



Defendants on the first day of the IG Farben Trial, August 27, 1947, in Nuremberg, Germany. Missing in the dock is Ernst Fischer, a leading figure in Germany's oil industry. He was not charged, for reasons that remain unclear.

The Enigma of Ernst Rudolf Fischer

Nazi Germany's Oil Expert

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In 1946, investigators attached to the Office of the Military Government, United States (OMGUS), uncovered a mystery.¹ They had instructions from Washington to gather all the information they could find about the firm Kontinentale Oel (Konti). This company was a public-private venture established in 1941 to take possession of oil fields across Axis Europe and the occupied territories, including (Berlin hoped) those of the Caucasus and the Middle East. The Third Reich, acting through a shell company,

held most voting shares, but several private firms from German industry and finance, including the chemical conglomerate IG Farben, had also contributed start-up and working capital. By the end of 1945, with the Third Reich in ruins and its assets destroyed or expropriated, Konti existed mostly on paper. Nevertheless, the US Department of State wanted to learn more about the company, because any oil OMGUS found would be useful for European reconstruction.

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The task fell to OMGUS, which worked quickly. Its investigators soon discovered that Konti's headquarters staff had decamped from Berlin to Landshut, a small town in Bavaria. The investigators seized whatever records were still in Landshut and interrogated any staff they could find.^a

One name kept popping up during their investigation: Ernst Rudolf Fischer. He was one of the top German administrators within the economics ministry and the planning office of Albert Speer's munitions ministry.² His name was also all over the Konti documents that the OMGUS investigators reviewed and on the mouths of the men they interrogated. He would be the key to answering questions the investigators had about Konti. There was just one problem—Fischer had fled to Switzerland a month before the war had ended.

It is not surprising to learn that US investigators demanded the State Department secure his extradition from Switzerland. Nor is it surprising that the Swiss stonewalled. What is surprising is that US officials soon gave up on getting Fischer, even as they moved ahead with the prosecution of other IG Farben executives at Nuremberg.³ Two of the defendants had, in fact, worked closely with Fischer. One, Carl Krauch, was the chairman of IG Farben's supervisory board and a key figure

in the production of synthetic fuel from coal; he also doubled as Hermann Goering's plenipotentiary for chemical production and received a six-year sentence for war crimes.⁴ Another was Heinrich Buete-fisch, who was in charge of synthetic fuel production at Auschwitz and also received a six-year sentence.⁵

Not only did Fischer not join them on the docket—despite his name coming up during the trial several times, including in the context of war crimes—he submitted an affidavit on behalf of Buete-fisch.⁶ Fischer eventually returned to Germany in the 1950s, where he replaced another IG Farben veteran, Fritz Gajewski, as the chairman of the managing board of Dynamit Nobel, a former member of the IG Farben conglomerate.⁷ (Gajewski, too, was at the dock in Nuremberg, but he was acquitted.)

Intelligence Connection?

How did a man who was instrumental to Germany's oil policy during World War II and who participated, at the very least, in the spoliation of occupied Europe escape the Allies' justice? It is tempting to think that he simply slipped through the cracks or was protected by nefarious Swiss bankers, but various documents that have escaped scrutiny



This photograph of Ernst Fischer, attributed to the Bundesarchive Deutschland, appeared in Regula Bochsler, "Ein neues Leben für drei Nazis," *NZZ*.ch, October 1, 2000.

until recently suggest that Fischer had a connection to Allied intelligence. That, in and of itself, is not earthshaking. The public has long been fascinated with the history of Nazis the United States recruited to wage the Cold War against the Soviet Union. (There is significantly less interest in the German scientists who went to the Soviet Union or even Britain and France.⁸) The most notable employment of former Nazis was Operation Paperclip, which included over a thousand Germans, most of them scientists and engineers, some of them fanatical Nazis and high-ranking members of the Third Reich implicated in

a. I am grateful to David Painter, Jeremy Friedman, and Sally Paine for their feedback on an early draft of this paper. I dedicate this essay to Sally to recognize her distinguished service at the Naval War College and for her mentorship.

war crimes. The US government, initially the military but later the Central Intelligence Agency, brought these Germans to the United States to leverage their expertise in emerging military technologies such as guided missiles. In a few cases, the government obscured their wartime activities to secure visas and eventually citizenship for Paperclip recruits. There have been several popular books about Paperclip (mostly written by journalists) and a recent television series starring Al Pacino.⁹ Even the last Indiana Jones movie featured a Nazi working for the Apollo program.

The Fischer case differs from the postwar recruitment of German scientists or spies—his service to the Allies may have come during the war and not afterward. This article will present circumstantial evidence that Fischer served as an Allied intelligence source as early as 1943. If that is indeed what happened, it is no surprise that the low-ranking OMGUS investigators were unable to secure Fischer's extradition from Switzerland or that no one raised any objections to a fugitive Nazi submitting affidavits on behalf of another Nazi on trial for war crimes.

Early Life

Fischer was born in 1892, served in the German Army during World War I, and in 1922

joined a firm that was one of the six founding members of IG Farben.¹⁰ Until 1932, he served as *Prokurist* (a low-level executive officer with the power to sign binding contracts) in IG Farben's headquarters before entering the firm's petroleum business as its sales manager. His initial appointment was with Deutsche Gasolin, a joint venture since 1925 between IG Farben, Standard Oil, and Shell, which sold synthetic gasoline on the German domestic market.¹¹ This was probably how Fischer first came into contact with the international oil industry, and it was a time when relations between the two Anglo-American-Dutch oil companies and the German chemical conglomerate were exceptionally close.

