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978-0-521-82246-7 - Nazis and Good Neighbors: The United States Campaign against the Germans of Latin America in World War II
Max Paul Friedman
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Nazis and Good Neighbors

The United States Campaign against the Germans of Latin America in World War II

Based on research in seven countries, this international history uncovers an American security program in which Washington reached into fifteen Latin American countries to seize more than 4,000 German expatriates and intern them in the Texas desert. The crowd of Nazi Party members, antifascist exiles, and even Jewish refugees were lumped together in camps riven by strife.

The book examines the evolution of governmental policy, its impact on individuals and emigrant communities, and the ideological assumptions that blinded officials in both Washington and Berlin to Latin American realities. Franklin Roosevelt's vaunted Good Neighbor policy was a victim of this effort to force reluctant Latin American governments to hand over their German residents, while the operation ruined an opportunity to rescue victims of the Holocaust. This study makes the very contemporary argument that security measures based on group affiliation rather than individual actions are as unjust and ineffective in foreign policy as they are in law enforcement.

Max Paul Friedman is Assistant Professor of History at Florida State University and a former Woodrow Wilson Postdoctoral Fellow in the Humanities. His work has been published in *The Americas* and *The Oral History Review.* Before entering academia, he was assistant producer for National Public Radio's "All Things Considered" and a freelance writer published in the *Washington Post, New York Newsday, Atlanta Constitution, Cleveland Plain Dealer, Orlando Sentinel,* and other newspapers and magazines. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley in 2000.

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For My Father

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Prologue

San Francisco, California, April 1945. Werner Kappel lies in his hospital bed, his cheek full of shrapnel, his jaw broken, clutching his newly awarded medal, a Purple Heart. He has plenty of time to reflect on the strange course of events that brought him to this point.

Werner was the sixteen-year-old son of German Jewish parents in 1938 when his father Fred Kappel, a leather wholesaler in Berlin, was threatened by the Gestapo and ordered to leave Nazi Germany. Father and son slipped out to Denmark and made their way to Panama, where they earned a living as bus drivers. Then, on December 7, 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, and the U.S. government put into motion an obscure operation to secure its southern flank. Identified by U.S. intelligence agents as possible Nazi subversives, Fred and Werner Kappel, along with more than four thousand other Germans from Latin America, were deported to the United States and interned in camps in the Texas desert.

For the next year and a half, from behind barbed wire, Fred wrote frantic letters to everyone he could think of: the State Department, the White House, the Justice Department, American Jewish organizations. His campaign, and protests by some of the other eighty Jewish refugees interned in camps for "dangerous alien enemies," eventually secured their conditional release on parole in late 1943. Werner Kappel went to St. Louis, where he found a job as a baker's apprentice – and was drafted into the U.S. Army.

Shipped to the Philippines, Werner was seriously wounded in fighting on Luzon. Six months of hospitalization followed. His earlier petition for U.S. citizenship was denied on the grounds that he had entered the country illegally – a cruel irony for someone seized and brought to the United States by force. But his congressman took an interest in his case, and by the end of June 1945, he would take the naturalization oath before an immigration judge. It would take another six months for Werner Kappel, decorated war veteran and U.S. citizen, to be released from the supervision of the government's Alien Enemy Control Unit.

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"The whole thing was very unfair," Werner recalled many years later. "We had nothing to do with Hitler, because we were chased out by the Nazis. We didn't even feel like Germans anymore, and the Germans didn't think we were Germans – only the Americans thought so." Time has allowed him to forgive, if not forget, what happened to him and many others seized in Latin America in the Second World War. "When you left Germany to get away from Nazism, and then you get thrown into a camp for Nazis, it was idiotic," he says today. "When I think about it, I get angry right now!"[1]

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Broadening a foreign relations study beyond the records of the policymakers to consider its impact on the individuals and nations that are its object; finding evidence not easily available in the United States; and considering the perspectives from abroad and from below – these goals make multinational archival work an imperative. My research and interviews overseas would not have been possible without the support of the following institutions: the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, the Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, the Mellon Foundation, the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute, the Rockefeller Archive Center, the American Historical Association, the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation, and at Berkeley, the Institute of International Studies, the Center for German and European Studies, the Center for Latin American Studies, the Graduate Division, and the Department of History.

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More than forty people involved in this murky corner of history agreed to speak with me about their experiences (their names appear in the Bibliography). Our conversations were not always easy for them. They already have my thanks, to which I add my respect and appreciation for their willingness to wrestle with the past.

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From that golden summer afternoon in Berkeley when I first saw Katharina to the cold Berlin winters we've spent working at one desk while arguing in two languages, I have been entranced by her sharpness of mind, the pleasure she takes in irony, and her unmasterable spirit. *Sine te nihil.*

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