"The Cape of Last Hope": The Postwar Flight of Nazi War Criminals through South Tyrol/Italy to South America

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The Postwar Flight of Nazi War Criminals through South Tyrol/Italy to South America

The Issue and the State of Research

Sixty years after the end of World War II, our knowledge about the escape of Nazi war criminals to South America is still sketchy. That chapter is among the few major gray areas of the Nazi past. That is in no way by chance. Contemporary history has only been occupied with this topic for a few years. Previously, it had only been writers and journalists who looked into the Nazi escape routes. As a rule, the accounts of secret organizations that allegedly smuggled Nazi criminals abroad were tinged with touches of fantasy. Up to this day, our image is strongly colored by this version of events. Since the publication of the book The Odessa File by Frederick Forsyth, the ODESSA organization was stylized into a myth. Both the novel and the film achieved worldwide success. The image emerged of a sworn secret organization that effectively protected its members, had immense financial resources, placed its people in influential positions, operated worldwide, was nearly perfectly shielded, worked with hierarchical gradations, and was run autocratically, with members who were resolute, ready for anything, and sworn to the objective of seizing power.

Rarely have representations of the Nazi escape routes actually followed the strict standards of the scholarly approach. Efforts toward objectivity and distanced impartiality have commonly been lacking.

The escape routes of Nazi war criminals were indeed shrouded in mystery, to put it mildly. But a single, global secret society by the name of “Odessa” (Organisation der ehemaligen SS-Angehörigen) did not plan them. The reality was far more complicated. After the collapse of the Third Reich and the beginning of the Cold War, an entire series of networks, institutions, and governments that had an interest in helping SS criminals came into being all of a sudden. Thus what came to light were several routes leading to escape.

Since the 1990s, the escape of Nazi war criminals to South America has once again increasingly become a topic for the media, law enforcement authorities, and historical research. There are a number of reasons for this interest. With the end of the Cold War in 1989, a layer of protection dropped away for war criminals who were still alive. They were investigated in Europe and South America and brought before the courts, accompanied by great interest in the media. Old inquiry files from the years immediately following the war were once again “discovered.” A characteristic example for Italy was an old file cabinet in the Palazzo Cesì, the headquarters of the military public prosecutor in Rome. The files on war crimes that had been collected by the Allies in the 1950s and early 1960s were still being stored there. The military prosecuting attorneys were supposed to have sent these out. But the documents remained in
the cabinet, which was locked and placed with its door facing the wall. Probably during the Cold War, the Italians wanted to be mindful of their NATO ally West Germany, and not dig up skeletons in the closet. Thus, the documents just sat and gathered dust undisturbed in the “cabinet of shame.” It was only in the middle of the 1990s that a judicial officer in search of documents for the proceedings against the SS officer Erich Priebke opened the cabinet. Nearly seven hundred files came to light once again, and this time they were sent to competent military prosecutors.4

The trials also captured considerable interest in the media, so much so that even American archives took this public interest into account. Beginning in 2001, for instance, the CIA’s files on individuals, the so-called “name files” on major Nazi figures and hundreds of war criminals in the National Archives in Washington, were released. Within that context, the role of American intelligence services in the recruiting of Nazi criminals in the early Cold War and the provision of assistance for their escape was made clear for the very first time.5 In the 1990s, an international commission of historians appointed by the Argentinian Foreign Ministry studied the flight of Nazi war criminals.6 The conclusions were published in 1999, and the result was a series of academically backed publications on the flight of war criminals. Since that time, the relevant Argentinian inventories in the National Archives in Buenos Aires have been made accessible for research purposes. Holger Meding, a professor at the University of Cologne and a pioneer in the exploration of the emigration of German speakers to South America after 1945,7 cites three reasons for the long-lasting lack of interest among contemporary historians in the topic of Nazi flight: the archives had not yet been made accessible until just a few years before, the thoughtless dealings of journalists and publicists with the stories of flight (often even including their fabrication), and the sensationalism around real or invented individual cases such as those of Josef Mengele, Adolf Eichmann, or Martin Bormann.8

Following the trail of the Nazi war criminals will slowly take on a factual basis through the new availability of sources and the resulting research. Myths of all-powerful secret organizations will correspondingly be seen in relative terms. Just a few years ago, that was only possible on a limited basis as a consequence of the closed archives and the basic political conditions. The archives that are now accessible offer a rich field for future research.

Within the framework of a research project at the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C., I dealt especially with one question: How was the flight of Nazi war criminals from Europe possible in practical terms? How did the concrete steps look, which groups, individuals, and institutions in Italy were involved in them? What were their motives and what was the form of their concrete support? This article is not the place to go into all of the structures, groups, and institutions that aided the escapees. Thus the aid from church authorities and their prominent escape helpers, such as Bishop Alois Hudal in Rome, will only be touched upon. In addition, this article cannot treat in detail the role of the U.S. intelligence services and their escape organizations, the “rat lines” in the early Cold War. Two elements will, however, be singled out: first, the flight over the Alps to Genoa or the special role of Italy and the border province of South Tyrol, and second, the escape assistance from the Argentinian government.
The Nazi Escape Hatch of South Tyrol

As a consequence of new research, more and more structures of the escape route can be recognized. Within that context, references to South Tyrol are emerging more and more often, and the impression is coalescing that, after 1945, the border province of South Tyrol played an important role as a "Nazi escape hatch."

The path to South America led first of all over the Brenner Pass from Austria to Italy and then, for the most part, from the port of Genoa to Argentina (cf. the map on the next page).

The escape routes were known. In the case of Josef Schwammberger, the commander of the Przemysl camp, the Innsbruck national police headquarters reported in 1954 that the wanted man may have "fled via Bolzano-Genoa to South America (Argentina), like a large percentage of former SS members who had become fugitives." The border on the high Alpine Brenner Pass — and with it, the local, political, and societal relations — achieved a special significance. By the end of the war, a large number of prominent war criminals from all over Europe had already fled to North Tyrol in Austria or South Tyrol in Italy, the last area of retreat in the "Alpine fortress." In South Tyrol in particular, many SS men and war criminals found virtually ideal conditions because South Tyrol was a sort of "no man's land" territorially, but also politically. The nearly perfect conditions in this no man's land turned South Tyrol into Nazi escape hatch number one. Indeed, there is no other region in Europe that could be compared with it.

