

All the Allies wanted to capture Wernher von Braun. Each country wanted to put the brilliant man to work on their own projects.

British Intelligence had compiled a book with the names of major German and Austrian scientists. In the final months of 1944, British and American intelligence agents looked for those scientists in France.

Then ... the Allies learned that von Braun had likely moved his V-2 factory to the center of Germany, near a town called Nordhausen.

On the morning of April 11, 1945 Americans found von Braun's factory. Hidden underground, it was the one of the most extraordinary "finds" of the war.

Assembly lines, untouched by Allied bombs, were completely intact. Weapons of mass destruction were in the final stages of production, soon to be released into enemy territory where they could inflict maximum damage.

The scale of von Braun's operation was breathtaking. Slave laborers comprised the crews building the deadly and much-feared V-2s. Some of the workers were as young as 14 and all were cold, tired and hungry.

Anyone who attempted "sabotage" would be sentenced to death by hanging. Just about any infraction could be treated as "sabotage."

Workers lived in a nearby concentration camp. When the Americans discovered the V-2 plant at Nordhausen, they also discovered the true cost of the German rocket program: underfed, sick, emaciated and dying people. How did von Braun come to use the tunnels and underground areas, at Nordhausen, as a rocket factory?

The short answer is: gypsum.

People had been mining the Kohnstein hill, near Nordhausen, for gypsum since 1917. As with other gypsum mines, in other parts of the world, the mining creates (and leaves behind) a series of tunnels.

The tunnels of the Kohnstein hill had a planned use around 1934. They would be used as underground storage areas for petroleum reserves.

To make the original area even more useful, workers dug two parallel tunnels running north to south. They were connected by galleries—a series of ladder-like chambers—which ran between the main tunnels. There was also a smaller service tunnel, which ran through the middle (and was parallel to the main tunnels).

The whole system was connected by a narrow-gauge railway, not uncommon in mining operations. By mid-1943, the tunnel complex near Nordhausen was Germany's largest storage area for oil and fuel.

Then its use dramatically changed.

Von Braun needed a new place to build his V-2 rockets. The Allies had bombed his Peenemünde complex, on the Baltic coast, in August of 1943 and again in early 1944, so the tunnels in Kohnstein hill became a factory instead of a storage unit.

"Mittelwerk," a company tasked with continuing the V-2 production, was in charge. Its supervisors used slave laborers from Buchenwald, a nearby concentration camp, to work on improving the tunnels and assembling the rockets.

Initially the workers lived in the tunnels since they could not "commute" from Buchenwald. Living conditions were atrocious, even worse than at Buchenwald, because of the darkness, dampness, dustiness and noisiness of an underground work site.

Thereafter, a new concentration camp was built on the south side of Kohnstein hill to house the slave laborers. Principally known as "Dora," it was also called "Mittelbau," and grew into one of Germany's largest labor camps. Under cover of the hill, Dora workers produced:

- V-2 rockets
- V-1 "flying bombs"
- Jet engines for Me 262 aircraft

- Jet engines for Ar 234 aircraft
- Anti-aircraft missiles called “Taifun”
- Anti-aircraft missiles called “Orkan”

By the time the Allies liberated the Nordhausen area—on the 11th of April, 1945—the secret Mittelwerk operation had produced more than 13,000 V-1 and V-2 rockets for the Third Reich.

Before the Soviets took over the site, in July of 1945, the Americans and British removed as many parts and completed rockets as they could physically handle.

After the Russians also removed whatever they wanted from the tunnels, they attempted to blow-up the interior. Since that wasn’t possible, they instead sealed the exterior tunnels with a series of explosions in 1948.

The site remained in that condition until Germany was reunified in 1989. Thereafter, people exploring the tunnel-remains found many V-1 and V-2 parts. Some of those artifacts were brought to museums.

In 1995, the government had a new tunnel created, not far from the previously exploded entrance, so tourists could view a part of what had once been a place of production for the Third Reich (on the one hand) and a place of death for slave laborers (on the other hand).

More than 10,000 prisoners died building V-2 rockets.

See, also:

Operation Paperclip

Hitler's Scientists - The ME-163 Rocket Plane

Hitler's Scientists - von Braun Surrenders

Hitler's Scientists - Impact on US and USSR Technology

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Producers: David Dugan, Mark Radice and Emily Roe

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Media Stream



Map Depicting Buchenwald and Nazi Labor Camps

Map image online, courtesy U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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