

Space age again. Peenemünde and superpower dreams

In Peenemünde, the Nazis built a rocket base. Today, the public can observe the remains, and ponder the techno-optimism that existed at the beginning of the space age.

It is here that the Space Age began, with the German rocket program during 1930s and '40s. It is here that the Swedish dreams of becoming a superpower gained momentum, three hundred years earlier, when, in 1630, Gustavus Adolphus went ashore on the north coast of Usedom to intervene in what became the Thirty Years' War.

Of the Third Reich's rocket base, an enormous power plant remains – a grotesque colossus, renovated a few years ago as a museum of both rocket technology and Nazi crimes. "Förfäras ej Du lilla hop" (Be not terrified, my little flock), we read on the back of the memorial stone to the Swedish disembarkation in the cemetery a few hundred meters away. "Thou shalt not kill" is the contemporary message of resistance from the modest chapel walls.

It is a gray and desolate experience to step off the train at the final destination for the seaside resort of Usedom, with the sign "Peenemünde". "But where is the town center?" a woman traveling alone with a baby carriage asks, and from what I can see, there isn't even a village here.

Across from us is an abandoned row of condemned houses from the 1930s with their windows smashed and shrubs and trees growing into the stairwells. An apologetic notice from the municipal authorities on a construction enclosure surrounding the area indicates that the

houses are private property and that the municipality is not responsible for the neglect. Perhaps the private owners are in the West. Local politicians in the old East Germany, the former GDR, tend rather frequently to complain about "Wessies" who have purchased or reacquired houses in the East that they fail to take care of. The money of those who have invested in the area is all the more visible just a few kilometers from here, where a string of exquisite seaside resorts from the imperial period has been cleaned and polished and stretches eastward up to, and even across, the border into Poland.

But a vacation atmosphere has never come to Peenemünde. The western corner of the beach island, Usedom, was unspoiled land when the rocket engineer Wernher von Braun chose the area as an appropriate test base, in order to have a free artillery range over German waters 400 km towards the east off the Bay of Gdansk (then known as Danzig Bay). And although the cape was outside the general motorways, it was only a few hours straight north from the national capital, Berlin. Here, starting in 1937, a whole city was built for over 10,000 inhabitants and for forced laborers in a concentration camp, along with factory facilities and launchpads.

On October 3 (now the date of German Unity Day!), 1942, the first successful launch of an A4 rocket took place. In early summer 1943 the Western powers had begun to understand what was going on, and in August the same

year, Peenemünde was subject to allied bombing raids. Weapons production was moved underground to Thuringia in southern Germany. At the end of the war in 1945, the generals and engineers had fled Usedom.

The Nazi rocket facility became, for forty years, a coal-fired power plant that covered local needs, as well as a GDR airforce base. Only with German unification in 1990 was the public finally able to visit the area for the first time. Now, the verdure of nature is once again getting the upper hand and covers most of the remnants of the launch pads. Signs warn of unexploded ordnance and grenades in the fast-growing deciduous forest.

Here, in its gloominess, the evil heritage of history is stored. But Peenemünde also is compelling for rocket and technology enthusiasts who come here in order to learn and reflect on how today's Space Age and satellite-based communication society began.

It was also German enthusiasts from the area who first wanted to do something with Peenemünde in 1992, in time for 50th anniversary of the first successful rocket experiments. Here, a technical museum displaying the modern technological wonders of our age would be built. But the leaders of the Federal Republic knew all too well about Germany's need to constantly work through their history, and, instead, what was built was a place for historical reflection on over both space romanticism, Nazi crimes, the Cold War, and scientific knowledge in the service of military needs.

The balance in the exhibition between Nazi history, techno-optimism, and fantasies of space, has, of course, been difficult to maintain. But it works to some degree. What is most distracting is a nostalgic graveyard of worn out and decommissioned aircraft, helicopters, and missiles from the Soviet and GDR era that occupies the isolated space in front of the museum. There are more worrisome connections between Peenemünde and things that still live on in our time.