After World War I, German-speaking South Tyrol was separated from the collapsed heap of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy in 1919 and annexed to Italy. During Mussolini's fascist rule in Italy, the German-speaking population in South Tyrol was repeatedly subjected to national repression. The German language and culture were made to disappear. Moreover, the South Tyroleans found themselves relegated to being now a small minority in Italy and the massive immigration of Italians into their province of South Tyrol (were German speakers were and are still a majority) started.

After Hitler came to power in 1933, all the hopes of many South Tyroleans were aimed at a national liberation by Nazi Germany. "South Tyrol can only be helped by a strong Germany" was the motto at the time. The year 1933 also saw the founding of the Völkische Kampf­ring Südtirols (VKS, or South Tyrolean National Front). The name was at the same time the program, which provided for a strictly hierarchical structure constructed according to the principle of the Führer and which, in its statements, was oriented toward the program of the Nazi Party in Germany. It centered on the "saturation of the South Tyrolean people with the national socialist worldview," as it stated. Up until the end of the Third Reich, many German-speaking South Tyroleans placed all their hopes on the "German card": the hope for national liberation by Hitler.

But as a result of Hitler's alliance with Mussolini, South Tyrol was not reincorporated "back into the Reich," as all German nationalists had hoped. Quite the opposite, Hitler sacrificed this ancient Germanic borderland ("urdeutsches Grenzland") of South Tyrol to his alliance with Italy and personal friendship with the Duce. Rome and Berlin quickly agreed to radically resolve the South Tyrol matter once and for all through resettlement. The South Tyroleans were scheduled to be resettled in a closed area of Germanic settlement in Eastern Europe. South Tyrol's German-speaking population was to make a decision — the so-called Option — either
to maintain Italian citizenship, remain in the district of Bolzano, and be further subjected to Italianization, or else to take on German citizenship and emigrate to the German Reich. Approximately 85 percent of those eligible for the Option signed the orange-red form to accept German citizenship and emigrate to the Third Reich. The decision was not always a demonstra-
tion of support for Nazism; rather, it was often a rejection of fascism's policy of national suppression. The position of those who opposed emigrating and often were also against Nazism, the so-called Dableiber, was made more difficult by being confronted with an uncertain future since fascist Italy refused to give any guarantees that these people could remain in South Tyrol. In reality, only 75,000 of the approximately 250,000 German- and Ladin-speaking South Tyroleans actually emigrated.

Because of the war, the emigration, in the end, completely ground to a halt. After the occupation of Italy in 1943, the small border region was annexed de facto to the Third Reich. But a further official annexation did not occur, and at the end of the war, the national status and the future of the province were, at first, unsettled.11

The "Alpine fortress" never existed as a fortress as such. But one form of the "Alpine fortress" that did exist was an area to which, as early as 1944, everything that was escaping from the approaching frontlines, or that Berlin or Vienna wanted to protect from Allied carpet-bombing, headed there. At the end of April 1945, the Third Reich - with the exception of Bohemia and Moravia and Schleswig-Holstein - had practically dwindled to the area of this Alpine fortress. Everything that had escaped from east and west, from north and south, was located in this area.12 It was as if a fishnet had been drawn together over the Reich. The flight to South Tyrol meant one last escape from the Allied armies, and within that context, the "no man's land" between Germany and Italy was especially desirable. One reason for this was the proximity of neutral Switzerland and, thus, a possible escape opportunity.

In the final months of the war, South Tyrol had specifically become not only the safe harbor for collaborators with Hitler's regime from throughout all of Europe, but also for the SS and the Nazi leadership who brought themselves and their relatives to safety. In April 1945, the families of prominent Nazi figures fled from the bombarded Obersalzberg near Berchtesgaden to the safe haven of South Tyrol. Among them was the family of Hitler's personal secretary, Martin Bormann, as well as Emmy Göring, the wife of Reich Marshall Hermann Göring, who lived for years in Merano. In fact, during the first months after the end of the war, the Americans managed to track down some high-ranking figures. The capture of Heinrich Himmler's wife and daughter in a mountain cabin twenty kilometers outside of Bolzano caused a sensation.13 This list could be continued at length.

At the end of the war, SS and Nazi leaders very often hid in the spa town of Meran in private homes, hospitals, sanatoria, farms, and mountain cabins, mostly under false names. The particular role of Meran as a Nazi stronghold - as an "El Dorado of collaborators" - was known in the years following the war. The newspapers at that time wrote, "Meran is known to all as a sort of El Dorado of big and small fish."14 Tens of thousands of people landed in Italy as the flotsam and jetsam of the war. "Alto Adige is among the regions that is most affected by the stream of illegals, and Meran in a particular way, where the mass of these people is concentrated in considerable numbers,"15 wrote the daily paper Alto Adige in 1947. At first, these people behaved extremely inconspicuously and lived off their personal savings that they had managed to salvage and bring along. After a certain time, however, their money ran out, and only few of them were able to find legal work. Many illegals, therefore, slipped more and more into the realm of criminality and made their living through prostitution, drug trafficking, money smuggling, human trafficking, and currency counterfeiting. "Many of these people have little to lose and think little of themselves and their reputation."16
In May 1947, Alto Adige wrote:

"Our newspaper has repeated over and over again ad nauseam that in the postwar period, Alto Adige has been the El Dorado of the Nazi fascists who at all times have found generous and warm-hearted hospitality and reception here. Although the situation has now settled down somewhat, the number of war criminals and collaborators with the fascists and the Germans who have gotten comfortable in Bolzano continues to be very high." 17

After 1945, the population in South Tyrol also remained very German-friendly. At the end of the war, stranded soldiers and refugees were gladly helped along, and for reasons of nationality, it would hardly have been the case that Germans would have been turned over to the Italian or Allied authorities. Furthermore, in South Tyrol, as in the rest of northern Italy, the Allied troops pulled out again as early as December 1945. South Tyrol was thus the first German-speaking region no longer under Allied occupation and control. Beginning in December 1945, the war criminals in the province hardly had to fear pursuit anymore. For that reason, many Nazis and SS members from Germany and Austria had remained in South Tyrol in 1945. In Austria, it was only in 1955 that the Allies left the country, and in Germany, it did not occur until decades later that at least the Russians left.