The firms shared more than just markets. Standard Oil had long been interested in IG Farben's work in synthetic rubber (which began during World War I), and starting in 1926, the two firms realized that IG Farben's hydrogenation process as well as its catalysts could produce both synthetic gasoline and increase the gasoline yield from crude oil.¹² By 1929, Standard and IG Farben had concluded a number of agreements, to which Shell later adhered, whereby the IG Farben turned over its international patent rights for hydrogenation and related processes to Standard in exchange for a monopoly in the German market, a share of profits from licensing fees, and large block of shares in

Standard that made the German firm the second-largest holder of Standard Oil shares behind the Rockefeller family. That relationship lasted until the US Justice Department discovered it and forced Standard to sign a consent decree terminating it in 1942.¹³

Fischer's Key Roles

Fischer was not a bystander to political events in Germany. He played a key role in the public relations campaign to improve IG Farben's image with the Nazi Party in 1932, and the following year he supported the negotiations for the Third Reich to purchase synthetic gasoline at a fixed price to cover IG Farben's costs and guaranteed a modest profit.¹⁴

Fischer may not have been a Nazi before 1933, but like many other ambitious men, he joined the party once it became the government (membership numbered 1,773,899 on April 1, 1933).¹⁵ He then served in the Nazi Party's Economic Policy office for several months in 1933, which busied itself with a four-year plan to boost German petroleum production.¹⁶ Eventually, he joined a number of Nazi organizations, including the SS, in which he held the rank of captain.

Fischer was hardly a disinterested public servant; he always remembered on which side he buttered his bread. His employer

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was desperate to preserve its role as a petroleum supplier, despite the fact that synthetic gasoline was economically uncompetitive at a time of oversupply of (and low prices for) crude oil.¹⁷

In a 1934 overview of the German oil industry, he dismissed most alternatives to raise domestic production besides IG Farben's method, which was "practically limitless."¹⁸ He also handled negotiations with IG Farben's international partners on matters important to the Third Reich, such as the construction of additional refineries and storage facilities.¹⁹

The new regime held him in such esteem that there was talk during 1935–36 of appointing him to lead Germany's petroleum planning, but the appointment fell through, and he remained at IG Farben.²⁰ In 1937, the firm appointed him its intermediary when it agreed to serve as stalking horse for the Third Reich by purchasing a large quantity of petroleum (roughly \$20 million) from the major oil companies in London, which would serve as an emergency reserve until Germany had constructed additional synthetic fuel plants.²¹

Fischer finally moved to the public sector in 1939 just before the war's outbreak, when IG Farben delegated him to head the petroleum office in the economics ministry, where he soon became

indispensable, earning the nickname "Petroleum Fischer."²²

Fischer's Wartime Role

Once the war began, Fischer began managing the Third Reich's foreign oil policy and attended many high-level conferences with policymakers such as Goering. Fischer was also involved in German oil relations with Romania, including the confiscation of British and French assets there after 1940.²³

In perhaps his most notable contribution, in September 1940, Fischer drafted a memorandum on Axis Europe's postwar energy needs. Fischer discounted the Soviet Union as a supplier, as the Third Reich had not yet committed to Operation Barbarossa, and high Soviet consumption left little available for export. This meant that Europe needed to import oil from the Middle East, particularly from Iran and Iraq. Fischer recommended the creation of a private German firm with the requisite capital and technical expertise to oversee Axis interests in the region, perhaps after Germany had taken over Anglo-Persian and Shell's operations.²⁴

Not coincidentally, Goering soon issued instructions for the establishment of a "Continentale [sic] Oel" company "to improve Germany's supply of petroleum from abroad and strengthen

Germany's position in the international oil industry [...]." He also insisted that "all matters pertaining to foreign oil supplies" required Fischer's approval.²⁵ The formation of Konti followed early the next year, with the Third Reich holding a controlling interest, thanks to the sale of plundered Dutch securities.²⁶

Fischer was also Germany's primary interlocutor with the international oil industry. When the German Foreign Office learned that a member of SS intelligence had met with Armenian oil executive Calouste Gulbenkian in February 1941, the relevant state secretary, Wilhelm Keppler, was furious. Keppler insisted that Konti was responsible for all external oil matters, and that if Gulbenkian needed to speak with anyone, it should be with Fischer, who knew Gulbenkian "personally."²⁷

By this point, Fischer's private and public work was indistinguishable. During a meeting of Konti's supervisory board in September 1943, Fischer gave a presentation on the activities of the firm and oil engineers attached to the military, the *Technische Brigade Mineraloel*.²⁸ Although he shared the disappointment over the failure of the Caucasus Offensive in 1942, he took some comfort in the fact that the equipment Germany had gathered for oil production in the Soviet Union might instead go to other production areas such as Romania, Hungary, and Estonia.²⁹

For his dedication to the Third Reich, the regime awarded him both the Knight's Cross of the War Merit Cross (one of Nazi Germany's highest civilian decorations) and the title of *Wehrwirtschaftsfuehrer* (an honorific the Third Reich bestowed upon business leaders who supplied the war economy).³⁰ But Fischer could see the writing on the wall. Once the Allies began bombing Germany's synthetic fuel plants consistently in May 1944, defeat became inevitable unless the Luftwaffe managed to win back air superiority—a point Fischer and his bosses, Hans Kehrl and Speer, tried to impress upon Adolf Hitler during a high-level conference on May 23, 1944.³¹

The Tide Turns

As the war turned to the Allies' favor, the US government began putting more thought into postwar planning. The State Department's petroleum adviser notified a US representative on the Allied Reparations Committee on April 20, 1945, that the United States needed more information about European indigenous oil production, because the Allies could use it to supply Europe's postwar needs and avoid putting further strain on the limited supply of tankers.³² Since Allies subsequently determined at the Potsdam Conference to dismantle Germany's synthetic fuel industry, it became doubly important to identify European

sources of crude oil, which meant taking a closer look at Konti.³³

The US government had kept tabs on the firm during the war based on the Konti's public filings and open-source reporting from the petroleum-industry trade journals.³⁴ Most of its attention focused on German efforts to dominate Romania's oil industry, but the US government knew this was only the first step.³⁵ The fact that the firm announced it was soliciting additional capital following its founding suggested it "knew that an attack on the Soviet Union was coming within a few months, and it was thought that sooner or later German troops would reach the Caucasus."³⁶ Once Standard Oil's cartel agreement with IG Farben became knowledge after its enforced dissolution, one muck-raking journalist even claimed that Konti was merely a stalking horse for reestablishing the cartel with British and Dutch participation after the war.³⁷ The US Petroleum Administrator for War Harold Ickes quickly wrote to the journalist's editor to insist that Konti was solely "a German concept and of total German control."³⁸

Considering the lingering uncertainties about Konti and the pressing need to boost postwar European oil production, Washington instructed Political Adviser for German Affairs in Europe Robert Murphy in December 1945 to undertake an investigation of Konti's activities

and assets. The British had already tried to locate the company's files in July 1945 at the home of one of its directors, Karl Blessing, a former aide to Hjalmar Schacht at the Reichsbank who would subsequently become president of its successor, the Bundesbank. Blessing's home was in an area that US troops had liberated but would turn over to the Red Army.

