outright disinformation have often accompanied this shortage of professionalism as well, resulting in vague hypotheses supported by unverifiable data masquerading as facts.

Professional shortcomings or political biases of myth-makers, however, only go so far in explaining the produc-

tion and staying power of the idea of Odessa, for Schneppen argues that such stories ultimately satisfy a collective need as well, particularly during periods of rapid rupture and flux like the complete collapse of Nazi Germany. On the one hand, for many of the Third Reich’s most diehard supporters, the end of the Second World War produced a profound spiritual vacuum. Although their world lay in rubble, devoted Nazis still had to believe that the timeless, indestructible Germany of their most recent and glorious past had survived. To them, therefore, lay the task of sustaining the idea and substance of the Nazi regime in the postwar period. As the racial elite of the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft* (national community), to whom it owed unwavering allegiance, the SS invariably assumed the leading role in achieving this objective. After 1945, with the Reich in ruins, the loyalty of the SS shifted from Adolf Hitler to a spiritual Germany of eternal “blood and soil.” Since the organization’s members could not realize their dreams in Germany itself, perhaps they could construct a new empire in some foreign land, a project that would require the services of a secretive human-smuggling outfit like Odessa in order to actually transport them and other leading Nazis to their new home.

The sentiments that gave care and comfort to Nazi supporters, however, at the same time dramatically heightened the concerns and fears of those individuals, particularly members of ethnic and political groups the Nazis had targeted, who were afraid (to the point of paranoia) of any indication that National Socialism would experience a revival, indeed, that it had never truly been

extinguished. Ultimately, then, Schneppen argues that contrary expectations served to ensure that the myth of Odessa would receive sustained nourishment throughout the years following 1945.

In the end, Schneppen admits that the factors giving birth to such legends as Odessa must move beyond the authors themselves as well as the particular historical contexts within which they are living. As old as man himself, such conspiracy theories simply seem too irresistible for some to concoct and never abandon, for they rest upon the exciting, intriguing, and often dramatic premise that behind the appearance of reality, powers are constantly at work formulating plans (almost always devious) revealed to no one. Such myths extend beyond the empiricism of causes and contexts which historians seek to discern and for which they seek to account. Nonetheless, with all their irrationality, such myths often demonstrate plausibility by referring to particular facts and events, whose truth the most ardent skeptics could not even deny. In addition, the very strength of conspiracy myths is their ever elusive nature, for that which does not exist also cannot be entirely refuted.

Schneppen wrestles with the imaginings that ultimately forged the myth of a secret Nazi organization that ferried top-ranking members of the Third Reich out of Europe by zeroing in on the three principal pillars supporting the legend: the alleged formation of Odessa itself, the Strasbourg Conference of August 1944, and the "Argentinean connection" linking Nazis with the government of Juan Perón. Odessa was the means; Strasbourg the decisive site, where leading Nazis apparently coordinated plans to secure their own future amidst a rapidly deteriorating military situation; and Argentina was the goal.

The author first discusses the theory of the Odessa organization and its shortcomings. Supposedly, in the vicinity of Odessa in 1947, a worldwide secretive escape outfit of leading SS and Gestapo members formed, taking the name of the city in which it was founded. The group provided a thickly connected, smoothly functioning network in which all Nazi escapees could rely on a contact point every forty kilometers. Over the so-called cloister route, Odessa apparently smuggled fleeing Nazis first to Genoa and Rome with the assistance of the Vatican and Italian authorities, and from there to Perón's Argentina, which served as a final "end station." The organization, however, supposedly occupied itself with more than just ferrying Nazi criminals out of Europe. Odessa energetically sought to undermine the Federal Republic from

within by infiltrating its parties and government apparatus at the national, regional, and local levels. It strived to gain a foothold in the economy, the judicial system, and the police as well. Its members sought to drag out the investigation and pursuit of Nazi criminals, and if a particular case reached court, Odessa ensured that each defendant had access to the best defense money could buy. Throughout the postwar period, the organization apparently became a fervent organizer of neo-Nazi activities as well. Odessa supposedly even officially declared war on Israel, continuously seeking to thwart the operations of the country's commando units, and assassinate its secret agents. A series of Odessa cells apparently operated throughout such cities as Rosenheim, Stuttgart, Kempten Mannheim, Berchtesgaden, Dachau, all coordinated on the ground by SS-Obersturmbannführer Otto Skorzeny. Periodically, small groups of members secretly met in hotels and cafes in order to hatch plans and to coordinate operations.

In order to fund such activities, Odessa supposedly harnessed the profits that its members had made during the war, particularly during the implementation of the Final Solution. Secured in the banks of neutral lands, such as Switzerland, the funds were readily available. In addition, throughout the Arab world, Odessa traded stolen weapons and munitions for marijuana and opium. Working in conjunction with various Mafia networks, the organization then would sell the drugs on the global market.

