

## HOW SOUTH AMERICA BECAME A NAZI HAVEN

### HOW AND WHY SOUTH AMERICA BECAME A SAFE HAVEN FOR THOUSANDS OF FORMER NAZI PARTY MEMBERS AND SS OFFICERS

AFTER WW2

**487**



*Nazi rally in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1938. Photo credit: Rare Historical Photos*



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Lightning flashed across the Argentine skies as Ricardo Klement stepped off a bus after finishing his shift as an assembly line foreman at a Mercedes-Benz automotive plant. As he walked to his small brick house in a middle-class Buenos Aires suburb on May 11, 1960, he passed by a chauffeur and two men working under the open hood of a black Buick limousine. Suddenly, Klement was grabbed by the men and hauled kicking and screaming into the back seat of the vehicle, which sped off into the night.



*Adolf Eichmann*

Everyone involved in the abduction was playing a high-stakes game of deception. Klement was Adolf Eichmann, the notorious Nazi SS lieutenant colonel who masterminded the transport of European Jews to concentration camps, and the men with the limousine were Israeli secret service agents.

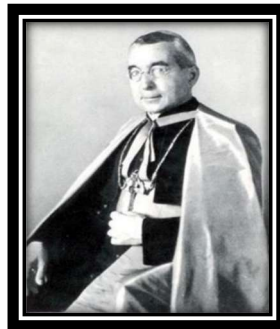
Eichmann was hardly alone among Nazis in finding refuge in South America after the fall of the Third Reich.

According to a 2012 article in the Daily Mail, German prosecutors who examined secret files from Brazil and Chile discovered that as many as **9,000 Nazi officers and collaborators from other countries escaped from Europe to find sanctuary in South American countries**. Brazil took in between 1,500 and 2,000 Nazi war criminals, while between 500 and 1,000 settled in Chile. **However, by far the largest number—as many as 5,000—relocated to Argentina.**



**Adolf Eichmann on trial, April 21, 1961, in Jerusalem.**

Due to the hundreds of thousands of German immigrants who lived in the country, **Argentina maintained close ties with Germany and remained neutral for much of World War II**. In the years after the end of the war, Argentine President Juan Peron secretly ordered diplomats and intelligence officers to establish escape routes, **so-called “ratlines,”** through ports in Spain and Italy to smuggle thousands of former SS officers and Nazi party members out of Europe. As with numerous other fascist-leaning South American leaders, Peron had been drawn to the ideologies of Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler while serving as a military attaché in Italy during the early years of World War II. The Argentine president also sought to recruit those Nazis with military and technical expertise that he believed could help his country, much like the United States and the Soviet Union who both poached scientists from the Third Reich to assist them in the Cold War.



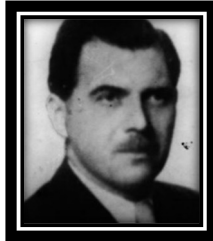
**Bishop Alois Hudal**

According to Uki Goñi, author of “The Real Odessa: Smuggling the Nazis to Peron’s Argentina,” the Peron government in 1946 sent word through Argentine Cardinal Antonio Caggiano to a French counterpart that the **South American country would be willing to receive Nazi collaborators from France who faced potential war crimes prosecution.**

That spring, French war criminals carrying passports **issued by the International Red Cross** stamped with Argentine tourist visas began to cross the Atlantic Ocean.

In their attempts to aid Catholic refugees amid the post-war rise of communist regimes across Europe, numerous Vatican officials unwittingly aided in the escape of Nazi war criminals, but some clerics such as Bishop Alois Hudal did so with full knowledge of their actions.

According to Goñi, Hudal, an Austrian-born admirer of Hitler who ministered to prisoners of war in Rome, admitted to abetting Nazi war criminals by providing them with false identity documents issued by the Vatican that were then used to obtain passports from the International Red Cross.



*Josef Mengele, who evaded capture, c. 1950*

Hudal also aided the Franciscan monk in Genoa, Italy, who supplied Eichmann with an Argentine visa and signed an application for his falsified Red Cross passport, which allowed him to board a steamship to Buenos Aires in 1950 under the assumed identity of Ricardo Klement. The German legal team that examined South American files in 2012 told the Daily Mail that most of the Nazis who entered the continent did so using forged Red Cross passports, including 800 SS members to Argentina alone.