The question of which country South Tyrol would belong to was settled in 1946 in favor of Italy. But the citizenship of the South Tyroleans was still unresolved until 1948. At the end of the war, the Italian government basically considered all South Tyroleans who had opted for German citizenship ("Optants") to be foreigners. That affected not only the approximately 75,000 South Tyroleans who had received German citizenship and had left the country, but also those who had opted for Germany but had still remained in Italy. In other words, many South Tyroleans were "displaced persons" – foreign refugees without a passport in their own homeland and, thus, with only limited rights. Only in 1948, through the so-called "Optants' Decree," could the South Tyroleans reacquire their Italian citizenship. The South Tyroleans were, thus, one of the few German-speaking minorities in Europe to be spared the destiny of expulsion after 1945. With propagandistic undertones, the Italian Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi made reference to Italian tolerance at the end of 1945: "The only area that offers the Germans protection and asylum is Alto Adige." 18 The question of citizenship was an important reason why South Tyrol developed into an ideal escape hatch for Nazi war criminals on the run.

Paths over the Alps to Italy

In order to comprehend what went on at the time between Brenner, Rome, and Genoa, it is necessary to envision the chaos of the postwar years. Millions of refugees were on the move, trying to find their homeland, their families, or possibly what was left of their possessions, or else to seek a new existence anywhere else. Those who were fleeing were not just fugitive Nazis and war criminals, but also exiles from the eastern German regions, collaborators and anti-communists from the countries of Europe that were occupied by the Red Army, deserters, prisoners of war, slave laborers, displaced persons, soldiers, and survivors of extermination camps and concentration camps. Italy turned into a nerve center for the streams of refugees.
It became a way station for all those who wanted to leave the destruction in Europe and to emigrate to Latin America, the United States, Canada, or Australia. The various organizations of the Jewish underground also seized the chance to smuggle as many Holocaust survivors as possible through the British naval blockade to Palestine. In this case, the most favorable stretch also led through Italy, from which the risky voyage continued with organized ship transports. South Tyrol also played an important role as a stop along that escape route, as well.19

After the war, Italy was filled with refugees whose goal was to reach the Italian sea ports. Obstacles were especially present in Central Europe: the internal German borders with their controls and restrictions and the Alps, a barrier to Italy, that had to be overcome. But there, structures were available that had been established for the purpose of smuggling.

The border between Austria and South Tyrol had been under strict surveillance since 1918, yet in spite of that, it had always been porous. The system had worked itself out: experienced mountain guides knew the right paths and people. It was just that now, the smuggled wares were people. That human traffic had the advantage of the contraband transporting itself. In the economically difficult postwar years, numerous locals made a very good living as smugglers. In addition to saccharine, insulin, cocaine, tobacco, healthy livestock, currency, and gold, people were also brought over the “green border” as goods.
In the postwar years, South Tyrol was teeming with refugees and fugitives who had come over the mountains clandestinely: exiles, prisoners of war, and Jewish refugees, but also war criminals on their way to South America. The illegal escape routes over the "green border" were very professionally organized and made for good business. Not unlike the U.S.-Mexican border today, an American official in Rome, Vincent La Vista, aptly described the situation:

"In spite of all attempted controls, this method of entering Italy is so simple that it is merely a matter of walking across the border and, if apprehended, being turned back to try again the next day. The process is repeated until success is achieved."20

For example, in August 1947 alone, 3,139 illegal refugees were apprehended by the Italian security authorities at the international border and turned back to Austria.21 The number of those who were not picked up, that is, those who succeeded in crossing the border to Italy, was no doubt far higher. It was impossible to keep the frontiers along the main ridge of the Alps under constant surveillance. In addition, the local smugglers knew every rock and every tree, and it was also not unusual for them to have friends and family among the border guards and customs officials. If a crossing was not successful, then it could be tried again after a few days.

The first informal transit and assembly point soon crystallized in Innsbruck, where the Red Cross had a headquarters. From there, several possibilities were available: from the Alpine spa town of Nauders in North Tyrol, South Tyrol could be reached both through Switzerland and directly over the Reschen Pass, and from there along the Adige River past Meran to Bolzano. The common alternative was the route that led from Innsbruck over the Brenner Pass to Sterzing (Vipiteno) and then along the Isarco River to Bolzano. In Nauders, a spa town where unfamiliar faces did not attract all, many inhabitants were involved in such postwar transports. In addition to the Brenner Pass and Reschen Pass lines, the route through the Ziller Valley and Ahrn Valley to Bolzano was also frequented. The dangerous path over the high mountains was also chosen by the refugees. That route led over the Krimmler Tauern in the province of Salzburg to South Tyrol's Ahrn Valley.

The smugglers – traffickers in humans – made no distinction among those they helped: In addition to German emigrants whose destination was South America, their clientele many times consisted of Jews who, likewise illegally, were fleeing to Palestine. In a macabre fashion, the paths of fugitive Nazi criminals often crossed along the escape routes over the Alps with their former victims on the way to Palestine. Simon Wiesenthal wrote about this:

"I know a small inn near Meran where every now and then, illegal Nazi transports and illegal Jewish transports spent the night under the same roof without knowing about each other. The Jews were hidden on the second floor and instructed not to stir; and the Nazis on the ground floor were urgently warned not to let themselves be seen outside the establishment."22

For the most part, the smugglers were not acquainted with the people to be transported, and the names that the travelers provided were seldom genuine. A middleman brought illegal border crossers in small groups at a time to a mountain guide who was involved in everything. The guide would then lead them along a route with which he was familiar to South Tyrol, where they were usually met by another contact person. It was quite a safe route: The people of North
and South Tyrol knew each other, family groups and ties of friendship were not unusual, and the smuggling tradition had been a fixed routine for generations. There were also acquaintances with the customs officials on both sides of the border. Escape assistance turned into an important second occupation in the Alpine border region. The boom lasted from the autumn of 1945 to the summer of 1946. In 1949, the stream slowly abated.  