The British had to get what they could before the transfer, because they wanted to restart German crude oil production, most of which was located within their occupation zone, lest the "British Tax-payer" foot the bill for Germany's oil imports.³⁹ Unfortunately, Konti staff had moved most of the material a week before, leaving only stationary and inconsequential paperwork.⁴⁰ Fortunately, the British secured the services of Dr. Alfred Bentz, Germany's chief petroleum geologist, who told the British that he had removed his files from Berlin in 1943 once he knew Germany would lose the war and placed them at the Allies' disposal.⁴¹ The British quickly exonerated Bentz and his colleagues and put them back to work.⁴²

Washington informed Murphy that Konti's files were either in Berlin or the town of Landshut in Bavaria, just across the border from Switzerland. The managing director of the firm, Walter Dihlman, had met with US military officers in May 1945 and later provided

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them with lists of Konti's holdings and personnel in the hope the latter could secure postwar employment.⁴³ Additionally, the State Department believed that three directors of the firm, including Fischer, were in Landshut with the files. These records, it was hoped, would detail Konti's activities across Europe and provide data on European oil deposits.⁴⁴ OMGUS started the investigation in February 1946.⁴⁵

Murphy replied in March 1946 with a preliminary update from the decartelization branch of OMGUS. The investigators had located a few documents and checked the homes of former Konti directors.⁴⁶ Murphy followed up in August in a more detailed report from OMGUS's finance division.⁴⁷ Investigators had reviewed several cases of Konti's files in Landshut and nearby of Deggendorf in June 1946.⁴⁸ They also interrogated several of Konti's employees. OMGUS briefly explained the company's formation in March 1941. It noted that, although the Third Reich maintained a controlling interest, "the running of affairs was decidedly an IG Farben show." After all, the Reich's representative, Fischer, was also an IG Farben executive, who installed another IG Farben alum, Dihlman, as the managing director.

OMGUS did interrogate Dihlman and found him to be rather "slippery"—he claimed, for instance, that he had only joined

the Nazi Party to protect his Jewish wife, although it turned out she was an Aryan.⁴⁹ He also went to great lengths to minimize IG Farben's influence, which the firm's own documents contradicted.⁵⁰ Dihlman had, in fact, secured the removal of General Georg Thomas, the former head of the military's defense-economics office, from Konti's supervisory board in 1945 (presumably after Thomas lost a power struggle to Speer and went into semi-retirement).⁵¹ Dihlman had also signed documents on behalf of the shell-company Borussia, through which the Third Reich exercised its controlling interest.⁵²

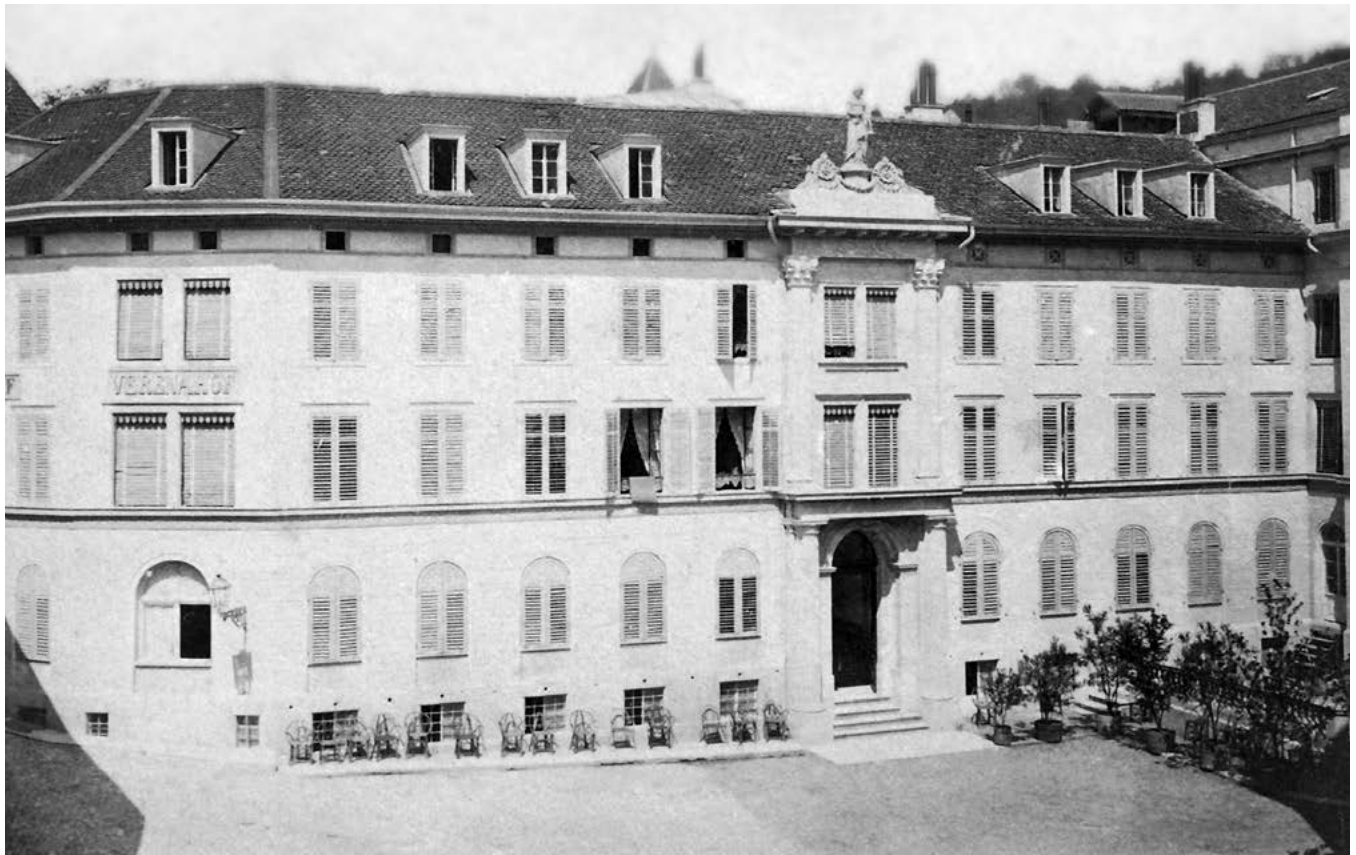
OMGUS soon found that IG Farben officials also proliferated on the boards of Konti's various subsidiaries. Only one name, however, appeared on the roster of every board: Fischer. Investigators also determined that Dihlman had concealed from them that Fischer had left for Switzerland on April 4, 1945, along with 28 tank wagons of residual oil, which Konti's transportation subsidiary had invoiced to the Petrola Zurich oil company, a state-controlled enterprise that handled Swiss petroleum imports from Germany.⁵³