Many of the Nazis who escaped to South America were never brought to justice. SS colonel Walter Rauff, who created mobile gas chambers that killed at least 100,000 people, died in Chile in 1984. Eduard Roschmann, the “Butcher of Riga,” died in Paraguay in 1977. Gustav Wagner, an SS officer known as the “Beast,” died in Brazil in 1980 after the country’s supreme federal court refused to extradite him to Germany because of inaccuracies in the paperwork. The most notorious of the fugitives was Dr. Josef Mengele, the “Angel of Death” who conducted macabre experiments at the Auschwitz concentration camp. He fled to Argentina in 1949 before moving to Paraguay in 1959 and Brazil a year later. Buried under an assumed name after drowning off the Brazilian coast in 1979, Mengele had his identity confirmed only after forensic testing of his remains in 1985.



*Klaus Barbie outside the Lyons courthouse following his sentencing on July 4, 1983*

In some cases, the United States was complicit in the exodus of Nazi war criminals to South America. Following the war, the U.S. Counter-Intelligence Corps recruited Klaus Barbie—the Gestapo chief in Lyon, France, who played a role in the deaths of thousands of French Jews and members of the French Resistance—as an agent to assist with anti-Communist efforts.

He was smuggled to Bolivia, where he continued his spy work and instructed the military regime on how to torture and interrogate political opponents.

Barbie became one of the few Nazis who fled to South America but couldn't escape justice, much like Eichmann who was also convicted of crimes against humanity by an Israeli court and executed in 1962.

### ARGENTINA AND THE NAZI'S AFTER WW2

The link between Argentina and Nazi Germany is something that has fascinated historians for decades. Here, we take a step back in time and revisit this complex chapter of the South American country's fascinating history.



**Nazi hideout' in Argentina discovered by Archaeologists. Photo credit: ABC news**

*The 2015 discovery of a former Nazi lair hidden deep in the Argentinean jungle, reignited and refueled curiosity into the mythical fables that have plagued South America ever since the end of WWII.*

Depending on whom you ask, or what you read, Hitler and his entourage managed to reach Patagonia in a doggy dinghy and spent the rest of their lives simultaneously hiding in the Andean wilderness and enjoying the blissful relaxation of a Patagonian ski resort town. Stories of crateful's of Nazi gold washing up ashore along the coasts of Argentina and Brazil still persist, as searches 'ratlines', underground escape tunnels allegedly built by members of the Third Reich to avoid capture. Yet although some of the stories are a little far-fetched, others are real, and their legitimacy is proved by concrete evidence.

*According to discoveries over the last few years, Nazi escapees made it further into the jungles of South America than previously thought.* Although if you've never even heard of this not-so-secret link between Argentina and Nazi Germany, we should probably take it back a few decades...



### FROM NAZI GERMANY TO ARGENTINA? NOT NEARLY AS FAR AS YOU THINK!

The link between Argentina and Germany is not all that surprising, considering that German influence was well established throughout much of South America by the turn of the 20th century.

The considerable influx of immigrants from not only Germany but also Italy and Spain, ensured Argentina retain its long-held close ties with all three European countries.

During the Second World War, and certainly, with the rise of Nazi Germany, the link was mutually nurtured. Germany promised Argentina trade deals and economic relations after the war, in return for its support.



*Juan Domingo Peron.*

[Juan Domingo Peron](#), a celebrated lieutenant general who would later become Argentina's President, was quite the outspoken Nazi sympathizer throughout much of his life. He even served in Mussolini's Italian fascist army in the late 30s. Today it has become common knowledge that Peron personally oversaw the safe passage of hundreds (some say thousands) of SS members into Argentina towards the end of the war. This happened at about the same time that Argentina publicly declared 'war' on Germany in March 1945. According to many historians, this declaration against the Axis Powers of WWII was a mere smokescreen to get undercover agents into Germany to help the now-defeated Nazis to escape. Plus, the public display of support for the Allies no doubt helped Argentina's relations with the US and Western Europe.