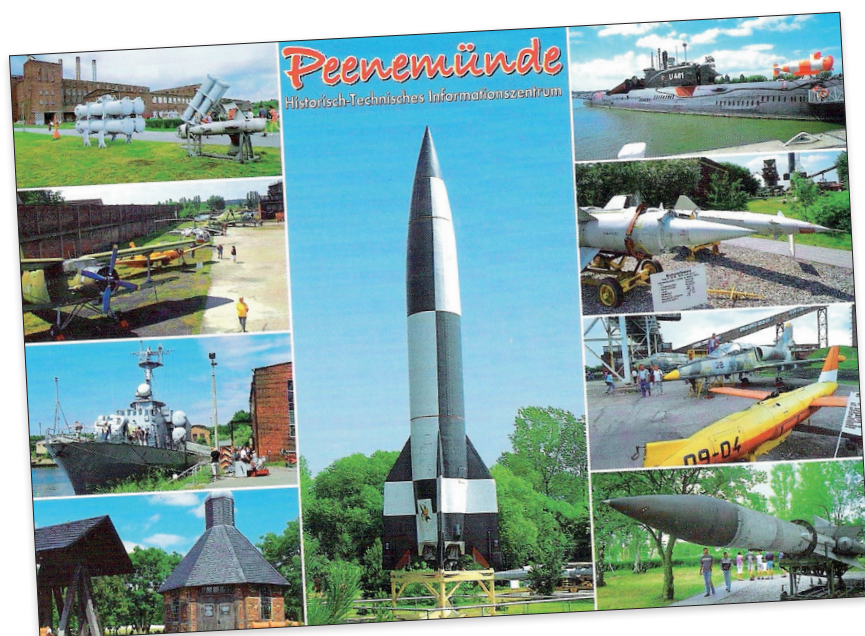
It was with the cheerful engineering optimism of the early 20th century that interest in rockets began. The first museum halls show the infatuation for

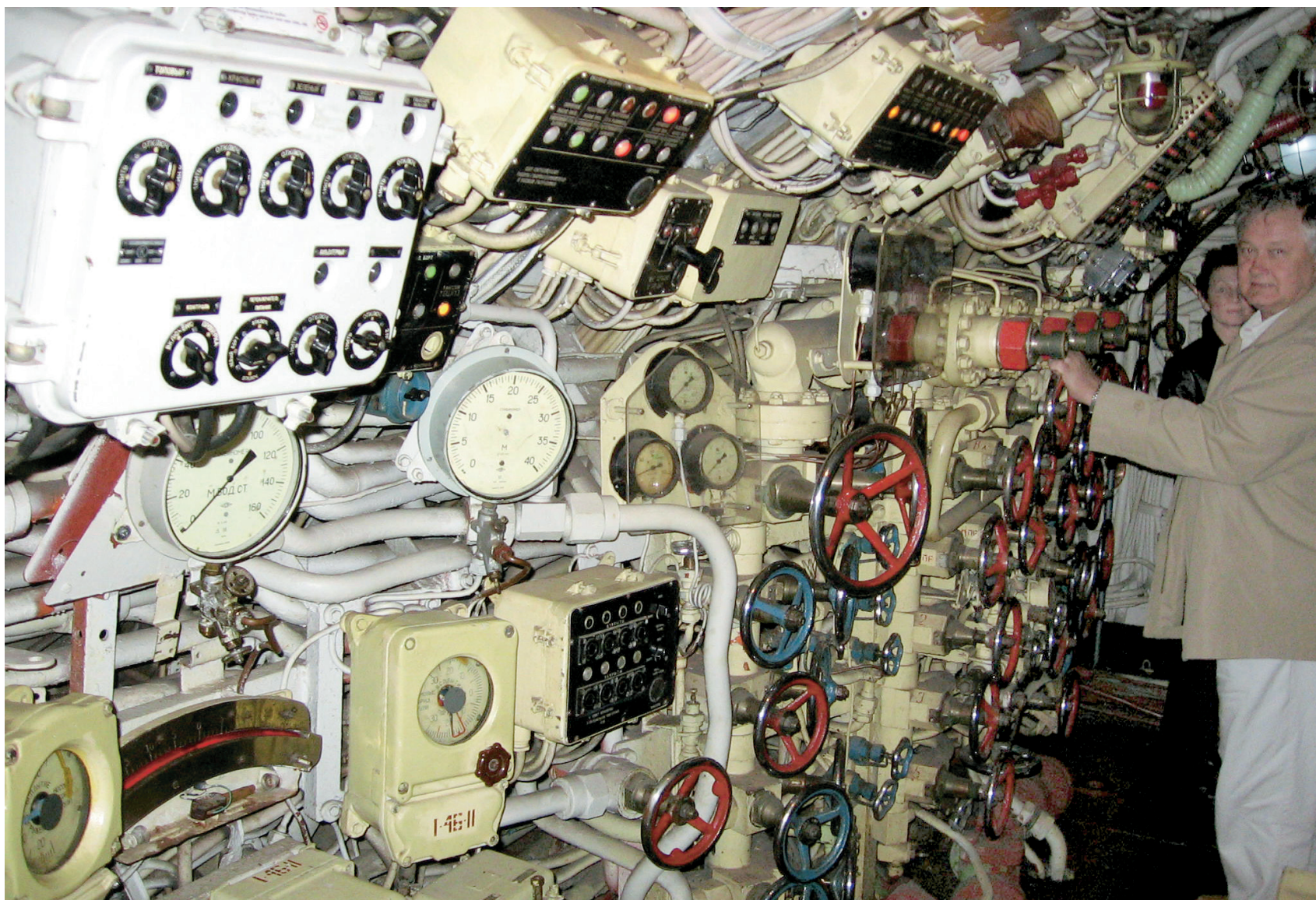
space in Germany during the 1920s, and we can see excerpts from *Woman in the Moon*, by the great filmmaker of the time, Fritz Lang. But as is customary with technological development, the engineers had to turn to the military to gather momentum and get money for their projects. Space and a potential "Star Wars" were still beyond the horizon of the military strategists' imagination. But the possibility of being able to develop a carrier of bombs with great range and high precision was attractive.