The director of the Catholic charity Caritas in Rome, Monsignor Karl Bayer, remarked on the flight of war criminals through South Tyrol:

“All these guys had informed each other at which villages at or near the Brenner Pass the crossing would be most favorable, which farmers were old Nazis or simply ready to help or else could be bought off. But in any case there were enough mountain guides – old hands from the smuggling business who took them over the border.”

All of this was routine. In this way, thousands of war criminals and SS men were sent on the route to Italy. But the escape over the mountains did not always come off smoothly. In April 1947, Dr. Gerhard Bast, SS Sturmbannführer and head of the Gestapo in Linz in Upper Austria, was murdered by a smuggler on the Austrian-Italian border at Brenner. In the autumn of 1946, Bast had already found work and lodging as a farmhand during his flight to South Tyrol.

The Role of the International Red Cross

Aside from making it over the border, the primary problem of all prospective emigrants – with the exception of those who belonged to the secret services and party bigwigs with access to fake identity papers – was the matter of documents. At the end of the war, there were hundreds of thousands of refugees, deportees, slave laborers, prisoners, and POWs without documents. Even in the event that someone could make it past all of the control points without notice, a recognized proof of identity that entitled its bearer to leave the country was necessary for the visa to a South American country. Travel documents of that sort, on the other hand, were to be received from the occupation forces in Germany or Austria only after political screening and after having run the bureaucratic hurdles, a process which the prospective emigrants wanted to avoid. A few alternatives were available: Alleged or actual ethnic Germans could try to mix in among the groups of refugees – the “displaced persons” – of their native country. If they were successful, they enjoyed the protection of the United Nations and especially of the International Red Cross, which issued them identity cards. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) had been issuing such travel documents since February 1945. Beginning in 1946, these travel papers were recognized by the United Nations as substitute documents. With them, the refugees could emigrate to Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, Bolivia, and North America. The papers from this organization, of which 25,000 copies had already been issued by mid-1947 and approximately 70,000 copies by the end of 1948, were “to be issued to all persons who had been compelled by the war to leave their country of residence and could not obtain any passport.” People with no passport with unresolved nationality had the right to refugee identification from the International Red Cross. A valid Red Cross passport was the precondition both for emigration out of Italy and for the voyage to South America. The passports were acquired in Italy for the most part from the representatives of the Red Cross in Rome or Genoa.
Bolzano, May 1945:Red Cross headquarters were guarded by a GI and a young German Waffen-SS soldier. People with no passport with unresolved nationality had the right to refugee identification from the International Red Cross. A valid Red Cross passport was the precondition both for emigration out of Italy and for the voyage to South America. Source: Museo Storico Italiano della Guerra di Rovereto.

The reason why the identification from the Red Cross was so desirable becomes immediately clear once such a passport is examined. It bears the printed inscription, "The present document has been established at the request of the bearer and because he has stated that he possesses no regular or provisional passport and that he is unable to procure one." The document merely certifies:

"The undersigned delegate of the International Committee of the Red Cross certifies having issued this document to the bearer to enable him to justify his presence at his present place of residence and to facilitate his immediate or subsequent return to his country of origin or his emigration. He testifies having registered the following declarations by the bearer concerning his identity:"

Genuine or false names could be registered at one's own discretion. Even more striking, since the photographs were affixed only with paste and without any imprint, they could easily be changed. According to La Vista, the greatest beneficiaries of this black market in passports were a group of German Nazis who only came through South Tyrol into Italy in order to
receive fictitious identity papers and visas there. They then immediately left Italy via the ports of Genoa and Barcelona in the direction of South America. A long-time employee of the ICRC, Gertrude Dupuis, declared that during this time, the International Red Cross in Rome issued at least five hundred passes per day. In that context, controls fell by the wayside. With regard to these ICRC passports, La Vista emphasized:

"It is to be noted that although these International Red Cross passports are recognized as perfectly valid identity documents, they in fact identify nothing. The name appearing on the passport is invariably fictitious and often is one of several aliases used by the person whose picture it bears [...] It is also to be noted that the picture is affixed to the passport with ordinary paste. No seal is impressed through the picture or anywhere else on the passport, making the practice, which is in common usage in Italy, of transferring or changing pictures, a very simple one. This is likewise true with the thumb print which is affixed. The thumb print is never clearly made nor legible [...] thus making a clarification count impossible."  

Any possibility for inspection and control of the ICRC's travel documents was systematically made impossible at the time, since the passport applications traveled immediately to the head office of the Red Cross in Geneva. There they remained archived under lock and key:

"Unfortunately, the International Red Cross makes it a practice to send all its records to their headquarters in Geneva, as soon as practical after each case is closed here, thus making it impossible for the investigation to continue along those lines here. It is the opinion of this writer, however, that an examination of the records in Geneva of all passports issued by the International Red Cross would reveal startling and unbelievable facts."

The archives of the ICRC in Geneva were only opened forty years after these events. La Vista turned out to be right: The documents revealed the involvement of the ICRC in the organizing of the escape of war criminals and members of the SS.

Refugee Assistance from the Vatican

National aid committees of the Vatican assisted in the obtaining of Red Cross passports and visas for South American countries. Even during the war, Pope Pius XII assigned the responsibility for the care of prisoners and refugees to the Papal Aid Commission (the Pontificia Commissione Assistenza, or PCA). This commission in Rome confirmed the identity of refugees in a letter of recommendation to the Red Cross. Without any further inspection, the "stateless person" was then issued a passport by the Red Cross. The Foreigner's Department (Sezione Stranieri) of the PCA set up approximately twenty subcommittees in order to manage the wave of refugees from Central and Eastern Europe. The head of the Austrian department, Assistenza Austriaca, was the Graz native Alois Hudal, who had extremely close contacts to the Nazis from the Austrian province of Styria. The bishop was an especially prominent helper for Nazi escapees. His motive was a fanatical anti-communism matching that of the Nazis.
Hudal was born in 1885, studied theology in Graz, and became a professor of Old Testament there beginning in 1919. In 1923, Hudal was appointed rector of the German-speaking national church in Rome, Santa Maria dell'Anima. The year 1937 saw the publication of Hudal's book, *The Fundamental Principles of National Socialism*, which he sent to Hitler with the dedication, "To the Siegfried of German greatness." Hudal, who was small of stature, dreamed of a "Christian national socialism." After the Austrian *Anschluss* in 1938, the bishop entered into negotiations with the Nazi rulers "for religious peace in the land." He always viewed himself as a "bridge builder" between the Nazis and the Catholic Church. After the collapse of the Third Reich, Hudal did not change his views, and because of his escape assistance and his open political engagement, he finally became *persona non grata* within the Catholic Church's leadership after 1945.

