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Managing the catastrophe: bavarian cities in the Total War

Wailing sirens, nights in makeshift cellars used as air raid shelters, destroyed flats, dead relatives and neighbours, hunger, evacuations: all those things have been engraved on the minds of many Germans, and they have shaped their memory of the war years between 1939 and 1945, when the National Socialist terror struck back against German territory with merciless cruelty. For many Germans, the bombing of their cities was a central part of their war experience during the Second World War. Those clear lines of distinction between front and home - they did not exist any longer. It took a long time until scholars of contemporary history started to do some research into German war society, its inner changes and its dynamics under the despotic inner and outer mobilization for the racist war, and the research into the closing phase of the National Socialist rule has only just started.

At the centre of this there is the air war against German cities, the urban catastrophe. Aerial warfare changed the face of the cities, destroyed historic building stock grown over centuries, aggravated existing conflicts on the housing market, and confronted the authorities and the National Socialist party with so far unknown challenges. The problems that communal authorities had to deal with were various - such as protecting the people against air raids, evacuations, keeping up the food supply, and maintaining the lines of communication. At the same time, it became more and more unlikely that the central government in Berlin would provide the resources that were urgently needed to cope with the crisis. However, it would be misleading to believe that life in the cities had been peaceful before they were turned into zones of war and terror by allied bombing, for the "home front" of the cities was by no means civilian. As the war went on, it became more and more clear, and especially so in those cities that were massively hit by allied bombing, how closely National Socialist welfare was intertwined with the mechanisms of extermination. Forced labour, "aryanization", and concentration camps were no "alien elements", but integral parts of racist German war society.

Consequently, the way in which local authorities coped with the crisis was also a question of inclusion and exclusion, depending on who counted as a member of the so-called "Volksgemeinschaft" and who did not. The criteria for this began to shift as the war went on, to wit from a racist biologism towards an increasingly radical form of social utilitarianism. In other words, the potential of economic achievement and usability became the decisive criterion for the allocation of the scarce resources.[1] The fact that National Socialist officials were gaining more and more power within the bureaucratic apparatus was an important precondition for this development. By looking at the examples of two big cities in Southern Germany, Nuremberg and Munich[2], this article demonstrates what strategies local authorities used in order to deal with problems resulting from the bombardments, and it pays special attention to the role of the NSDAP.

War and Destruction

The destruction of Munich and Nuremberg was primarily a result of the last phase of the war, 1943/45. During the first phase of aerial warfare, beginning in 1940, allied bombers had largely spared Nuremberg and Munich, as opposed to Northern and Western Germany. The British bases were more than 900 km away, and at the beginning of the war, the RAF bombers

scarcely had the technical capability of flying attacks against targets that were so far away. It was only when the British and the Americans were able to fly joint attacks by day and by night against targets in the heart of the *Reich*, with the noose around Germany's neck tightening even further as a result of the allied advance in Italy, that cities in Southern Germany increasingly came under the fire of the bomber squadrons, too. Partly, this was due to the central symbolic role that those two cities played in Nazi propaganda: Munich as the seedbed of the National Socialist movement, and Nuremberg as the centre of propagandist self-aggrandizement.

Munich had to suffer the worst attacks with the biggest destructions and the highest death toll in 1944. In Nuremberg, an attack on January 2nd, 1945, which took place after the city had suffered several waves of attack within a short time, had the most serious consequences. In one night, 1,794 people were killed, and more than 100,000 lost their homes. The total death toll of the air raids against Munich and Nuremberg amounted to about 6,000 people. In Munich, the so-called "capital of the National Socialist movement",33 % of the houses and flats were partly or totally destroyed. Compared to other German cities, however, Munich had got off relatively lightly. Nuremberg, styled as the "city of the *Reichsparteitage*", i. e. the Nazi party conferences, had been hit a lot harder: about half of the houses had become uninhabitable.

The local communities and the beginning of the war

"When the siren sounds, it is your first and foremost duty to stay calm: a panic is more dangerous than bombs!" From the beginning of the war, such propagandist set phrases were central to the National Socialist rhetoric of air raid defence. By means of corresponding leaflets, National Socialist activists tried to prepare the population for aerial warfare. Yet, the necessary action, namely to provide for the active protection of the citizens, was hardly taken. Although the National Socialist leaders said that each single person had to prepare themselves for war, people could not imagine then that urban centres in Southern Germany would be attacked with equal intensity as the war went on. Consequently, there were not enough air raid shelters, not to mention proper bunkers, and the remaining resources were to be invested, on order of Hitler, in the production of armaments and not in home defence. At the beginning of 1942, there was only space for 12,500 people in the air raid shelters of Nuremberg, but the city counted 400,000 inhabitants.[3] This was appalling, because, like Munich, Nuremberg had been classified as belonging to category I in the ranking of places in Bavaria that needed special protection against air raids - which should have resulted in special attention being paid to that issue. The lack of appropriate air raid shelter in the Bavarian capital led to civilian protest as the war went on. Hitler himself had Martin Bormann announce on June 29th, 1943, that "the precautions taken against air raids were totally inadequate"[4], and that the cooperation of the authorities responsible must be improved, and fast - a complaint which was aggravated and perpetuated by the problem of evacuees from other parts of the *Reich*.

