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Houston, We Have a Problem

By DAVID HOLLOWAY

Many books have been published to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the 1969 landing of the first men on the [moon](#). Wayne Biddle's "Dark Side of the Moon" is not celebratory. As the title suggests, it is a deeply skeptical account of the early life and career of Wernher von Braun,

who played a key role in the German rocket program before and during World War II. Von Braun was brought to America in 1945 and was later the leader in developing the Saturn V booster rocket that launched the Apollo 11 mission into space. A [NASA](#) Web site describes him as "without doubt, the greatest rocket scientist in history."

Born in 1912, von Braun came from a conservative Junker family. As a student in Berlin, he fell in with a rather louche group of rocket enthusiasts. In the 1930s, patronage came from the army, which set up a special rocket base on the Baltic Sea, at Peenemünde, where von Braun worked from 1937 until 1945. It was there that he helped to build the A-4 (V-2) missile. Six thousand of these missiles were produced, and about 3,000 were launched against London and Antwerp in the last year of World War II.

After the war, von Braun claimed that his main interest had been in [space flight](#) all along. His work for the German Army had been an unfortunate necessity because that was where resources could be obtained, and, besides, it was dangerous to resist the Nazi state.

Biddle will have none of this. In his view, von Braun was very far from being an innocent visionary who took Nazi money in order to pursue his dream. He was a member of the Nazi Party and the SS, and he knew that he was developing weapons at Peenemünde and that the weapons were manufactured by slave labor. He had enough contact with Nazi leaders to understand quite clearly what kind of regime it was, and he helped to persuade [Hitler](#) to give top priority to the V-2. The fact that the V-2 program was futile from a military point of view does not absolve von Braun of responsibility for what he did.

Biddle is particularly critical of the new persona von Braun forged for himself after the war, precisely because it all too conveniently pushed to one side the issue of responsibility. Von Braun showed no remorse, not even the specious remorse Biddle ascribes to Albert Speer, Hitler's minister for armaments.

In Biddle's view, von Braun escaped from the sphere of moral judgment with the help of the American authorities, who wanted to employ him in the missile and space programs. Biddle's aim is to make him answerable, if only posthumously, for what he did. And he has a more general point to make, too: scientists and engineers, by claiming to be "apolitical," often escape being held to account for what they help to

DARK SIDE OF THE MOON

Wernher von Braun, the Third Reich, and the Space Race

By Wayne Biddle

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produce. In other words, von Braun is an egregious example of a more general phenomenon.

This is a passionate book that raises important moral questions, but it hints at more than it accomplishes. Biddle, who won a [Pulitzer Prize](#) for his coverage of the antimissile program, focuses on the social and political context in Germany in order to illuminate the choices von Braun made. But he says very little about the implications of his analysis for the space race he mentions in his title. Did von Braun's experience in Nazi Germany inscribe itself in some way onto the American program, or is his story an example of the United States as the country of second chances? Citing [Thomas Mann](#), Biddle argues that German rocketry was a form of technological Romanticism with strong cultural connections to right-wing politics. The United States, like the Soviet Union, built on what Germany had done. Did it inherit more than the technology? Biddle points to these troubling questions but hardly addresses them.

David Holloway teaches history and political science at Stanford University.