Wayne Biddle’s *Dark Side of the Moon* joins a growing list of Wernher von Braun biographies published in the last two decades in Germany and the United States. This renewed interest in the charismatic rocket engineer and manager of both the V-2 program for the Nazi regime and the Saturn V rocket development program for NASA seems reflective of a major re-evaluation and shift in public representations of the man who was voted #2 in Aviation Week’s 2003 ‘Top 100 Stars of Aerospace’ poll and whose name to this day adorns not only high schools and streets in Germany but also the Civic Center and a Research Hall at the University of Alabama in Huntsville.

Von Braun, who died in 1977 of cancer at the age of 65, faced some criticism during his lifetime for his culpability in the use of slave labor in the production of the V-2 rockets he and his team designed, but not nearly as much as was prompted by the investigation of one of his top managers, Arthur Rudolph, after von Braun’s death. Rudolph moved back to Germany and renounced his citizenship in 1984 instead of trying to fight war crime allegations from the U.S. Justice Department’s Office of Special Investigations. According to his supporters and detractors, von Braun had a lot of clout in Washington. Both camps seem to agree that the Rudolph case would not have made it as far if von Braun had been alive to weigh in and ‘protect’ his colleague.

In lieu of being able to confront von Braun directly in interviews or even in a courtroom, laypersons and historians have been trying to grapple with this controversial figure using surviving documents, recorded interviews, and other publications. According to Biddle, there are no personal notes available from before 1945 for von Braun, which means that a reconstruction of his life before he moved to the United States has to rely on what others have written and his own later writings, which Biddle dismisses as whitewashing the past in light of his new life (pp. 96, 137, 139). Since objectivity is desirable but illusive in any historical analysis, and the images created in the media often vacillate between Nazi villain and space hero, the outcomes of these more thorough analyses vary greatly, which makes the production of multiple biographies quite useful. In other words, those interested in learning more about the seemingly larger-than-life figure may be well advised to read more than one of his biographies.

This is not just a general observation but intended also as a cautionary comment in reference to Biddle’s
monograph. Biddle is very clear about his intent to focus on von Braun’s moral responsibility as a scientist and engineer for the hellish treatment of concentration camp laborers for the production of the V-2 rockets – presumably the parts that von Braun and his supporters have tried to ‘whitewash’ in their accounts. In the introduction he thanks ‘the many former Dora prisoners who patiently discussed their experience’ (p. xiii), illustrating his belief that von Braun’s life is inextricably intertwined with the lives of the prisoners of the concentration camp Dora, where the laborers working in the tunnels to build the V-2 rockets towards the end of the war were held.

One of the consequences of Biddle’s focus to counter existing hagiographies is that he ends the biography with the move of von Braun and his team to the United States in 1945. The Epilogue briefly describes the events up to Sputnik in 1957. Biddle explains that ‘then [von Braun] became all about hardware’ and that the later years through Apollo are of interest ‘mostly to buffs’ (p. xii). These are, of course, the most important years to von Braun admirers, who like to use the successes of Explorer I and the Apollo program as evidence that bringing von Braun and his team to the United States and offering them jobs and citizenship was justified. His supporters naturally prefer to focus on these years for which he has been internationally celebrated in order to deflect from his potential involvement in the use of slave labor for the Nazi regime. But even if you are not an uncritical admirer of von Braun, the years following Sputnik are significant because of the impact of the moon landings worldwide and von Braun’s role in not only promoting spaceflight but also managing the Saturn V program. Besides the fact that the book’s title is therefore misleading, it seems ahistorical to discount this part of his life as unimportant to a larger audience.