Despite the often detailed and comprehensive depiction of Odessa, Schneppen indicates that all serious historical inquiry speaks against the existence of any such organization. Scholars and watchdog groups of neo-Nazi activities refute its existence due to the lack of evidence. Ultimately, however, the author argues that simple logic speaks against the existence of Odessa as well. First, considering that numerous government and nongovernment bodies within not only Germany, but the free states of the rest of the world, maintain a close watch on the slightest stirrings of fascism, the idea that a secret, widespread, and active Nazi global network could actually conduct its work is simply inconceivable. In addition, since the cause Odessa reportedly pursued had only the slightest chance of success, one must consider the former Nazi functionaries in the organization as either complete phantoms or total idiots, and nothing in-between. After all, as Schneppen argues, only the prospect of gaining power could ultimately enable a politically minded individual to persist decades-long in order to achieve a particular goal. Even though conspiracy theorists lend much weight to the bi-

ographies of certain prominent Nazis who fled, such as Adolf Eichmann (*SS Obersturmführer*, head of Jewish affairs at the Reich Main Security Office), Josef Mengele (camp doctor at Auschwitz), Franz Stangl (commandant of Treblinka), Eduard Roschmann (commandant of Riga Ghetto), and Josef Schwammberger (*SS-Oberscharführer* and former ghetto commandant in Przemysl), the author states that none of the above individuals ever referred to assistance that Odessa apparently provided to them.

Certainly the escape stories of such prominent Nazis reveal certain similarities. An exchange of identities was vitally important for all of them, which could and did take place at various points: before the collapse of the Third Reich, within internment camps, after release from prison, or during escape. In addition, certain commercial human-smuggling organizations, the Red Cross, and the Catholic Church did assist escapees for a variety of material and humanitarian concerns, sometimes cooperating with each other in their endeavors. Nonetheless, their efforts in helping the escapees, even if at times coordinated, did not necessarily represent a systematic plan of any secret, overarching SS organization called Odessa. The myth of Odessa was overlaid with the idea of a secret conference of Nazi government and economic leaders, who had supposedly met in the Hotel Maison Rouge in Strasbourg on August 10, 1944, and who had provided the necessary funding for the organization's endeavors. As for Odessa, Schnepfen details the theory, while pointing out its limitations.

Along with other leading figures within the Third Reich, General Nazi Party Secretary Martin Bormann had apparently come to the conclusion by the summer of 1944 that the war was invariably lost. The only hope for the future survival of himself and other head Nazis, all of whom faced execution if captured, lay in utilizing their own resources for their escape from Europe. He deemed it absolutely necessary to bring the enormous Nazi treasure out of Europe and to invest it securely. Entire industries must be transferred out of Germany. Key Nazi firms must establish roots abroad in order to avoid rapacious reparation payments. Thousands of war criminals, most of whom were members of the SS, needed assistance to leave the Reich and secure hiding in the prepared settlements and German colonies of foreign lands. In order to secure and coordinate the financial backing for such operations, Bormann apparently called a hidden meeting of business leaders and top-ranking members of the war and naval ministries to Strasbourg in the summer of 1944, without the knowledge of Heinrich Himmler or Adolf Hitler. The results of this meet-

ing were indeed supposedly quite substantial, for enormous money amounts, hidden currencies, and gold reserves were eventually moved out of Germany. Besides establishing the firm foundations for the economic security and growth of Nazi firms abroad, the money apparently served to finance the actual escape of such individuals through secret organizations like Odessa as well.

The author argues, however, that any critical historical analysis of the meeting in Strasbourg proves that the event was sheer fantasy. Many of its alleged participants were senile, already dead, or in concentration camps. Indeed, their presence, as well as the participation of representatives from government ministries, simply cannot be proven. In addition, the alleged civilian chairman of the meeting, a Dr. Schied, was indeed a ceramic industrialist and leading official in Albert Speer's ministry, but he would have been a poor choice of an individual who could have brought the SS into the plan. Having experienced immense difficulty himself in obtaining membership in the Nazi Party, he never even became a member of the SS.

Not only are the reports about the participants not convincing, but justifiable doubt exists concerning the meeting place as well. Schnepfen places into serious question whether a conspiratorial meeting could have actually taken place only weeks following the attempt on Hitler's life (July 20, 1944), when the party was hunting mercilessly for any hint of defeatism. In addition, skepticism concerning the funds to which the conference participants had access is necessary. Throughout the fall of 1944, the Reich was in possession of only scant amounts of gold and foreign currencies in order to finance the war. The idea of any substantial capital transfer out of Germany seems highly improbable, especially in light of the increasingly restrictive rules concerning financial transactions with Nazi Germany that the Allies were imposing at the time upon neutral states, like Switzerland.