Within the framework of escape assistance, Hudal maintained close contact after 1945 with the bishop of Bressanone, Johannes Geisler, whose closest colleagues initially also followed Hudal's political line, in which anti-communism and German nationalism were the strong, unifying bond. Nazi refugees could count on safe shelters from Brenner to Rome, mostly in monasteries. Colonel Hans-Ulrich Rudel, who himself made it to Buenos Aires via the church routes, was to later write the oft-quoted lines in his memoirs:

"Otherwise, you may stand by Catholicism as you will. Whatever had been saved in the valuable substance of our people, often having been saved from certain death, during those years by the Church, especially by individual, humanely outstanding personages within the church, shall rightfully never be forgotten!"

The case of the former Gestapo commander in Linz (Austria), Gerhard Bast, may serve as an example. In March 1947, he made an application for a passport from the Red Cross. For that purpose, he left his hiding place in South Tyrol and went to Rome for a few days. From the PCA on *via Piave*, he also received the much sought-after letter of recommendation to the Red Cross. Equipped with this recommendation, he made an application two days later, on 5 March 1947, for a passport from the Red Cross. His name was now Franz Geyer, he had been born on 23 January 1911 in Krško near Ljubljana, he was a merchant, and was stateless. As his residence, Bast listed his address in South Tyrol as *Valdaora di sotto 5* (Bolzano), that is, house number 5 in the village known in German as Olang. He obviously felt very safe with his escape helpers, and he, indeed, had every reason to feel so. All that was necessary for his new identity was a letter of a few lines with the letterhead and signature of the PCA. Bishop Hudal could easily obtain ICRC passports and, thus, provide the Nazi refugees with these greatly desired papers. According to Gertrude Dupuis, ICRC delegate in Rome, "it was relatively easy for [Hudal] to achieve this; you mustn't forget, he was a bishop [...] How could we go against the word of a priest?"
Networks of Former SS Members

In South Tyrol, there were a large number of underground relief organizations that especially took care of escaped prisoners of war, providing them with fake papers and safe lodgings. With a document with a new name and a new origin, the Nazi refugees could apply for a passport from the Red Cross in Genoa or Rome. The path to South America was then free.

Especially striking is the flight of a group of people who had been close acquaintances since the clandestine times in Austria and had maintained contacts after South Tyrol. It consisted of a group of high-ranking SS members from the Austrian province of North Tyrol. They had all belonged to the hard core of the Austrian Nazi movement and continued their close solidarity after 1945. "Those named consisted without exception of members of the SS, functionaries of the former Nazi Party, or participants in pogroms against the Jews."36 This is what the Federal Police Headquarters in Innsbruck reported to the Public Prosecutor's Office in January 1948 about "fugitive Nazis in South Tyrol."

Fritz Lantschner, Erwin Fleiss, and Franz Sterzinger were all in the illegal administrative district leadership (Gauleitung) in North Tyrol; the members of the North Tyrol police and SS, Franz Rubatscher and Fridolin Guth, were at minimum acquaintances of Fritz Lantschner. As the right-hand man of the North Tyrol Gauleiter, Lantschner was no doubt the leader of the fugitives. Less surprisingly, the Innsbruck Federal Police Headquarters reported to the Innsbruck District Court in 1947 that it "[...] is hereby informed that according to investigations that have been made, the engineer Fritz Lantschner is continuing to stay in South Tyrol. The place of residence itself is not known."37 The Austrian authorities consistently knew about the escape and the residency of war criminals and Nazi perpetrators.

"It has been known to the court for a long time that the persons chiefly responsible for the severe excesses of November 9, 1938, first and foremost the former SS General [Johann] Feil, have escaped their responsibility through their flight to South America."38

The fact that Argentina served as a popular country of flight for former Nazis was also known to the Austrian authorities. In not one single case did they request the extradition of a war criminal.

SS Oberführer Johann Feil had participated in the pogrom against the Jews in 1938 in Innsbruck and likewise was able to head for Argentina via Bolzano and Genoa. According to information available from the Argentinian immigration authorities, Franz Rubatscher was the first of the North Tyrolean group to reach Argentina. He entered Argentina by land from Uruguay in October 1947. SS Hauptsturmführer Rubatscher could have served as the contact person for the others; for instance, upon his entry in October 1948, the SS private Guth explicitly listed "Franz Rubatscher [sic] – Hotel San Carlos de Bariloche" as a reference.39

In addition to the North Tyrolean and South Tyrolean Nazis, many Styrians in particular were involved in the organizations responsible for escape to Argentina. Among them was Siegfried Uiberreither, Gauleiter of Styria. On 7 May 1945 – that is, one day before the official end of the war – he fled from Graz after having handed over his official duties to his highest-ranking official, Gauhauptmann Armin Dadieu.40 Uiberreither, who was wanted in Austria and Yugoslavia for war crimes, took off for Buenos Aires in 1947 after having escaped from
an American prison camp. Even though Argentinian historians accept the flight of Uiberreither as definite, many questions on the destiny of the Gauleiter after 1945 remain open.41 The Uiberreither case will, no doubt, be resolved through research in coming years. In any case, Gauhauptmann Dadieu also ended up in the Argentinian camouflage company CAPRI. He had been Uiberreither’s right-hand man in Styria42 and had fled to Argentina via South Tyrol in 1948. After investigations by the state police, Dadieu remained in Graz without being recognized until 1948, and in March of that year, he fled from Nauders in North Tyrol to Meran.43 In so doing, Dadieu received active support from his compatriot, Bishop Hudal, and began a new existence in Argentina in the army under the name of Armin Pelkhofer. The deputy provincial governor (Landesstatthalter) and Gauhauptmann of Styria, at the same time the highest-ranking SS officer in Styria, and, by his own account, the head of the Chemical Division of the Research and Development Department of the Argentinian Military Factories, Armin Dadieu, returned to Germany after having been granted amnesty in 1958, where he held high positions in institutions for space travel research.44 Another refugee from Styria was the internationally respected hydrologist and SS officer Armin Schoklitsch, director of the Technical University in Graz from 1941 to 1945. Schoklitsch found a new home at the University of Tucumán, where he enjoyed recognition as a professor emeritus. At CAPRI, he was the direct superior of Adolf Eichmann.45 In spite of his problematic past during the Nazi period, his scientific works apparently were above any suspicion, so much so that in 1999, the Technical University in Graz organized an international symposium in his honor.46

