



Uki Goñi. *The Real Odessa: Smuggling the Nazis to Perón's Argentina.* London: Granta Books, 2002. xxx + 410 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-86207-581-8.

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Argentina's Disappearing Odessa Files

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"In those days Argentina was a kind of paradise to us," reminisced Nazi war criminal Erich Priebke in 1991, thinking back to the warm welcome he and some of his comrades found when they fled postwar Europe for the country ruled by Juan Domingo Perón (p. 263). Priebke, Adolf Eichmann, and Josef Mengele were only the most notorious of a rogue's gallery of several hundred European fascists who made their way to Buenos Aires in the late 1940s and 1950s. The story was immortalized in the best-selling novel *The Odessa File*, Frederick Forsyth's dark fantasy of a conspiratorial order seeking to launch a Fourth Reich through the mythical ODESSA (Organisation der ehemaligen SS-Angehörigen or Organization of former SS members).[1] This image of Argentina as a sanctuary for villains escaping justice became so widely understood in popular culture, even the Blue Meanies thought of going there after their downfall in the Beatles' cult cartoon "Yellow Submarine."

If the flight of Nazi fugitives down the ratlines to Argentina is well known and has already been the subject of a number of investigations, never before have the mechanisms of the escape routes been laid out in such detail as in this painstaking study by Argentine journalist Uki Goñi.[2] Goñi conducted some two hundred interviews and undertook six years of relentless digging in archives in the United States, Europe, and frequently uncooperative ministries in Argentina. His findings are a catalog of cynical malfeasance and cover-up by highly-placed officials in the Argentine government and the Catholic Church, as well as actors from other countries.

Goñi's principal contribution is his in-depth look at the Argentine side of an organized smuggling operation that had its genesis in German-Argentine cooperation during the war and eventually involved Allied intelligence services, the Vatican, and top Argentine

officials in a network stretching from Sweden to Italy. Among the key players in Goñi's account are two Argentines of German descent: former SS captain Carlos Fuldner, who ran "rescue" efforts from bases in Madrid, Genoa, and Berne; and Rodolfo Freude, head of Perón's Information Bureau, who coordinated the work of intelligence and immigration officials from his office in the Casa Rosada, Argentina's White House. Many of the Argentines involved, as well as a multinational cast of Vichy French, Belgian Rexist, Croatian Ustashi, and cardinals from several countries, seem to have been motivated by the vision of an international brotherhood of Catholic anti-Communists.

Goñi has gone to great lengths to document information about individual members of the operation and those it abetted. We learn, for instance, about SS Captain Walter Kutschmann, frequent wartime travel companion of fashion designer Coco Chanel and himself responsible for thousands of killings in Poland, who escaped to Argentina in the plain robes of a Carmelite monk. Goñi found documentary evidence of Kutschmann's support from the Casa Rosada in a place few people would have thought to look: Kutschmann's early application for a taxi license, Goñi discovered, was backed by Fernando Imperatrice, a member of Perón's presidential staff. Kutschmann retained friends in high places almost until the end of his life. During a trial held by the Argentine military regime in the early 1980s, the former SS man went free "when the court lost the case dossier. It was found five years later ... in the judge's safe" (p. 243).

In an extraordinary tale from the archives, Goñi describes spending five months posing as a genealogist to look unobtrusively for crucial evidence in the records of the Argentine Immigration Office. From 1920 to 1970, the government routinely opened individual immigration files for every applicant for a

landing permit, whether job seeker, refugee, or war criminal. Goñi eventually worked through “a couple of city blocks of shelves stacked with tightly packed cards,” indexing the files to find ones he wished to order (p. 117). He discovered entries corresponding to files for Eichmann, Priebke, Mengele, and other lesser-known fascists. But when he broke his cover and tried to order the relevant files, the archivists turned nasty and sullen, and terminated their cooperation. One of them then met him furtively in a park across the street to confess that in 1996, Peronists, fearing exposure, had carted most of the key documents down to the riverbank and burned them.