In the end, any efforts on the part of Odessa, or any plans finalized at the Strasbourg Conference to procure financing for the organization, could only succeed if a foreign power overseas actually allowed a "Fourth Reich" to take root. To this topic the author proceeds to turn through a discussion of how Perón's Argentina served as the destination point for Nazi men, money, and gold. Yet again, however, the author points out that the evidence is lacking, not only concerning the transfer of funds, but for conceptualizing Argentina as the staging area for future Nazi plans as well. For Schnepfen, a transfer of capital to Argentina could simply not have taken place. In January

1944, Argentina had broken diplomatic relations with the Reich, and on March 27, 1945, had actually declared war on Germany. Prior to these events, however, largely because of pressure from the United States, Argentina had already restricted trade relations as well as bank and financial transactions with Nazi Germany. The rupture of diplomatic relations severed vital contacts between German firms and their Argentinean subsidiaries, although Allied blockade efforts had in reality stifled such relations much earlier. A few days after the declaration of war, all branch offices of German firms as well as the fortunes of German nationals resident in Argentina came under state control, and when the war ended, the liquidation of such industries took place. Under such circumstances, Argentina hardly seems like an ideal site for the transfer and hiding of Nazi fortunes.

Upon assuming power in the summer of 1946, as Schneppen points out, Perón accelerated the above efforts. From time to time, German firms certainly sought, with varying degrees of success, to delay, or even evade, the measures of the Argentinean authorities. Before the official break of diplomatic relations, for example, certain German businesses aimed to secure their wealth by investing in bogus firms. The particular economic concerns of the industries involved, however, rather than any grand political and ideological design in coordination with Odessa, accounted for such behavior. In addition, these admittedly secretive moves of German firms to ensure their own survival never seemed to take place with the close cooperation of Perón, who, despite genuine German sympathies extending throughout his military career and awe at the manner in which the Nazis and Fascists had mobilized their populaces, first and foremost sought to promote the material interests of Argentina through the nationalization and the sale of Reich business enterprises.

Perón certainly demonstrated an eagerness to acquire Germany's "human capital" throughout the postwar period. Again, however, his policy was primarily nationalist, and not part of a wider scheme to facilitate the construction of a "Fourth Reich" within his country. When he took power, Argentina was one of the wealthiest nations on the globe as a result of its extensive exports of agricultural products to the Allies during the Second World War. In order to maintain prosperity in a postwar world, Perón believed that his country needed to establish a more diversified economy through industrialization. Such economic changes necessitated skilled workers that the country simply did not have, but which could be acquired through the immigration of Europeans, most

notably Germans (approximately 22,400 arrived in Argentina between 1945 and 1949) seeking to start a new life outside of Europe. For the most part, then, according to the author, Perón ran his government primarily as a pragmatist and opportunist, not an ideologue.

To drive the point home that Argentina did not become a bastion of Nazism, the author points out that the many German technicians, engineers, and natural scientists who immigrated to the country had few political motives. For Schneppen, one must distinguish not only between Nazis and the majority of nonpolitical immigrants, but also between Nazis and the very small number of war criminals, as defined by the Allied Control Council Law No. 10 of December, 1945, who sought refuge in Argentina. Those individuals who actually had held high posts in the Nazi ruling structure and faced criminal charges in Germany comprised an extremely small percentage of immigrants, only about 2 or 3 percent. Schneppen outlines each of those biographies—twenty-three in total, according to a 1999 report of the independent commission (CEANA), which the Argentinean government had charged with investigating Nazi activities in the country. Most of the immigrants simply sought anonymity in a foreign land, rather than dreaming of establishing a "Fourth Reich." The task of acclimating to a new society and surviving was more than enough for them. Ultimately, the author concludes that, while one could certainly consider Argentinean behavior careless and morally questionable (or, at the very least, indifferent), the scholarly evidence refutes the notion of any concerted and calculated effort on the part of Perón's regime to help Nazi war criminals flee Europe.

While detailing the history surrounding Odessa, the Strasbourg Conference, and the Nazi-Argentinean connection, as well as questioning the evidence accounting for their existence, the author continues to explore the factors accounting for the rise and longevity of such legends in the first place. Certainly a careless use of unverified sources proved instrumental in enabling Odessa and the stories circulating around it to persist. Novelists, as well as the public at large, often eagerly took up the dramatic tales surrounding Odessa, which were exciting, riveting tales full of mystery and intrigue.