Peron's role in the protection of Nazi war criminals wasn't confirmed until the late 1970s.

The extent to which sympathizers went to aid their escape from the Nuremberg Trials is still being uncovered today.

### **FOR FAME, GLORY & COLD HARD CASH**

Many former members of the Nazi party found a safe passage out of Germany through Italy and Spain, utilizing their looted Jewish funds, art, and jewels to buy their way to freedom. Experts believe that at a time when the whole of Europe was plunging into economic disaster, the considerable monetary incentive would have even been enough to convince Allied officers to turn a blind eye and allow escapees to cross into 'friendlier' lands. From there, buying a spot aboard an Argentina-bound ship would not have been too difficult.

[Argentina](#) also benefitted from its newly acquired German diaspora. All the Nazis who made it across the ocean brought with them an incredible amount of wealth. They invested in Argentinian factories and aided local industries. Many worked for German-owned companies and all felt so supported in their new homeland, they didn't even feel the need to hide their origins. Some, like [Reinhard Kopps](#), are even attributed to starting neo-Nazi movements in their newly adopted countries.

### **THE CONVERGENCE OF SEPARATE INTERESTS**

Scholars contest that the main reason why so many Nazis managed to escape to Argentina, of all places, was because the separate interests of the parties involved did make for a fortuitous convergence. For different reasons, both the Allies and Argentina felt it was in their best interest to let these war criminals escape. So escape they did.



It is widely believed that the Allies – and the US in particular – were privy to this post-war mass exodus from continental Europe to South America, and did nothing to prevent it.



*Eichmann on trial in Israel.*

This was mostly due to the swift rise in Communism sympathizing in the very same countries which were actively seeking Nazi criminals to put on trial. The US had no interest in turning them over. At the same time, Peron was personally interested in having the ‘brains behind the Third Reich’ on his home turf. If his premonition of an imminent West VS USSR World War III turned out to be true, he wanted Argentina to be a key player and would have needed experienced military leaders on his side. The Third World War never came, luckily, yet Argentina kept its German officers, nonetheless.

Yet Argentina wasn’t the only country to shelter Nazi fugitives. Peru, Chile, Paraguay, and Brazil also became safe havens, but mostly only once Peron was ousted from power in 1955, rendering Argentina less than ideal. In the widespread anti-Peronist wave, many former Nazis feared they’d be hunted and promptly shipped back to Europe to face trial. Most dispersed to neighboring countries and all finally adopted aliases and kept a low profile. Some were more successful at avoiding detection than others.

For a whole decade, Argentina was home to Adolf Eichmann, one of the key architects of the Holocaust and one of the most hunted fugitives in history. His covert capture by Israeli Mossad operatives on a Buenos Aires street in 1960, and his eventual trial in Israel, sparked a diplomatic row between the two countries. The row was eventually resolved, but Argentina still couldn’t halt Eichmann’s execution.

As time passed, and especially after the fall of Communism in Europe, the peaceful existence of so many Nazi war criminals became a hindrance to Argentina. The resurgence of the ‘Nazi hunters’ from the early 1990s led to the arrest, extradition, and trial of many former German officers, most of whom were, by then, well into their twilight years.



*Bariloche, Argentina.*

In total, Peron is believed to have opened the Argentinian doors to more than 1,300 Nazis. The most prominent ‘enclave’ turned out to be Bariloche, a gorgeous Patagonian town renowned mostly for its superb skiing and mouth-watering chocolates.

It was here that the eyes of the world converged in 1994 when a US film crew managed to track down and identify a former captain of the SS, Erich Priebke and uncovered a long-held code of silence in the city. A local businessman who saw the potential for this link to be beneficial to the town’s tourism industry even compiled a Bariloche Nazi guide of sorts. Visit today and you can take a self-guided tour around town, mostly ogling a few homes that, once upon a time, belonged to former SS members-in-hiding.

A world away from the site of the crimes, the Nazi link in Bariloche, as in the rest of Argentina, seems utterly surreal. Most especially seven decades after the end of WW2.