But not all of them were burned. By entering the data from the index cards alone into a computer spreadsheet, Goñi found that the files for Erich Priebke and Josef Mengele were numbered consecutively, even though they arrived in Argentina seven months apart. At the time of their applications, the Immigration Office was opening new files at a rate of over five hundred per day. Thus a single person must have applied on behalf of both war criminals at once or processed them together, *prima facie* evidence of an organized effort on behalf of Nazi fugitives.

Goñi made other important finds. He draws effectively on the revealing unpublished diary of a Belgian fascist involved in the smuggling network in Buenos Aires, Pierre Daye, whose papers were repatriated after his death and thus escaped the Argentine bonfires. Historian Beatriz Gurevich, a member of CEANA (Comisión de Esclarecimiento de Actividades Nazis en la Argentina), the Argentine government commission investigating Nazi links, who resigned in the late 1990s because the commission did not dig deep enough, shared her files with Goñi. He also worked in Chile, Denmark, Germany, Great Britain, Switzerland, and the United States. In the end he was able to identify nearly three hundred war criminals who entered Argentina beginning in August 1946. (The entire staff of CEANA came up with only 180.) This research, presented in such detail that at times the narrative of events gears down into a register of names and places, is itself a great achievement. Goñi’s interpretations of causality, however, are more porous. At the center of the image of Argentina as a fascist paradise, and looming in the background throughout the story told here, is the highly disputed figure of Perón himself. Did he, as Goñi argues, turn his country into an asylum for the blood-spattered losers of the Second World War out of ideological sympathy

for European fascism? Or were other motives more important?

Goñi takes a clear stand: if Perón was not himself a Nazi, he liked Nazis, cooperated with them before, during, and after the war, and sought to save them from the “victor’s justice” he saw at work at the Nuremberg tribunal because it offended his soldier’s sense of honor. “It was Perón’s intention to rescue as many Nazis as possible from the war crimes trials in Europe,” Goñi writes (p. 108).

To show the antecedents for the program, he spends several chapters outlining how Argentina steadily made it more difficult for Jewish refugees to enter the country in the late 1930s and 1940s, especially when the Immigration Office was headed by Santiago Peralta, a virulent and prolific writer of anti-Semitic tracts appointed by the military government in 1943 and kept on by Perón until June 1947.

Historians will no doubt contest whether anti-Semitism and pro-Nazi sentiment among Argentine officials, including Perón himself, can bear the explanatory weight Goñi assigns them in accounting for the causes of this sordid episode. A comparative frame of reference would also be useful. Countries all over the world were closing their doors to Jewish refugees in the Nazi era, an appalling practice that did not in itself automatically indicate a preference for fascist immigration. Despite the many obstacles created, in percentage terms, Argentina actually admitted more Jews (between 30,000 and 50,000 during Hitler’s rule) than did any country in the Western Hemisphere except Bolivia. (The United States ranked first in total numbers but third relative to population.[3])

Perón’s hostility to the Nuremberg trials should be placed in an Argentine context, where protestors sometimes chanted “Nuremberg! Nuremberg!” to call for the prosecution of the military officers (including him) who ran the country during the war, giving him a self-interested motive for opposing the trials. Perón cannot simply be labeled a Nazi since he readily made alliances with Communists and Jews, maintaining an ideologically flexible, populist approach as he tried to co-opt workers’ movements by meeting many of their demands. Indeed, within the Argentine military and the right wing in general, there was far more admiration for Italian and Spanish fascism than for the German variety, which was considered too anti-Catholic.

After the war, Perón did not just go looking for

war criminals in Europe; he especially sought skilled labor and advanced technology for his crash industrialization program. As Goñi notes, an Argentine agency based in Rome and implicated in smuggling fascists actually “had orders to organize the immigration of 4 million Europeans, at the rate of 30,000 a month, to boost the economic and social revolution Perón envisaged for his country” (p. 237). It was an ambitious plan, partly realized in at least one respect: Argentina produced its own jet fighter in 1947 with the help of imported Nazi engineers.