The American investigators ears must have perked up when they heard about Switzerland. At that time, the US government was pressuring Switzerland to liquidate German assets in Switzerland, particularly gold in Swiss banks that the Nazi regime had looted

from across Europe.⁵⁴ (As the military situation deteriorated, the Third Reich and German firms had deposited significant financial assets there in the hope that it would escape confiscation as reparations and perhaps support German reconstruction.⁵⁵) OMGUS recommended further investigation of Konti's affairs, including additional interrogations, and that the State Department secure Fischer's repatriation to Germany.

One of the first people OMGUS interviewed in November 1946 as part of its follow-up investigation was Erich Neumann. He had previously served as a member of Konti's supervisory board, confidant of Herman Goering, and state secretary of the four-year plan, which oversaw Germany's efforts to expand production of synthetic materials critical for the German war effort and provided the funds for the Third Reich's controlling interest in Konti.⁵⁶ He also participated in the infamous Wannsee Conference of January 1942 concerning the fate of Europe's Jews, yet he managed to avoid any postwar prosecution. Neumann believed that OMGUS was exaggerating IG Farben's influence over Konti. Fischer had gotten the job simply because he "was the oil-expert in Germany" overseeing petroleum policy at the economics ministry.⁵⁷

OMGUS also tried again with Dihlman. Investigators wanted to



After fleeing Germany for Switzerland in spring 1945, Fischer and his two IG Farben colleagues lived temporarily at Hotel Verena Hof, shown in this vintage post card.

know more about Fischer and the 28 wagons of petroleum that had gone to Switzerland.⁵⁸ Dihlman, upon realizing that US investigators had discovered his duplicity, was more forthcoming.⁵⁹ He confirmed that several Konti executives had been in Landshut during March–April 1945 and made a remarkable admission:

As to Dr. E.R. Fischer and his intentions in Switzerland, Dihlman declared that Dr. Fischer had stated that Kontinentale Oel A.G. as well as the Oil Section of IG Farbenindustrie

would be best served by his presence in Switzerland and that he hoped to renew his connections with his old friends in the USA.

Dihlman could not identify those “friends” but mentioned that Fischer and two other high-ranking Nazi officials, Friedrich Kadgien and Ludwig Haupt, were then residing in a Swiss villa not far from the headquarters of Konti’s last customer, Petrola.⁶⁰ A former civil servant in the German Navy claimed that Petrola was a joint venture including Standard Oil, Shell, and Anglo-Persian, but there

is no proof of that. He added that there was conflict among Konti partners, specifically between representatives of Germany’s crude oil industry and those who produced synthetic petroleum, but that IG Farben “completely managed to dominate the organization” through Fischer, who “was not really drafted by the Reich for the job, but he was placed there by IG Farbenindustrie in order to safeguard its own interests.” OMGUS investigators reiterated that demand that the State Department press Switzerland to repatriate Fischer, as well as Kadgien and Haupt.⁶¹

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Fischer's activities in Switzerland received considerable scrutiny after 1996 when Switzerland finally came clean about its relations with the Third Reich and former Nazis after the war. The Independent Commission of Experts on Switzerland during World War Two concluded that Switzerland had welcomed certain Nazis after the war but not out of charity: "To gain admission to Switzerland, you had to be useful to the country."⁶² Although the Swiss made some accommodations for those who had provided service in the past, the most important criterion was "a narrowly defined usefulness for the economy, military, and diplomacy." Swiss officials and businessmen worried about postwar competition from US firms. The Swiss were therefore keen on engineers from IG Farben who could support Switzerland's synthetic raw-materials industry. Ultimately, some hoped that Switzerland could support West Germany's rearmament as the Cold War intensified.⁶³

Fischer was not a technical expert, but he was still useful. The Swiss already had a relationship with him because Switzerland depended during the war on imports of coal and petroleum from Germany, some of which Konti supplied via Petrola, largely from the former's oilfields in Romania.⁶⁴ Perhaps for that reason, the Swiss minister in Berlin told Fischer that the Allies were planning to put IG

Farben executives, including him, on trial after the war.