Schneppen, however, points out that one must consider the genuine ideological as well as the more cynically political motivations of particular individuals, groups, and institutions propagating and disseminating the myths. Wiesenthal, as a survivor of the Nazi camps himself and an individual who dedicated his entire life

to documenting Nazi crimes and hunting down perpetrators, was all too ready to truly believe that Nazis were lurking in secret, planning a resurgence through the solidification of a “Fourth Reich.” After the conclusion of the Second World War, U.S. Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr. pointed to Odessa and the supposed ever-present danger of a Nazi resurgence in order to bolster his case that the Allies needed to deindustrialize Germany for good in order to avoid any future conflicts arising from its people. Left-wing groups in the Federal Republic, as well as government officials, security services, and historians in the German Democratic Republic and the Soviet Union, propagated the myth in order to agitate against the rise of neo-Nazi movements in West Germany and strengthen the link in Marxist theory between fascism, monopoly capitalism, and imperialism. Throughout the postwar period, the danger of a “Fourth Reich” served as a pretext for the United States to conduct its interventionist policy throughout Latin America. During the Second World War itself, British radio, acting as German stations, spread stories about the widespread Nazi exodus of top Third Reich leaders, including the *Führer* himself, as well as the funds to support them, in order to break the morale of German fighting troops.

Harnessing a wide variety of archival, literary, and media resources from across the globe and spanning a half-century, Schnepfen not only persuasively argues that Odessa was a fiction, but offers a reflective and insightful commentary concerning the multiplicity of factors providing for the genesis and spread of the legend as well. In his analysis of the organization itself, the Strasbourg Conference of August, 1944, and the Nazi-Argentinean connection, the author reveals the dubious nature of the sources and points towards the political, economic, and international realities which seriously place into question the historical validity of all three “pillars” of the Odessa idea.

Particularly concerning the third issue, the link between Nazism and Peron’s Argentina, the author nonetheless perhaps establishes overly dichotomous immigrant categories of “nonpolitical” Germans, “Nazis,” and “war criminals.” These classifications may oversimplify the more nuanced nature of accommodation and complicity of Germans with Nazism. Increasingly, scholarly work in cultural history as well as *Alltagsgeschichte* (the history of everyday life) have pointed out the shortcomings of earlier analyses which have tended to portray the Third Reich as populated by Nazis, on the one hand, and Germans, on the other.[2] That is to say, instead of establishing categories of mutual exclusion, this research has increasingly sought to decipher the often complex,

ambiguous, and dynamic ways in which Germans from all walks of life actually related to and participated in the National Socialist project of renewal and change. The subtle mixture of enthusiasm, devotion, uncertainty, and dismay that may have characterized the relationship of many ordinary Germans to Nazism is lost through the employment of rigid labels.

Ultimately, however, Schnepfen’s wider point that the movement of Germans to Argentina throughout the post-World War II period did not constitute a coordinated effort to lay the foundations for a “Fourth Reich” is sound, and indeed provides a strong conclusion to a formidable analysis refuting one of the most cryptic and enticing global myths of the post-World War II period.

#### Notes

[1]. Paul Manning, *Martin Bormann-Nazi in Exile* (Secaucus: Lyle Stuart, 1981); E. R. Carmin, *Das Schwarze Reich: Geheimgesellschaften und Politik im 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Heyne, 1997); Frederick Forsyth, *Die Akte Odessa* (Munich: Piper, 1973); Simon Wiesenthal, *Ich jagte Eichmann. Tatsachenbericht* (Gütersloh, Sigbert Mohn Verlag, 1961), *Doch die Mörder leben* (Munich: Drömer Knauer, 1967), *Recht, nicht Rache* (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein Verlag, 1988); Lew Besyminski, *Auf den Spuren von Bormann* (Zurich: Aurora Verlag, 1965); Oliver Schroem, *Stille Hilfe für braune Kameraden: Das geheime Netzwerk der Alt- und Neonazis* (Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 2001); Andreas Rosenfelder, “Winnetous Erben,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 24 February 2005,48; and the series by Simon Wiesenthal: “Doch die Mörder leben: Auf der Jagd nach flüchtigen NS-Vebrechern,” *Der Spiegel*, 33 (August 7, 1967): 52-62; (August 14, 1967): 60-73; (August 21, 1967): 68-80.

[2]. Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); Andrew Stuart Bergerson, “Forum: Everyday life in Nazi Germany,” *German History* 27 (2009): 560-579. For examples of the earlier view, see Thomas Childers, *The Nazi Voter: The Social Foundations of Fascism in Germany, 1919-1933* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983); Detlev Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition, and Racism in Everyday Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in Power* (New York: Penguin, 2005); Ian Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich: Bavaria 1933-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), and *The “Hitler Myth”: Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

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