This aspect seems worthy of more careful analysis. Argentina was hardly the only country to take advantage of the decommissioned human resources of the Third Reich. The United States is famously indebted to rocketry expert Werner von Braun, who literally got NASA off the ground thanks to his experience building Hitler’s V-2 rockets using slave labor in the underground factories at Peenemunde. Von Braun arrived via Operation Paperclip, a once-secret program that eventually brought 765 German scientists, engineers, and technicians into the United States; between half and three-quarters were former Nazi Party members or SS men, and more than a few of them were guilty of war crimes. The Soviet Union carried off German technicians and laborers in large numbers after the war, and the intelligence agencies of both superpowers recruited well-informed Nazis into their ranks. Perhaps the most notorious was Klaus Barbie, the “Butcher of Lyon,” who worked for and was sheltered by the U.S. Army’s Counterintelligence Corps after the war. The CIC also protected Otto von Bolschwing, a senior aide to Adolf Eichmann. France likewise enlisted ex-Waffen SS in the Foreign Legion to fight against national liberation movements in its colonies.[4] Few historians would assert that the United States, the Soviet Union, and France welcomed Nazis out of ideological affinity with the Third Reich; moral blindness, perhaps, or cynical realism may have been at work, but there is no mistaking the instrumentalist thinking behind a salvage operation intended to locate Nazis with unusual skills for national programs in intelligence, advanced technology and counterinsurgency. Was what was good for the goose also good for the gander? Even if his sympathies lay more openly with European fascists, could Perón have been motivated in part by some of the same cold-blooded calculations going through the minds of Truman, Stalin and De Gaulle?

Goñi would answer with a resounding “no.” Although he acknowledges the utility of some of the

newcomers to Perón’s modernization effort, we also read of a number of arrivals who may have been good at mass murder, but had so few useful skills it was hard for their Argentine sponsors to find them employment. (Mass murder itself was in any case not yet in demand. Perón’s defenders like to point out that, whatever the Nazi influence in his government, Argentina’s concentration camps were created not under his rule, but by the generals who overthrew his second government in 1976 and killed some thirty thousand people.)

Ultimately Goñi understands the whole episode as part of a tragic continuity not only in Peronism’s sins of the past and present, but in an unbroken chain of Argentine history from collaboration with the Third Reich to the disappearances carried out by the military junta of the 1970s, the corruption of the civilian governments that followed, and the bloody bombings of the Israeli Embassy and Jewish cultural center in Buenos Aires. All of this went for the most part unquestioned, Goñi writes with sadness; Argentina’s chief crimes remain unsolved and draped in the silence of a society grown too accustomed to looking away. Historians will continue to differ over how to explain the Perón era and Argentina’s Nazi connections, and this study leaves unresolved key questions of interpretation, especially about how to classify the cipher at the head of the Argentine government from 1946 to 1955. But the debate over these issues, and our knowledge of the inside of the Argentine Odessa network, has been greatly enriched by Goñi’s findings.

Notes

[1]. Frederick Forsyth, *The Odessa File* (New York: Viking, 1972).

[2]. See, for example, Carlota Jackisch, *El nazismo y los refugiados alemanes en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Editorial de Belgrano, 1989); Holger Meding, *Flucht vor Nürnberg?* (Köln: Böhlau, 1992); Beatriz Gurevich and Paul Warzawski, *Proyecto testimonio* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1998); and John Loftus and Mark Aarons, *Unholy Trinity* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1998).

[3]. Jackisch, *El nazismo y los refugiados alemanes*, p. 149; Haim Avni, “Peru y Bolivia—dos naciones andinas—y los refugiados judíos durante la era nazi,” in *El Genocidio ante la Historia y la Naturaleza Humana*, ed. Beatriz Gurevich and Carlos Escudé (Buenos Aires: Grupo Editor Latinoamericano, 1994), pp. 335-355.

[4]. See Christopher Simpson, *Blowback: The First Full Account of America's Recruitment of Nazis, and Its Disastrous Effect on Our Domestic and Foreign Policy* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1988); Linda Hunt, *Secret Agenda: the United States Government, Nazi Scientists, and Project Paperclip, 1945-1990* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).

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