By then, Fischer's boss, Kehrl, had authorized his staff to leave Berlin, and he dispatched Fischer to settle affairs with Petrola.⁶⁵ Fischer had already visited Switzerland in November 1944, ostensibly for negotiations with Petrola but probably to prepare his escape along with two other Nazi war criminals: Haupt, who was also affiliated with one of Konti's subsidiaries; and Kadgien, who had overseen the deposit of plundered valuables, including from murdered Jews, into Swiss banks as part of a wider program of laundering the proceeds from stolen goods and securing foreign exchange for Nazi Germany to finance vital imports.⁶⁶

The Swiss granted the three Germans short-term visas in March 1945. Kadgien and Haupt left for Zurich, but Fischer stayed in Germany long enough to guarantee the shipment of the oil that OMGUS had discovered, which was vital because the three Germans depended on the money Petrola paid for the petroleum to finance their stay in Switzerland at least temporarily. The three lived initially at the Hotel Verenhof in Baden, not far from the German border.⁶⁷

The Swiss meanwhile rebuffed US requests for the trio's extradition since there was no proof they were still engaged in criminal acts. Fischer's travel companions,

Kadgien and Haupt, eventually used their stolen funds to begin new lives in South America around 1950, as international pressure to arrest him grew. Both disappeared until 2025, when Kadgien's daughter tried to sell her home in Mar del Plata, Argentina. The house photographer captured an image of a painting the Nazis had stolen from a Dutch art dealer in 1940 and which Kadgien had smuggled into Argentina.⁶⁸

Fischer might have joined them. He was keen on going to Paraguay, but the Paraguayan passport he secured turned out to be a forgery, and he had to remain in Switzerland.⁶⁹ His prior service would not have sufficed to keep him in Switzerland for a decade had he not also secured for the Swiss the services of unemployed IG Farben engineers. Former Petrola executive Ernst Imfeld assisted by finding Fischer a job with the Holzverzuckerungs AG (today known as Ems-Chemie), which produced a variety of synthetic products including ethanol from wood, fibers, nylon, and later a variant of napalm, so it needed people with IG Farben's skills.⁷⁰

Meanwhile, in West Germany, the US and British governments' interest in smashing IG Farben took a back seat to economic reconstruction, and the company was merely dismembered and repurposed from supporting German autarky to integration into the international economy.⁷¹ After a

while, Fischer became an adviser to several German firms and finally, in 1955, returned to Germany to take up a position with Dynamit, eventually becoming director of its managing board in 1957 before dying of leukemia in 1965.⁷² He never faced any penalties for his wartime service other than an unflattering reference in an East German propaganda publication outing 1,800 prominent West Germans as former Nazis, which appeared after his death.⁷³

The Explanation Behind Fischer's Freedom

So far, we have a typical history of a Nazi functionary who escaped justice for his crimes during the Third Reich and was rehabilitated by the Federal Republic of Germany. Certain factors, however, complicate this conventional narrative. Why, for instance, did the US government not pursue Fischer's extradition from Switzerland, as *OMGUS* advised? How could Fischer submit an affidavit on behalf of his former colleague, Buetevisch, at Nuremberg? And most importantly, why did Fischer escape any postwar sanction even though many of his colleagues spent time in prison for war crimes?

In the early 2000s, the East German historian Janis Schmelzer insisted that more research was necessary to clarify what exactly Fischer was doing in Switzerland and what his connections to US

intelligence were.⁷⁴ The available evidence concerning the latter suggests that Fischer survived and even prospered after the Third Reich because he had served as an Allied intelligence source after the war and possibly earlier, during the conflict.

There are two pieces of evidence to this effect—one an offer of service, the other the provision of intelligence. Regarding the former, in May 1943, the British Ministry of Economic Warfare included in its intelligence digest that Konti's president, "Dr. W. Fischer, in a conversation with a neutral last autumn, expressed the view that German could not win the war." Fischer told his interlocutor that he was doing what he could to guarantee the postwar restoration of oil properties Germany had seized. The British concluded that "Dr. Fischer was evidently anxious to place on record that he was 'different' and thus endeavoring to put himself in a position that would be of help to him in the difficult times ahead."⁷⁵ The Americans accepted the British report at face value, as a subsequent update on the firm mentioned that Fischer "endeavors to give the impression that every effort is being made to retain the individual identities of the confiscated properties."⁷⁶

As for information, Fischer provided some at least once, when he participated in an interview with the United States Strategic Bombing Survey.⁷⁷ Two things are

noteworthy about this confidential interview. First, the summary referred to the subject as "Emil Fischer." This happened to be the same name as the German winner of the 1902 Nobel Prize in Chemistry, but he had died in 1919. Another Emil Fischer had developed the Fischer-Tropsch process for producing synthetic gasoline. This Fischer was also a member of the Nazi Party and lived until 1949, but he could not have been the source. For one thing, Fischer-Tropsch was the rival to IG Farben's hydrogenation process. Moreover, the interview report described Fischer as the "commercial manager of IG Farben and director of their Ludwigshafen and Leuna plants for all oil products" before joining Speer's ministry. This was obviously Ernst Rudolf Fischer. Second, the interview took place in July 1945, but this raises another mystery because, according to Dihlman, Fischer had decamped to Switzerland in April. That means that the USSBS either interviewed Fischer in Switzerland or that Fischer returned to Germany for the debriefing before going back to Switzerland.

Whatever the case, Fischer provided useful information about the effect of Allied aerial attacks on Germany's synthetic fuel industry as well as IG Farben's technical support for Japan's synthetic-fuel program. He noted that even if the Germans had moved production underground earlier, it would not

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have materially affected the course of the war, as there was no way to transport goods to and from the new facilities. Fischer added that the Allies had missed a critical vulnerability by not targeting Germany's production of lead tetraethyl or synthetic rubber, as production of both was concentrated in two plants. Overall, Fischer concluded that strategic bombing of German industry "brought about the defeat of Germany" but dismissed the terror bombing of cities as "useless." Instead, a concerted attack on German petroleum production and transportation could have ended the war a year earlier.