At the same time, the traditional antagonism among the branches of the military put a spoke in the wheels of the development of the technology. The army had its testing laboratories in the western part of the new city, and the air force had its in the east. Adolf Hitler himself and the Nazi leadership were never completely overcome by enthusiasm for rockets. It is frightening to think what might have happened if Hitler had believed more strongly in rocket-based weapons, waited to launch the war until they were fully developed, and, from the beginning, had access to a weapon of mass destruction that his opponents in both the West and the East did not have. As it was, rocket-based weapons came into play only during the last phase of the war, and merely contributed to prolonging death and suffering when the battle for Europe was already lost for the Germans.

The head of development, Wernher von Braun, even came into conflict with the Nazi leadership when he and his colleagues increasingly wanted to focus money and attention on developing space rockets, rather than mass-producing efficient carriers of weapons for a war that had begun to go badly for Germany. But von Braun was no political virgin, and was perhaps even an opportunist. During his time in Peenemünde he joined both the Nazi Party (1937) and the SS (1940), and said that he admired Hitler.

The last exhibition halls in Peenemünde form a bridge to the Space Age we still find ourselves in the middle of. At the same time, they tell the unsavory postwar story of how German expertise was divided up among the victorious powers after World War II. Both the rocket engineers and officers were quickly exonerated of their past in Nazi Germany and took on important roles





in the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France, where they contributed to the development of space technology and the new Cold War.

In the fall of 1944, Wernher von Braun had sensed that the tide had turned, and began talking about establishing contacts with the Americans. He and the military commandant in Peenemünde, Walter Dornberger, surrendered to U.S. troops at the end of the war and were interned in Garmisch-Partenkirchen in the Bavarian Alps. Von Braun's imprisonment was a short few months, Dornberger's, two years in Great Britain. Both found themselves in the U.S. just in time for the beginning of the Cold War. As early as the 1950s, Wernher von Braun had become something of an American hero, and is now remembered mostly as the brain behind both the Saturn rockets and the Apollo Program. Major-General Walter Dornberger worked at the airbase in Dayton, Ohio (known now for the treaty of 1995 that was signed after the war in Bosnia)

and was able to retire as vice president of Bell Aircraft.

"Once rockets are up, who cares where they come down/ that's not my department, says Wernher von Braun", sang the 1960s satirist Tom Lehrer about that career. But isn't it in fact too serious to joke about? What if "Chemical Ali" from Saddam Hussein's Iraq was taken to the U.S. today to be head of development at Dow Chemicals?

Regardless, Peenemünde, in one way, is more unpleasant than many other memorials to the horrors of the Nazi era because we so clearly can see the connection to the successes and dreams of our own time.

And, moreover, even though the Cold War is over, the western tip of Usedom continues to have strategic importance. The massive turbine area in the abandoned power plant has been converted into a concert hall. On the exterior wall, there is a banner from the concert season that has just ended. First among the sponsors of this year's music festival on Usedom is Nordstream, the company behind the Russian-German gas pipeline

that will cross the Baltic Sea.

It will reach German soil in Greifswald around the corner from Peenemünde. ✖

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Museum Peenemünde. Historisch-Technisches Informationszentrum im Kraftwerk. Open daily April–September, 10:00 a.m. — 6:00 p.m. October–March 10:00 a.m. — 4:00 p.m. (closed on Mondays, November–March) www.peenemuende.de



Turncoat Wernher von Braun. Hitler's man until 1944. American hero of the Apollo program.