

How the Nazis Escaped Justice

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As the world falls silent in memory of the Holocaust, a new book reveals how many of its architects were helped to live out their days in South America.



The innocuous-looking vans he helped to develop began arriving at the Third Reich's mental hospitals in 1940.

Doctors in white coats herded patients, officially dubbed "useless eaters", into the hermetically sealed compartments in the back. The revs of engine could not conceal the screams. But within 20 minutes all those locked inside were poisoned to death by exhaust fumes.

Walther Rauff, the notorious SS colonel who was instrumental in creating the Nazis' infamous "mobile gas chamber" was held personally responsible for murdering at least 100,000 people during the Second World War. His victims included Communists, Jews, Roma and the physically and mentally ill.

Yet Rauff escaped to South America after the war. From there he travelled with impunity to Germany as a company representative until the late 1950s. Germany only issued a warrant for his arrest in 1961 and he was never brought to trial. Rauff died in Chile in 1984 and hundreds of old Nazis flocked to his funeral in the capital, Santiago.

As the world today remembered the horrors of the concentration camps, a new book has laid bare how many of its architects were able to escape justice for decades, and in many cases until death. Rauff, and dozens of other top Nazis who fled to South America after the Second World War, were sheltered by a "coalition of the unwilling" on both sides of the Atlantic.



German historian Daniel Stahl's book, *Nazi Hunt: South America's Dictatorships and the Avenging of Nazi Crimes*, published just as Germany remembers this week's 80th anniversary of the Nazis' accession to power and the world marks Holocaust Day, is based on extensive research in European and South American archives. It comes to the shameful conclusion that key officials on both continents, including the courts, police and governments, were reluctant to track down Nazi war criminals and even spent decades actively preventing their prosecution.

Rauff's case was typical. His address in Santiago was known to post-war West Germany's foreign ministry, and Hans Strack, the German ambassador to Chile, was ordered to request his extradition. But Stahl shows how Strack sympathised with war criminals in exile and delayed applying for Rauff's extradition for 14 months. When he finally did so in 1962, Chile was able to refuse extradition request because his murders had by then occurred too long ago under the country's statute of limitations.

Official reluctance also prevented the arrest of one of the world's worst Nazi war criminals, the infamous Nazi doctor Josef Mengele who carried out hundreds of brutal medical experiments on patients at Auschwitz concentration camp. Attempts were made to track Mengele down in 1960 following rumours that he was hiding in Brazil or Chile. Yet he was never found.

Stahl concludes in his book that Mengele was never caught because French police officers employed by Interpol refused to conduct searches for war criminals because they were implicated as Nazi collaborators.

"As henchmen of the Vichy regime, they collaborated with the Nazis until 1944," he writes.

Interpol's secretary general in 1962, Marcel Sicot, is unmasked by Stahl as regarding the prosecution of war criminals as "victor's justice".

The Brazilian government's concerns about its own moral legitimacy are singled out by Stahl as the reason why Gustav Wagner, an SS officer accused of complicity in the murder of 152,000 Jews at the Sobibor extermination camp, was never sent to Germany to stand trial. In the late 1970s judges at Brazil's supreme federal court refused a request from the then West German government for Wagner's extradition, citing alleged inaccuracies in the application.

According to Stahl, West Germany's ambassador to Brazil at the time explained the Brazilian authorities were worried Wagner's extradition would encourage opponents of the government to make demands that could compromise their authority. He said they feared opponents would demand all crimes in Brazil should be prosecuted, "including those committed by the military and the police".

Stahl writes that the reluctance of German and French authorities to prosecute Nazi war criminals began to wane in the early 1980s when a new generation was entering the government, police and the judiciary. He cites the arrest and trial of Klaus Barbie, the infamous Gestapo chief in France known as the "Butcher of Lyon". Germany and France, he points out, jointly pursued Barbie and obtained his extradition from Bolivia. He was finally deported to France in 1983 to stand trial for offences he committed 40 years earlier.

Yet evidence revealing how a "coalition of the unwilling" prevented Hitler's henchmen from facing justice continues to emerge. Just two years ago, leaked German intelligence files revealed that for a decade before he was caught, the West German government knew that Adolf Eichmann – the Nazi SS officer responsible for organising the Holocaust – was hiding in South America. Mossad eventually tracked down and kidnapped him in Argentina in 1960. He was flown to Israel where he was convicted of crimes against humanity and hanged in 1962.

After WW2, many high-profile Nazis succeeded in fleeing Europe and escaping justice for their crimes. But where did they go, and who helped them? And how were they finally held accountable? Historian Bill Niven explains more about the Nazis who eluded capture, and how they continue to haunt our culture today. "Ratlines" were a system of escape routes for Nazis and other fascists fleeing Europe in the aftermath of World War II. These escape routes mainly led toward havens in Latin America, particularly Argentina though also in Paraguay, Colombia, Brazil, Uruguay, Mexico, Chile, Peru, Guatemala, Ecuador and Bolivia, as well as the United States, Spain and Switzerland. Gräßling escaped justice until this week when the former SS bookkeeper at Auschwitz, now aged 94, was finally found guilty of being an accessory to the murder of 300,000 people and sentenced to four years in prison. It is likely to be one of the last Holocaust trials. 'Accountant of Auschwitz' jailed for the murder of 300,000 Jews. Read more. The trial raised the issue of whether those deemed to be small cogs in the Nazi machinery, but who did not actively participate in the killing of 6 million Jews, were guilty of crimes. British forces captured Gräßling in Germany at the end of the war and, probably as an act of revenge, initially imprisoned him in an old Nazi concentration camp. The historian Laurence Rees recorded that he was shipped to England in 1946.