Fischer advised the USSBS that "round-the-clock" bombing rather than sporadic attacks was necessary and even suggested the sorts of bombs Allied planes should have used. (The US and British raids on Leuna were inefficient and only overwhelmed German repair efforts after more than 20 raids between May 1944 and January 1945.⁷⁸) The USSBS made use of this information in its study of the German petroleum industry, but it only made a single mention of Fischer and never cited him as a source.⁷⁹

The US and British records, for whatever reason, often misidentified Fischer with an incorrect first name or initials, but we should have no doubt as to his identity. Leaving aside that they always identified Fischer as a leading executive with IG Farben and Konti, a classified postwar British study of the

German oil industry's wartime contributions identified him as "Dr. E.R. Fischer," even when quoting from the USSBS report.⁸⁰ The British also mentioned Fischer's paper on Axis Europe's postwar oil requirements but could not identify him as the author.⁸¹ The British considered this work their "opus magnum" on the subject.⁸² The Americans agreed; because the British report would be "both accurate and comprehensive," they saw no reason to write their own study.⁸³

In closing, what is the significance of Fischer's story? Does it validate the claims of East German (Marxist) historians about the close connections between German "monopoly capital" and the Nazi Party, particularly IG Farben, as fictionalized in the 1950 film, *Der Rat der Goetter (The Council of the Gods)*?⁸⁴ There is no doubt that men like Fischer moved effortlessly between private work and government service, and despite their complicity in the crimes of the Third Reich, faced few or no obstacles to a respectable life in postwar West Germany. If anything, Fischer's only handicap was his decade-long sojourn in Switzerland.

But just as importantly, the story of Ernst Rudolf Fischer reflects the moral ambiguities of intelligence work, including the recruitment of sometimes unsavory assets, including Nazis, in the service of a higher purpose.⁸⁵ Many studies of Paperclip are scathing of the

recruitment of former Nazis, but there were compelling reasons to do so.⁸⁶ Bringing scientists and technicians to the United States would, US officials hoped, boost US industry and denude Germany's future war-making capacity. Today we take for granted that Germany is a peaceful nation, but that was not the prevailing opinion after World War II. Moreover, every German expert who went to the West was one fewer who went behind the Iron Curtain. Finally, many Germans, Nazis or otherwise, did render years of distinguished service to the United Kingdom, France, and United States.⁸⁷

Nevertheless, one study of US intelligence's employment of former Nazi intelligence officers and secret police condemned it as a "blunder."⁸⁸ That may be a fair judgment in the case of some postwar recruits, but what about Germans who served both the Allies and the Third Reich during World War II? We still need to know more about what sort of specific information people like Fischer provided the Allies, and whether the Allies compensated them for their wartime crimes. Was Fischer merely a source of information or an actual asset for Allied intelligence, and for whom in particular? Most importantly, did the information he and others provide make a measurable contribution to ending the war sooner and with less bloodshed? Good history, this author hopes, prompts as many questions as it answers. ■

Endnotes

1. The article uses declassified, publicly available sources and is based largely on research I conducted for my first book, *Oil and the Great Powers* (Oxford, 2019), chapters 5–8, as well as from Dietrich Eichholtz, *Deutsche Ölpolitik im Zeitalter der Weltkriege* (Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2010), chapters 4–6.
2. Hans Kehrl, *Krisenmanager im Dritten Reich* (Droste, 1973), 319, documents IV, IVb.
3. Janis Schmelzer, *IG Farben* (Schmetterling, 2006), 169–71; Christine Uhlig, et al., *Tarnung, Transfer, Transit* (Chronos, 2001), 187, 425–26. Popular studies of IG Farben do not mention him, possibly because of his absence at the IG Farben Trial at Nuremberg from May 1947 to July 1948. See, e.g., Joseph Borkin, *Crime and Punishment of I.G. Farben* (Free Press, 1978); Diarmund Jeffreys, *Hell's Cartel* (Metropolitan Books, 2008).
4. Jens Ulrich Heine, *Verstand & Schicksal* (VCH, 1990), 98–100.
5. Heine, *Verstand*, 166–67.
6. See, e.g., *Trials of the War Criminals Before the Nuremberg Military Tribunals* (GPO, 1953), viii: 1251.
7. Under German corporate law, a supervisory board (Aufsichtsrat) oversees the actions of the managing board (Vorstand) and appoints its members. For a summary of IG Farben's corporate organization, see: Heine, *Verstand*, 6–44.
8. For a broader perspective, see: Michael Neufeld, "Nazi Aerospace Exodus," *History and Technology* 28: 1 (2012): 49–67.
9. Paperclip was supposed to be secret, but its existence became public knowledge in December 1946. Journalists wrote somewhat sensationalist books in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as documents slowly became available. See Tom Bower, *Paperclip Conspiracy* (Little, Brown, 1987); Linda Hunt, *Secret Agenda* (St. Martin's, 1991). Detailed studies were only possible after the passage of the Nazi War Crimes Disclosure Act in 1998. The most-recent work is Annie Jacobsen, *Operation Paperclip* (Little, Brown, 2014).
10. See National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Microfilm M892, BueteFisch Document Book IV, Document No. 196, Reel 81. See also: Janis Schmelzer, *Devisen fuer den Endsieg* (Schmetterling, 2003), 158–59; Uhlig, *Tarnung*, 183–84, 387–88; Karsten Linne, *Öl für den Endsieg* (Wallstein, 2026), 489–91.
11. May to Fischer, "Entwicklung [...]," June 16, 1933, Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde, R8128/10352.
12. Frank Howard, *Buna Rubber* (Van Nostrand, 1947), esp. Chapters 2–3; Rainer Karlsch, *Faktor Oel* (Beck, 2003), 135–38.
13. "Chronik [...]," December 13, 1944, Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde, R8128/817. For overviews, see: Henrietta Larson, *New Horizons* (Harper, 1971), Chapters 6, 15; Gregory Nowell, *Mercantile States and the World Oil Cartel* (Cornell, 1994), 236ff.
14. Thomas Parke Hughes, "Technological Momentum in History," *Past & Present* 44 (1969): 106–132; Karlsch, *Faktor Oel*, 166–168; Hayes, *Industry and Ideology* (Cambridge, 2000), 117ff.
15. NARA, Record Group (RG) 242, Berlin Document Center Microfilm, A3340, NSDAP Ortsgruppenkartei (MFOK), E051, and NSDAP Zentralkartei (MFKL), G126. Germans who joined the party in March 1933 were known, pejoratively, as the "Märzgefallene" ("March fallen") and tended to be older and wealthier than members who joined before 1933. Juergen Falter, "Die 'Märzgefallene' von 1933," *Historical Social Research* 25 (1998): 280–302.
16. Some of Fischer's correspondence is in: Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde R 8128/10352.
17. Kockel, *Oelpolitik*, passim, esp. 334ff.
18. Fischer, "Der gegenwaertige Stand [...]," September 13, 1934, BASF archives, courtesy of Raymond Stokes.
19. *Trials*, vii: 924. More broadly, see: Mira Wilkins, *Maturing of Multinational Enterprise* (Harvard, 1974), 186–89; <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1934v02/ch9subch7>.
20. Hayes, *Industry*, 140; Kockel, *Oelpolitik*, 212–13.
21. *Trials*, vii: 1202ff.
22. Kehrl, *Krisenmanager*, 203, 207.
23. See, e.g., Keppler to Wiehl, October 17, 1940; Neubacher to Foreign Office, "Stand [...]," 23 February 1942; Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde, R901/112772 and /112777.
24. Fischer, untitled memorandum, September 19 (?), 1940, Bundesanstalt für Geowissenschaften und Rohstoffe, File No. 0049457. For extended discussion of this paper, see: Titus Kockel, "Eine Quelle [...]," *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 1 (2003): 175–208.
25. Clodius to 10 German diplomatic missions, December 4, 1940, reprinted in: *Eichholtz, Krieg um Oel* (Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2006), 51–52; Hayes, *Industry*, 256; Dietrich Eichholtz, *Geschichte der deutschen Kriegswirtschaft* (DeGruyter, 2015), i: 235–38.
26. Anand Toprani, "Germany's Answer to Standard Oil," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37: 6–7 (2014): 949–73; Schmelzer, *Devisen*, 10; Karlsch, *Faktor*, 208–11; Uhlig, *Tarnung*, 388–90.
27. Wittrock to Maulatz, "Unterredung [...]," February 18, 1941; Kuntze to Foreign Office, "Bericht [...]," March 24, 1941; Keppler to Wiehl, April 12, 1941; Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde, R910/116640.