In the introduction, Biddle claims that ‘Von Braun moved so seamlessly from Peenemünde, Pomerania, to Huntsville, Alabama, because millions of people wanted him to, because the secrecy and some of the obsessions of the Third Reich were not entirely different from those of postwar America’ (p. xi). Project Paperclip, the secret military operation under which von Braun and his team were brought to the United States, was initially kept secret, and von Braun did not become a household name to ‘millions of people’ until he began promoting spaceflight in Collier’s magazine and with a Disney production in the 1950s. At this point he had already lived in the United States for more than five years. While there may be some truth to Biddle’s statement nevertheless, and a book arguing this point would be most intriguing, he does not establish this case. Instead, he not only purposefully omits a major part of von Braun’s life story but within the parts he does discuss, he zooms in on some areas while jumping from one period to another without explanation. Biddle begins by focusing on von Braun’s father’s life before, during, and after the First World War and during the Weimar Republic, presumably to describe the milieu into which Wernher von Braun was born and in which he grew up. As a result, Wernher does not become a central character in his own biography until chapter four. While the general intent seems clear, it is less obvious why the reader needs to know so much detail about Magnus von Braun’s life. This surplus of information stands in contrast with jumps in time and thematic focus between some of the later chapters. For example, where chapter five leaves the reader pondering the late 1920s and early 1930s when the aristocratic von Braun joined a group of seemingly eccentric and mostly unemployed young and middle-aged men tinkering with amateur rockets, chapter six jumps into a description of the remaining remnants of the concentration camp Mittelbau-Dora. A similar jump occurs when chapter nine ends with quotes from former Dora camp prisoners who accuse von Braun of war crimes in form of witness testimony. The first paragraph in chapter ten then is a brief description of the events of July 16, 1969, when the Saturn V rocket lifted off carrying the astronauts that would make history as the first humans to step on the Moon along with the statement that ‘An American named Wernher von Braun, fifty-seven, from Huntsville, Alabama, was heralded as its mastermind’ (p. 127). While these stylistic maneuvers make for a captivating read, which is clearly Biddle’s goal, the effect is jarring and manipulative and therefore inappropriate for an historical analysis.

Let me note here that I agree with Biddle that von Braun is too often romanticized and that his past cooperation with the Nazi regime and the use of concentration camp prisoners to build the V-2 rockets is not as well-known as it should be. I too am appalled that the memories of those who suffered and those who died building the V-2 rockets too often go unheard. What I do not appreciate is Biddle’s attempt to ‘tip the scales’ by employing a maneuver he accuses von Braun’s admirers of using: deliberately leaving out parts of von
Braun’s biography to serve his purpose. Biddle seems intent not only on debunking the mythology supporters have created around von Braun over the years but also to discredit early rocketry and the men who pursued it, including von Braun, where possible. For one, he tries to illustrate a close connection between right-wing politics and rocketry in prewar Germany (pp. 40–6, 52) that seems to have allowed the rocketeers to fit well into the National Socialist landscape. He further stresses von Braun’s close proximity to Nazi fanatics (pp. 92, 118) and the rocketeers own ‘tunnel-vision’ that presumably allowed him to ignore the abuses against others being carried out around him (pp. 74, 94–5, 97, 123, 143). At the same time, Biddle describes von Braun as a mere puppet of other, presumably more powerful, characters with specific agendas. He explains that as a very young man von Braun must have gained his high professional position mainly because of his aristocratic status and looks that reflected the ‘epitome of “Aryan’” (pp. 69, 72–3). He further points out that Walter Dornberger, von Braun’s superior in the German Army, did not trust him to make major decisions alone (pp. 78, 88, 104), which provokes the reader to question von Braun’s overall power and authority at the Peenemünde installation.

On the other hand, Biddle asserts that one reason von Braun has been celebrated by his peers was that they presumably feared him (p. 89). Biddle is referring to the selection of individual team members to join von Braun in the United States under Project Paperclip and quotes from FBI files to document this sentiment. The powerless von Braun of Peenemünde now seems to be overly powerful. While I suspect that those colleagues of von Braun who were eager to join him (some chose to stay in Germany) might have worried about not being selected, this ‘fear’ would not have lasted very long and certainly not for decades as Biddle insinuates. The rocket specialists were offered short-term and later long-term contracts with the Army and were free to work in private industry within the first few years of their arrival. Quite a few did leave the group before the Army’s rocket development program was moved to Huntsville.