The North Tyrolean SS men had especially good connections with South Tyrol; consequently, the path over the Alps to the Italian seaports was a smooth one. Social networks were apparently crucial in the initial phase of the flight. North Tyrolean and South Tyrolean Nazis smoothed the way for other fellow travelers from all over Europe on the road to Genoa. The Styrian circle of comrades apparently arranged the contact to the important escape assistant, Bishop Alois Hudal in Rome. Hudal, in turn, made referrals to contact people in the Vatican and the Red Cross. The SS men from Styria and North Tyrol joined other fellow travelers, and in the end, the exchange of information promoted close contacts with the Argentinians. Both the Styrian and North Tyrolean circles had important contacts within the Argentinian authorities. In the end, the gears of the mechanism engaged. Against the background of the early Cold War, U.S. intelligence services likewise helped in the recruiting and flight of former SS men. These escape networks functioned extremely well in the period 1948–1949.

South Tyrolean war criminals and SS officers succeeded in fleeing relatively easily. As South Tyrolean "Optants," they were regarded as stateless and, therefore, had the right to a passport from the Red Cross. In these particular cases, they often kept their real names. Their comrades from Germany proper and Austria were able to pass themselves off as ethnic Germans who had been expelled from their homelands, such as South Tyrolean "Optants," and were likewise able to take advantage of this possibility. For that solution, an identity card from a South Tyrolean municipality was sufficient. Many war criminals assumed the identity of an ethnic German from outside Germany or Austria, since that condition, therefore, made them stateless. Only their status as stateless authorized them to receive the much sought-after passport from the International Red Cross. Their escape path over the Brenner Pass automatically led them to South Tyrol.

At some point, South Tyrolean SS members and those who helped them to escape no doubt arrived at the natural idea of the "South Tyrolean identity card." Several groups and institutions
initially worked in a very improvised and haphazard fashion independently of one another, but increasingly began to work together on a more professional and coordinated basis. Finally, the individual groups worked as efficiently as cogs in a wheel, and by around 1948, they were able to create structures that were accustomed to working together. Right at the end of the war, social networks were at first apparently crucial; initially through personal friendships and camaraderie and then by word of mouth, an expanding escape mechanism that interacted among its several components slowly developed. After 1945, solidarity among the Nazis existed out of necessity: SS men mutually helped each other with the escape into the underground or abroad, and there was also something akin to camaraderie in the internment camps.47

It was known where there were safe houses, where someone could hide for some time, where civilian clothes could be obtained. In that regard, local friends, Church circles, and later the U. S. secret services were helpful. In South Tyrol, the loose but apparently quite effective escape assistance of former SS men took care of their comrades from Germany. SS men and Wehrmacht officers were smuggled over the “green border” and lodged in safe houses in South Tyrol. In that context, new documents were also organized for the comrades, since forged identity papers could be obtained without problem from the municipalities. With respect to the connection of Styrian Nazi refugees, another nearly perfect solution resulted with the help of the network of the Styrian bishop Hudal in Rome: With South Tyrolean identification papers, the refugees could identify themselves with a new identity as “stateless.” They thus received passports from the Red Cross in Rome or Genoa and could, therefore, emigrate to South America. The South Tyrolean municipalities – among them, Tramin in particular – issued the SS men identity cards with fake names. On top of that, numerous counterfeiting groups produced fake personal documents for money.48

Argentinian Immigration Policy

Argentina went on to become the preferred refuge of Nazi criminals with the blessing from “above” and, therefore, quickly became the most desired country in South America to which to emigrate. Between 1945 and 1955, up to 400,000 people emigrated from Europe to Latin America.49 Thus far, the total number of suspected war criminals in Argentina from all of Europe has been estimated at 40,000 to 50,000.50 In the first months after the war, travel was forbidden in practical terms for all Germans and Austrians. After 1946, members of the Nazi Party and the SS were only allowed to leave the country in exceptional cases. Entering Argentina with a fake identity and false citizenship was illegal, yet that is precisely how many Germans and Austrian entered the country. Expelled ethnic Germans – for instance, from Eastern Europe, the Balkans, or South Tyrol – were registered by the Argentinian authorities according to the country of their birth. An ethnic German immigrant who was born in Cluj-Napoca, Rumania, was automatically registered as a Rumanian, an ethnic German refugee from Ljubljana was Yugoslavian, a German-speaking South Tyrolean born in Bolzano was automatically Italian. For that reason, precise statistical figures for the German-speaking emigration to Argentina are difficult to determine.51 According to official sources, 66,327 people who were born in Germany emigrated to Argentina between 1945 and 1955. During the same period, 51,398 Germans left the Perón Republic. Therefore, 14,929 settlers permanently remained in Argentina.52 Very precise information is available for the number of Austrians who emigrated.
For the period from 1947 to 1955, the Argentinian immigration authorities registered 13,895 immigrants who had been born in Austria. A total of 9,710 left Argentina several years later, leaving a difference of 4,185 as permanent settlers.  

The Argentinian commission of historians, CEANA, reconstructed 180 detailed biographies of prominent Nazi war criminals who had escaped to Argentina from Austria, Germany, Belgium, France, and Yugoslavia. But the war criminals and SS men listed by CEANA were only the tip of the iceberg. Hungarian, Italian, or Ukrainian criminals were not even taken into consideration for the list. The high number of "simple" members of the Wehrmacht and SS soldiers who wanted to build a new future in Argentina has to date not yet been numerically recorded.