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28. For German efforts in the Caucasus in 1942, see: Anand Toprani, "The First War for Oil," *Journal of Military History* 80 (2016): 815-854; Karlsch, *Faktor Oel*, 213–17; Bruno Koppensteiner and Herman Haeusler, "Das Kaukasus-Oel," *Berichte der Geologischen Bundesanstalt* 140 (2021): 77–102.
29. "Niederschrift [...]," September 21, 1943, Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde, R176/89.
30. Heine, *Verstand*, 61; Schmelzer, *Devisen*, 158–59.
31. Kehrl, *Krisenmanager*, 366ff; Karlsch, *Faktor Oel*, 232–37.
32. Rayner, "German Synthetic Oil Industry [...]," April 20, 1945, NARA, RG 59, 862.6363/4-2045.
33. Davies to Clayton, November 19, 1945, RG 59, 862.6363/11-1945.
34. "Petroleum Press Review," October 1943, NARA, RG 169, Enemy Oil Committee, Box 2201; Uhlig, *Tarnung*, 393.
35. Stockholm to Washington, "Techniques [...]," September 29, 1943, NARA, RG 169, Enemy Oil Committee, Box 2201.
36. See the material enclosed with: Mayer to Grove, "Return [...]," September 6, 1944, NARA, RG 169, Enemy Oil Committee, Box 2201, especially "The Kontinentale Oel A.G.," February 11, 1944.
37. Stone, "Biggest Cartel [...]," *PM Daily* (September 7, 1943).
38. 'Summary [...]' enclosed with: Ickes to Lewis, October 8, 1943, Library of Congress, Ickes Papers, Box 221.
39. Author unclear, "Case [...]," January 28, 1946, British National Archives, FO 1039/496.
40. "Visit [...]," no date (circa July 1945), and Riveline to Harford, "Various [...]," September 28, 1945, both in: British National Archives, FO 1039/496.
41. Bentz, "Supplement [...]," February 11, 1946, British National Archives, FO 1039/496.
42. Titus Kockel, *Deutsche Oelpolitik, 1928–1938* (Akademie Verlag, 2005), 15–17.
43. Dihlman to Peery and Pollock, "List [...]," May 29, 1945, and "Statement [...]," June 6, 1945, both in British National Archives, FO 1039/496.
44. Memo to Murphy, December 11, 1945, NARA, RG 59, 862.6363/12-1145.
45. Heath to Draper, February 4, 1946, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/472567766>.
46. Murphy to Byrnes, "Information [...]," March 4, 1946, NARA, RG 59, 862.6363/3-446.
47. The following discussion draws from: Wangler, "Research Report [...]," August 10, 1946, attached to: Murphy to Byrnes, "Transmitting [...]," August 29, 1946, NARA, RG 59, 862.6363/8-2946. There is a more complete record of this investigation in: NARA, RG 260, OMGUS Property Division, Box 9.
48. See, e.g., Coleman, "Records [...]," June 7, 1946, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/472567766>.
49. Dihlman, "Extract [...]," NARA, RG 260, OMGUS Property Division, Box 9.
50. See, e.g., Dihlman, "Borussia [...]," June 21, 1946, NARA, RG 260, OMGUS Property Division, Box 9.
51. "Translation [...]," September 18, 1943, NARA, RG 260, OMGUS Property Division, Box 9.
52. "Erklaerungen [...]," NARA, RG 260, OMGUS Property Division, Box 9.
53. The oil belonged to Donau Oel (an I.G. Farben subsidiary), which operated within Austria. "Free Translation [...]," July 22, 1946, NARA, RG 260, OMGUS Property Division, Box 9; Uhlig, *Tarnung*, 390ff; Linne, *Endsieg*, 45–46, 193.
54. The Swiss agreed May 1946 to return a fraction of the German gold Swiss banks had purchased from the Reichsbank and liquidate half of German assets in Switzerland, but there was no clear process for the latter. After years of haggling over exchange rates, the Swiss made a small payment in 1952, but only after West Germany agreed to recompense Switzerland. "U.S. and Allied Efforts to Recover [...]," May 1997: <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/GOVPUB-S-PURL-LPS658>; <https://www.dodis.ch/en/washington-agreement-1946>
55. E.g., Janis Schmelzer, "Das Schweizer 'Komitee'," *Schweizerische Gesellschaft fuer Geschichte* 52 (2002): 213–19; Christopher Kobrak, "International Investment and Nazi Politics," *Business History* 48: 3 (2006): 399–427.
56. Schmelzer, *Devisen*, 40-42, 48ff.
57. "Interrogation [...]," attached to: Murphy, "Report [...]," January 17, 1947, NARA, RG 59, 862.6363/1-1747.
58. "Rechnung," 24 April 1945, attached to: Murphy, "Report [...]," January 17, 1947, NARA, RG 59, 862.6363/1-1747.
59. Contra Dihlmann and Schulze-Brachmann, undated declaration, NARA, RG 260, OMGUS Property Division, Box 9.
60. "Protocol [...]" and diary extracts of March–April 1945 attached to: Murphy, "Report [...]," January 17, 1947, NARA, RG 59, 862.6363/1-1747. Emphasis in the original.
61. Wangler, "Supplement [...]," 01 December 1946, attached to: Murphy, "Report [...]," January 17, 1947, NARA, RG 59, 862.6363/1-1747. Emphasis in the original.
62. The following discussion draws from: *Die Schweiz, der Nationalsozialismus und der Zweite Weltkrieg* (Pendo, 2002), 398-399; Uhlig, *Tarnung*, Chapters 5, 11; <https://www.nzz.ch/geschichte/ein-neues-leben-fuer-drei-nazis-ld.1576696>; Schmelzer, *Devisen*, 133ff.
63. Uhlig, *Tarnung*, 187–88.
64. Adam Tooze, *Wages of Destruction* (Allen Lane, 2006), 381; Uhlig, *Tarnung*, 391; Linne, *Endsieg*, 191.
65. Kehrl, *Krisenmanager*, 431.
66. Schmelzer, *Devisen*, 43, and passim; Linne, *Endsieg*, 162.