Biddle tries to paint a particularly distressing picture by contrasting what he calls ‘delusional’ ideas of space and rocket enthusiasts that seem to use the equivalent of smoke and mirrors to convince the German leadership of the validity of their project with the atrocities committed against the concentration camp prisoners of Dora. The juxtaposition of quotes with terms such as ‘Sonny Boy’ to describe von Braun and ‘brain bubbles’ to describe some of the ideas for rocket development at Peenemünde are rhetorical weapons that ridicule his protagonist but do little to enlighten the reader (pp. 60, 90, 134). Early on, Biddle questions the entire notion that von Braun was really a space-travel enthusiast and suggests that instead he was one of the ‘ideologically branded weapon-builders … who could have been prosecuted under the Nuremberg Code if … they had not been enlisted in the technological race against the Soviet Union’ (p. 38). This commentary is what a friend of mine would call a ‘cheap shot’ – an assertion that cannot be proven but that has a dramatic effect on the reader.

Perhaps the most problematic part of this biography is the way in which Biddle uses testimony from former Dora concentration camp prisoners. After quoting a Dora camp survivor who testifies that von Braun gave direct orders to abuse him, Biddle explains that some historians are weary of using this type of testimony as evidence. He then calls these reasons into question by stating that they are based on standards that ‘tend to work against the dispossessed’ (pp. 124–6). While that is unfortunately sometimes the case, it does not mean that these standards should be dismissed. Issues such as being ‘remove[d] in time from the original event, lack of corroboration, and the possibility of mistaken identity’ (p. 126) do create valid doubts. Biddle proves this point when he alludes to the fact that we have to contend with the testimony of the presumed perpetrator as well as the accusers and hold them to the same standards. Unfortunately, Biddle oversimplifies the realities of dealing with these kind of testimonies in context of the Nazi past today when he claims that ‘Historians must ultimately decide whether to believe a man who spent the rest of his life keeping Dora in the shadows or those who spent theirs trying to shed light on it’ (p. 126). Besides the fact that it is not an historian’s job to make these kinds of decisions, this statement is based on true/false and right/wrong binaries that do not represent the complexity of human experiences. Biddle can obviously not resist the temptation to do what many of us would like to do, but know does not reflect reality: He wants to judge what and who is right and what and who is wrong and therefore simplifies where it suits his needs.
Parts of the book read like a novel and Biddle’s writing style is very enjoyable, which should not surprise since the author is a Pulitzer-prize winning journalist. His research appears to be solid but I do find it problematic that he tries to define himself as a historian, thereby lending a scholarly notion to his work and creating a sense of heightened credibility. Instead he has written a fairly heavy-handed commentary, in which he makes some interesting points but does not always follow accepted rules of professional historians. In addition to those already mentioned, I would add the choice to publish only a selected bibliography and no list of primary sources. As I was once told, historians do not trust other historians and want to be able to verify everything a colleague has written. This may seem to be a professional pet-peeve but I think it is quite useful—especially in a history as contested as von Braun’s. While I appreciate that Biddle is willing to ‘take a stand’ and describe what he believes are the most important points of contention in von Braun’s biography, I would not recommend it as the only source to learn about the rocketeer’s life. Its bias, however, makes it a great illustration for how history is a hotly contested and political form of memory – the main topic of my own research about the integration of the rocket engineers and their families associated with von Braun in Huntsville, Alabama. After reading Biddle’s book, I was prompted to re-read Dr. Space as a counterpoint. That biography was recommended to me by almost every one of my German interviewees in Huntsville. It was written by Bob Ward (2005), a journalist from Huntsville who similarly claims objectivity. In contrast to Biddle, Ward claims this is a given based on his profession. In the end, I still find that of the recent publications Michael J. Neufeld’s Von Braun: Dreamer of Space, Engineer of War (2007) provides the most balanced story. Neufeld has a point of view, of course, but it does not overwhelm the reader. While it may lack in open commentary it does cover the rocketeer’s entire life, the positive and the negative aspects. The author discusses an enormous amount of evidence and tries to leave it up to his readers to decide how they want to judge his protagonist. Wayne Biddle and I have both worked with Michael Neufeld during our fellowships at the National Air and Space Museum, unfortunately at different times. I am sure we would have had some fascinating conversations.

Notes


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