

ISLANDS IN SPACE

It is hard to understand the furor raised by the German proposal to send rocket-ships to a point in space 5,000 miles distant and there build a platform or island for a sodium mirror which is to concentrate the sun's rays on the earth to generate power. The Army officers who discovered plans for a "space island" in German archives evidently knew nothing of rocket history and primed the correspondents with information which has been available in print ever since 1928. In that year the late Count Potocnic, a retired officer of the Austrian Army, who wrote under the pen name "Hermann Noordung," devoted a whole pamphlet to islands in space. He was followed by Count Guido von Pirquet, a practicing engineer; Hermann Oberth, and others—all excellent physicists and mathematicians. A popular American scientific periodical took Potocnic's plans and embellished them in the best pulp-magazine fashion, so that some thousands of America's boys knew all about them long before the war.

Mad as islands in space may seem, they could be created in theory. Von Pirquet insisted on them because they were needed as refueling stations for rocket-ships bound for Mars and Venus. Without them it was simply impossible for a rocket-ship to carry enough fuel millions of miles. Practical considerations therefore inspired the astronauts and not dreams of scorching large sections of the earth. Even if they had widespread devastation in mind, von Pirquet, Oberth and the rest knew that it would be hard to direct blistering solar beams on successive spots. There was also the problem of obscuring clouds and of handling huge sheets of sodium, a metal which combines with oxygen on the earth and is thus reduced to caustic soda.

The astronauts displayed extraordinary ingenuity in their plans. Islands which were to become little moons were placed (on paper) at various distances from the earth and their periods of revolution calculated. Count Potocnic had the best idea. His artificial moon-island was located exactly 22,300 miles away, because at that distance it would revolve around the earth once in twenty-four hours and therefore remain stationary over one spot. Incredible as it may seem, it would be easier to assemble such an island than to fly directly to the moon or to Mars. The astronauts were not quite as insane or bloodthirsty as they have been painted. In fact, they were so practical that

without their aid the Germans probably would never have developed the V-1 and V-2.