67. <https://www.badenertagblatt.ch/aargau/baden/friedrich-kadgien-der-ranghohe-nazi-der-jahrelang-im-verenahof-unbehelligt-lebte-ld.1486735>
68. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/sep/06/18th-century-portrait-stolen-by-nazis-recovered-in-argentina>; <https://english.elpais.com/international/2025-09-15/looting-escape-and-mystery-the-hidden-story-behind-the-painting-stolen-by-the-nazis-and-found-in-argentina.html#>
69. Uhlig, *Tarnung*, 395.
70. See the subchapter on “Mineraloel Fischer” in *Regula Bochsler, Nylon und Napalm* (Hier und Jetzt, 2022); Uhlig, *Tarnung*, 183–88, 383ff.
71. Tom Bower, *Blind Eye to Murder* (Andre Deutsch, 1981), Chapter 14; Raymond Stokes, *Divide and Prosper* (California, 1988), esp. 201ff; Mark Spicka, “Devil’s Chemists on Trial,” *Historian* 61 (1999): 865–882.
72. <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-46273374.html>; Heine, *Verstand*, 161, 297.
73. Braunbuch (Staatsverlag der DDR, 1965), 13, 46–47.
74. Schmelzer review for the *Berliner Gesellschaft für Faschismus- und Weltkriegsforschung* of Dietrich Eichholtz, *Deutsche Politik und rumänisches Öl* (Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2005).
75. *MEW Intelligence Minutes*, No. 20, May 24, 1943, NARA, RG 169, Enemy Oil Committee, Box 2201.
76. “Kontinentale Oel A.G.,” no date, NARA, RG 169, Enemy Oil Committee, Box 2201.
77. USSBS, Interview No. 67, July 2, 1945, NARA, RG 243, European Survey, Intelligence Branch, Interrogations, Box 2.
78. Peter Kelly, “The United States Army Air Force Bombing Campaign [...],” *Journal of Military History and Defence Studies* 4: 1 (2023): 116–60.
79. See: USSBS, *Oil Division Final Report* (January 1947), figure 11.
80. Technical Sub-Committee on Axis Oil, *Oil as a Factor in the German War Effort* (March 8, 1946), Combined Arms Research Library, pp. 28 n.10, 148, 156. This report was originally marked “Secret.”
81. *Oil as a Factor*, 24.
82. Foreign Office, “Factor [...],” June 19, 1945, enclosed with: Kilbey to Rayner, July 16, 1945, NARA, RG 169, Enemy Oil Committee, Box 2202.
83. Grove to Kilbey, July 21, 1945, NARA, RG 169, Enemy Oil Committee, Box 2202.
84. E.g. Eichholtz, *Geschichte*, i: 39ff; Schmelzer, *IG Farben*, passim, esp. 104ff. The film was a thinly veiled dramatization of I.G. Farben’s role in supporting the Third Reich by producing poison gas. After Germany loses the war, the executives of the firm escape prosecution because the US government wants the company to restart production so it can use the gas against the Soviet Union.
85. Luke Daly-Groves, “Control not Morality?” *Intelligence and National Security* 35: 3 (2020): 331–49.
86. Compare Bower, *Paperclip*, 273–74 and Hunt, *Agenda*, 257–61 with Jacobsen, *Paperclip*, passim, esp. chapters 6, 11.
87. See, e.g., Dave Oliver and Anand Toprani, *American Defense Reform* (Georgetown, 2022), 265, n. 6. For nuanced perspectives on Paperclip, see Michael Neufeld’s review of Jacobsen, *Paperclip* at <https://www.thespacereview.com/article/2769/1>; Brian Crim, *Our Germans* (JHU Press, 2018); and Monique Laney, *German Rocketeers in the Heart of Dixie* (Yale, 2015), esp. chapter 1.
88. Richard Breitman, et al., ed. *U.S Intelligence and the Nazis* (Cambridge, 2005), 7. See also: Hunt, *Agenda*, Chapter 10; Jacobsen, *Paperclip*, Chapter 16. ■