The Argentinian head of state, Juan Domingo Perón, promoted the immigration of experts from war-torn Europe with all possible means. Years later, when Spanish journalists asked the former and future Argentinian president about the recruiting of qualified German employees after 1945, Perón remembered with satisfaction this transfer that was to lead his country technologically to the level of an industrial nation. Argentina bore only the travel costs, while Germany had invested millions of marks in the education of these scientists and technicians. Before the defeat of the Axis Powers, the Argentinian side had already prepared itself for the recruiting of interested, qualified employees from Germany to Buenos Aires. There was a tradition of cooperation with German scholars at the Río de la Plata; top German technology enjoyed admiration everywhere. The Argentinian academic world was most strongly influenced and pervaded by the Germans. The good experiences with them spurred Perón to recruit top German labor in competition with the victorious powers of the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France. The commitments into which Argentina entered on an international basis forbade the admission of persons from the former Axis Powers without the approval of the Allies after a political examination. But like the Americans with their secret projects "Overcast" and "Paperclip," Perón also disregarded these control regulations; the legal principle of adhering to a treaty was subordinate in each case to the political principle of reasons of state.

Opportunities were distributed most unevenly. With the enlisting of top German labor, the Allied occupation forces in Germany and Austria had an entire arsenal of possibilities available, from offers that were scientifically and financially attractive to massive threats of bans from the profession and even worse. With regard to the crème de la crème of the world of German thought, Argentina had to yield to the victors, who fully swept it up. The La Plata republic thus had to think about the middle level of experts, in particular those who, after their investigation by the de-Nazification tribunals (Spruchkammer) in Germany, had been banned from their professions, as well as those who had no possibility for work because of the conditions of the war or the occupation.

Argentinian interests got word out quickly to the groups that were affected, so an abundance of detailed applications soon reached its delegations in Europe, even being received directly by the Foreign Ministry in Buenos Aires. Through these underground rumors as well as press reports that had been issued, overseas recruiters soon had a wide variety of choices, even to the point of turning down applicants. The main focus of the Argentinian interest was qualified natural scientists and experts from the armaments industry. Wilfred von Oven, formerly Joseph Goebbels' personal press officer, recognized just how many other former SS men had a great opportunity for a new beginning with Perón's policy.
“Perón is now governing (since 1946). He wants to have as many competent immigrants as possible and is therefore contributing to the sale of the German intelligentsia whose beneficiaries were all Allies, to which he in the end belongs, even if his entry into the war only took place at the last possible moment […] What matters to him – as to the USA – is primarily more the abilities and knowledge of those willing to emigrate than their party membership. An important German immigrant can easily be a so-called ‘Nazi’ or even a ‘war criminal.’ That does not play any role.”

Within the framework of its immigration policy, Argentina attempted once again to smooth the way after 1945, specifically for those Germans who were interested. Perón had given the corresponding instructions to his embassies and consulates in Europe. Incomplete and even missing documents were forgiven in certain cases, and the administrative expense was kept to a minimum. Moreover, Perón created special institutions for political refugees in Italy which, in cooperation with local authorities, the Catholic Church, and the Red Cross, conducted people at risk to Argentina. The Argentinian Consulate General in Genoa was of central importance, and it maintained close contacts with the Catholic Church and the Red Cross. In addition to that, the South Tyrolean city of Meran was an important command post of the Argentinian immigration authorities. Perón knew this border region between Italy and the German Reich firsthand, since in 1939–1940 he had participated in a training course for Argentinian officers by the Italian Army and had stayed in Meran for several months. A functioning system soon began to operate: the Catholic Church provided lodging and coordination, the Red Cross issued the documentation, and the Argentinian Consulate General in Genoa, in coordination with the immigration authorities in Buenos Aires, granted the visas and, in many cases, also took care of the sea passage.

A New Beginning in Argentina

In contrast to assertions that are often made, the predominant majority of the new arrivals that disembarked from the Atlantic steamers in the port of Buenos Aires were in no way welcomed with open arms. The assistance of the German-Argentinian community was limited by its capacity that had dwindled as a result of the war, and the assistance of the Argentinian state was concentrated upon a tightly defined group of people. Furthermore, most of the immigrants began their new life with debts and had to pay back in installments the cost of their crossing that had been advanced to them. To make things more difficult, added to the lack of means was, as a rule, the lack of familiarity with the language and the culture of the new homeland. On the other hand, the majority of them brought an asset along with them that would prove to be of considerable value in the long run: a solid education. Emigrants of the postwar period represented a different class of quality in comparison with the immigrants of the 1920s. They were on average better professionally trained, had a higher level of education, and the state of their technical knowledge predestined them for an abundance of careers. Furthermore, their wartime experiences in many cases provided them with the necessary toughness for the new economic beginning and lowered any overly high expectations.

Many newcomers climbed the career ladder faster than their established colleagues; they had soon penetrated the managerial levels of companies or had founded their own. Many
were of the same opinion as the SS businessman and head of the secret operation “Bernhard,” Friedrich Schwend, who had emigrated to Argentina as early as 1946. In 1959, he wrote to his brother-in-law in Genoa:

“Life here is indeed much easier. It’s a shame that you didn’t high tail it over here right after the end of the war. After a period of struggle of about two years, all of the doctors who came from Europe have made out very, very well. I’m thinking about our family doctor, for example, a German. Before, he didn’t have two coppers to rub together. Now he’s built a luxury villa, his children are at the university, etc.”

The chance to become successful in Argentina with knowledge that had been gained in Germany could hardly escape notice. Tiny companies were founded with the smallest amounts of capital that had been saved up during the first years of work in Argentina, companies that from time to time went into production in a garage. Success was not always certain for a competent person. But the number of successful people who were able to attain modest prosperity was large. Even big German concerns like Siemens, which had a significant position in Argentina before the war, had to reestablish their branches after 1945 as a result of the world conflict. As a rule, though, they did not have to start from zero, because financial transactions had been carried out before 1945 and some guaranteed reserves could be drawn upon. The personnel departments of German branches in Argentina gave preference in hiring to new German and Austrian immigrants, several of whom moved up to leading positions. In that regard, Simon Wiesenthal noted bitterly that in Argentina, Siemens, Krupp, and Volkswagen had been “absolute nests of Nazis.”

