In the wake of World War II, America recruited a few leading German scientists in order to advance our space and military programs and to keep these valuable assets from falling into Soviet hands. This is the broadly accepted script about Nazis in America. In fact, as Eric Lichtblau, a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter for The New York Times, relates in “The Nazis Next Door,” we welcomed approximately 10,000 Nazis, some of whom had played pivotal roles in the genocide.

While portions of this story are not new — see Annie Jacobsen’s book “Operation Paperclip,” for example — Lichtblau offers additional archival information in all its infuriating detail. (He conducted some of his research at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s Mandel Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, on whose supervisory committee I serve. I had no role in his selection as a fellow at the center.)

America began reaching out to leading Nazis months before the Germans surrendered. In March 1945, while the war still raged, the American spy chief Allen Dulles conducted a friendly fireside chat in the library of a Zurich apartment with the Nazi general Karl Wolff, the closest associate of the SS leader Heinrich Himmler for much of the war. The Scotch-lubricated conversation convinced Dulles that Wolff, despite his ties to Himmler and his role as a leader of the Waffen SS, was a moderate who deserved protection. When prosecutors sought to try Wolff, one of the highest-ranking SS leaders to survive, at Nuremberg, Dulles worked to have his name
removed from the list of defendants. While Wolff was in Allied custody, he was permitted to take a yacht trip, spend time with his family and carry a gun. Nonetheless, he complained that what he endured was “much more inhumane than the extermination of the Jews.” He said the Jews had been gassed in a few seconds, while he did not know how long he would be held. (His imprisonment lasted four years.)

While Jews languished in the camps after Germany’s defeat (“We felt like so much surplus junk,” one survivor said), the United States gathered up Nazi scientists. Had only leading scientists been enlisted, it would have been distasteful if understandable. But of the more than 1,600 scientists brought over, some had pedestrian skills. Others had developed the chemicals for the gas chambers, or conducted experiments on concentration camp prisoners. Even the State Department protested.

But we did not stop with scientists. The C.I.A. and the F.B.I. sought out spies and informants who had participated in genocide. For these agencies, engaging in murder was acceptable as long as the recruits did not lie about their record. Ultimately, most of these “informants” never provided any valuable information. Some even offered bogus reports.

But these intelligence agencies remained their greatest protectors. In the 1980s, when the Justice Department began to hunt war criminals who had lied in order to enter this country, both agencies actively obstructed the investigations. They were also protected by White House officials such as Pat Buchanan, then a top aide to Ronald Reagan, who denounced the Justice Department’s “revenge obsessed” and “hairy-chested Nazi hunters” as dupes of the Soviets. And the largest group of Nazis who entered America simply slipped in through “the back door,” according to Lichtblau. They gamed the system and immigrated as “refugees,” starting new lives as thousands of people perished in the Allied camps.

Lichtblau brings ample investigative skills and an elegant writing style to this unsavory but important story. “The Nazis Next Door” is a captivating book rooted in first-rate research.

**THE NAZIS NEXT DOOR**

*How America Became a Safe Haven for Hitler’s Men*

By Eric Lichtblau


Deborah E. Lipstadt is a professor of modern Jewish and Holocaust studies at Emory University. Her most recent book is “The Eichmann Trial.”

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