

# Operation Paperclip

In the aftermath of World War II, United States intelligence smuggled over 1,600 German scientists, engineers, and technicians out of Germany and into the U.S. in a covert program called Operation Paperclip.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. government went to great lengths to whitewash the pasts of these former Nazis, some of whom were involved in despicable war crimes. The most notable scientist was Wernher von Braun, who was a member of the SS, Adolf Hitler's executive force that led the implementation of the "Final Solution," the genocide of the European Jews.<sup>2</sup> Von Braun also was the lead scientist in an underground slave labor facility where he designed the rockets that were used to decimate England. The purpose of Operation Paperclip was to gain a military advantage over the Soviet Union, who relocated more than 2,200 German scientists in response. The operation was a success, as it was von Braun who designed the rockets that put America on the moon. Despite their roles in Nazi war crimes and human rights violations, seemingly none of the scientists were ever held accountable for their actions.

The United States government excused known war criminals in order to get ahead in fields of science, war, and defense. Yet these men apparently committed no further crimes after their relocation to the U.S. It could be said that the former Nazis made up for their pasts by providing groundbreaking developments in the scientific fields. If they had been imprisoned, it would have been detrimental to scientific progress, and it might have cost the United States the edge in the Cold War.

Critics of Operation Paperclip claim that technological progress is no excuse for letting crime go unpunished, no matter the consequence. Even if the beneficial consequences could have outweighed the harm done, they assert that the circumstances of the Cold War were not dire enough to ignore the atrocities committed by the Nazis thanks to these scientists. The fact that scientists like von Braun could get away with horrible crimes solely on account of their intellectual talent disturbs many, especially those who have been punished for far less.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is it ever morally permissible to excuse moral evils for the sake of scientific or social progress?
2. Could the United States government have permissibly punished Nazi scientists while also requiring their continued work, and benefitting from that work?
3. Should scientists be held responsible for the way in which their research is used by other parties?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2014/02/15/275877755/the-secret-operation-to-bring-nazi-scientists-to-america>

<sup>2</sup> <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ss>