But ideological cliques cannot always be assumed in this context – although they most certainly also existed – since there were also purely practical reasons for such a personnel policy: the new arrivals spoke perfect German and, in the meantime, good Spanish; they were technically up-to-date; they often had good education; and they were flexible, highly motivated, and willing to work.

Even though the communities demonstrably also sustained the contacts between incriminated former SS and Wehrmacht members, mutually helped each other, and protected themselves, there was no tightly organized, sworn network. As long as Perón held his protective hand over the Nazi criminals, such a network was actually not even necessary. In July 1949, the dictator even decreed a general amnesty for foreigners who had illegally immigrated to Argentina. Questions about the past were hardly asked. Even a certain Otto Pape showed up at the immigration authorities and stated that until the end of the war, he had found shelter in the German embassy in Rome. So Otto Pape turned back into Erich Priebke – completely legally.

Priebke had settled in one of the many German immigrant colonies in Argentina which had metamorphosed into a refuge for fugitive Nazis: He selected San Carlos de Bariloche, an idyllic ski town in the Andes where several SS members had already settled and where Josef Mengele often came to visit. The number of German-speaking settlers there was already quite large before 1945; the contacts in the old homeland worked.

Priebke led a peaceful existence there; he opened up a Viennese delicatessen and even became president of the German-Argentinian Cultural Association. He often traveled around the world, even to his old war station of South Tyrol, and he regularly renewed his passport at the German embassy in Buenos Aires.
Former SS-Hauptsturmführer Erich Priebke, who lived in South Tyrol until 1948, also applied for a passport from the Red Cross before he left for Argentina. His name now: Otto Pape. Source: Gerald Steinacher.
Things were just fine until he encountered an American television team in 1994 that was actually searching for Reinhard Kops. Priebke openly described his participation in the massacre in the Ardeatine Caves near Rome in 1944 and himself personally shooting two Italians. The interview with Priebke unleashed an outcry of indignation throughout the world. An Italian extradition request followed immediately, and the procedure took place in November 1995. On 7 March 1998, an Italian military court sentenced him to house arrest for life.

In a part of the world in which the Third Reich's worst murderers of Jews came together, many Germans believed the murder of millions to be a nasty Allied – or Jewish – fabrication. That also explains why so many Nazi criminals who fled found protection and shelter among their (sometimes even respectable) compatriots. Simon Wiesenthal called Argentina the "cape of last hope," and so it was in every way: The Nazi criminals were able to hope for final refuge there, and the German settlers asserted with all their hope and might that the Nazis had not been criminals.62

Notes

1 The author would like to thank Dr. Hans Heiss of Bolzano and Prof. Günter Bischof of New Orleans for their important suggestions and feedback to improve this essay, and Phil Isenburg for the translation into English.
9 Ernst Klee, Was sie taten – was sie wurden: Ärzte, Juristen und andere Beteiligte am Kranken- und Judenmord (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1986), 229.
14 "L'Eldorado dei collaborazionisti," Alto Adige, 22 May 1947, p. 3.
16 Ibid.
17 "Falso nome e falsi documenti di un 'nazi' collaborazionista," Alto Adige, 30 May 1947, p. 2.


23 Meding, _Flucht vor Nürnberg?_, 73.


27 Meding, _Flucht vor Nürnberg?_, 74.


29 Sereny, _Am Abgrund_, 375.


31 Ibid., p. 2.


35 Quoted in Shraga Elam, _Hitlers Fälscher_: Wie jüdische, amerikanische und Schweizer Agenten der SS beim Falschgeldwaschen halfen (Vienna: Ueberreuter, 2000), 171.

36 Bericht der Bundespolizeidirektion Innsbruck an die Staatsanwaltschaft Innsbruck vom 19. Jänner 1948, Tituler Landesarchiv (TLA), Bestand Landesgericht, Akt 10 Vr 2138/47 “Franz Rubitscher.”

37 Bundespolizeidirektion Innsbruck an das Landesgericht Innsbruck vom 11. März 1947, TLA, Bestand Landesgericht, Akt 10 Vr 924/47 “Fritz Lantschner.”

38 Gesuch um Einbeziehung in die Weihachtsamneste 1959 des Herrn Hans Aichinger, an den österreichischen Bundespräsidenten, 12. November 1959, TLA, Bestand Landesgericht, Akt 10 Vr 104/46 “Erwin Fleiss u. a.”


42 Karner, _Steiermark_, 469.


44 Ibid., 114.


46 Goñi, _Operazione Odessa_, 358ff.


48 “Una banda di falsari presente all’appuntamento. Il sequestro di valuta italiana e straniera per un ingente valore nonché della attrezzatura per la compilazione di carte d’identità,” _Alto Adige_ 1 May 1947, p. 2.

49 Giovanni Maria Pace, _La via dei demoni. La fuga in Sudamerica dei criminali nazisti: secreti, complicite, silenzi_ (Milano 2000), 4.

50 Holger Meding, "La emigración a la República Argentina de los Nacional-socialistas buscados. Una aproximación cuantitativa," _Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos_ 43 (1999): 241–259; also see the article by Meding in the

51 Holger M. Meding, La ruta de los nazis en tiempos de Perón (Buenos Aires: Emece, 2000), 194.
52 Ibid., 195.
54 Meding, Flucht vor Nürnberg?, 87–89.
55 Wilfred von Oven, Ein "Nazi" in Argentinien (Duisburg: VAWS, 1999), 53.
56 See Paolo Valente, Porto di Mare, Frammenti dell’anima multiculturale di una piccola città europea, volume 3, Italiani (e molti altri) a Merano tra esodi, deportazioni e guerre (1934–1953) (Trento: Temi, 2005).
57 Letter from Friedrich Schwend to Johann Neuhold, 2 October 1959, Fritz-Bauer-Institut, Frankfurt am Main, copy of the Schwend-Archivs, file II/3.
58 Quoted in Meding, Flucht vor Nürnberg?, 226.
59 Ibid.
60 Karl Ilg, Pioniere in Argentinien, Chile, Paraguay und Venezuela: Durch Bergwelt, Urwald und Steppe erwanderte Volkskunde der deutsdsprachigen Siedler (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 1976), 106ff.
62 Wiesenthal, Recht, nicht Rache, 135.