With the first large scale attack of the British on September 20, 1942, "total war" from above reached Munich. The Royal Air Force killed about 150 people at this first heavy bombardment, with 400 wounded and 6000 made homeless. Even the leading local Nazis had now understood that the situation of the city had been dramatically changed by the new Anglo-American strategy of precise area-bombing against German cities and the allieds' improved navigational technique. Whereas Munich and Upper Bavaria had been regarded as "the *Reich's* air raid shelter" even at the end of 1941, this raid had brought it home to

absolutely everybody that Munich was jeopardized by allied attacks just as much as any other city of the *Reich*.

Immediately after the attack, a scenario began which was to be repeated in similar form more and more frequently, until the war was finally over. The fire brigade and the local, police, party, or army air defence units frantically tried to extinguish the fires; the town's fire watchers on their lookout towers reported the sources of fire to the air-raid wardens, who could then specifically deploy the fire-fighters. The British bombs had not started widespread fire storms in the city comparable to Hamburg or Lübeck, but there were many people trapped in cellars which had collapsed because of their insufficient quality and because the RAF had dropped high-explosive bombs. The National Socialist propaganda tried to play down this attack, as well as the ones that followed, but even at the first attacks, there was great feeling of uncertainty, and a deep anxiety that the war would increasingly extend.[5]

Before the war, the organisation of air raid defence had been a part of general administration, divided between the police, the air force and the local authorities. The commanders of the local police and the air-raid wardens, usually the local police administrators, formed the lowest levels of the air defence institutions.[6] They controlled the so-called "police for air defence" and the "expanded self defence" (erweiterter Selbstschutz). It was the central task of the local air-raid wardens to "get public and economic life going again as fast as possible"[7] after an attack; they also had to ensure that there was a "uniform command", that the deployment of the units of firemen was coordinated, and that the cooperation with the *Wehrmacht* and other authorities that dealt with the fires and the damages worked. Like in Munich, air raid defence was seen to by the chief of local police in Nuremberg, too.[8] This was SS man Dr. Benno Martin. Apart from the *"Fachführer"* or departmental leaders, i.e. representatives of the fire brigade and of the medical, repair and decontamination services, his staff comprised, among others, a commander of the constabulary, an officer for air raid defence and road communications, as well as a signals officer, who was to take care of all questions regarding the infrastructure of communication.[9]

Up to this point, there had not yet been any formal integration of the NSDAP. Martin, however, was a leading representative of the party, and he was at the head of the institutions entrusted with air raid defence in Nuremberg. Within the party, he had won the power struggle against Streicher; therefore, he could dominate the field of air raid defence, too. But what was going to happen now, as the war went on, and as the legal and bureaucratic rule of traditional municipal administration, with its factual, de-personalized and formalized regulations, was increasingly questioned, both by the National Socialist apparatus and by the pressure to work more efficiently? As late as September 1941, the so-called *Gauleitung* of the administrative district of Munich-Upper Bavaria had pointed out that in case of an air raid, the NSDAP was merely to see that contact was established with the local air raid defence forces, and to look after the homeless when the raid was over.[10] There were still no orders for the NSDAP to actively engage in air raid defence. This changed with the radicalization of aerial warfare. From 1942/43 onwards, Frick instructed the *Gauleitungen,* in his function as an authorized representative of the *Reich's* administration, to set up an office for air raid defence in each local branch of the NSDAP.[11] According to the directions from Berlin, all of this was intended to take place under the command of the party and the NSDAP-*Ortsgruppenleiter*, i.e. the leader of the party's respective local branch.

This new distribution of competences[12], which was agreed between the *Reich's* Ministry of Aviation and the Party Chancellery at the end of 1942, was intended to serve two purposes: first, it was to acknowledge and to satisfy the Party's growing demand for power, secondly, it

was to put an end to the increasingly frequent complaints about the lack of coordination between the party, the *Gau* leaders, the *Wehrmacht,* and the municipal authorities. The expansion of competences concerned various fields of municipal "defence of the *Reich*" - and National Socialist "man management" ("Menschenführung") and "man care" ("Menschenbetreuung") usually went hand in hand: the leaders of the party's local branches and the leaders of the party's superior districts did not only take over the propagandist stabilization of the home front, but they were now also responsible for immediately dealing with an emergency situation. They had to see to the construction of ditches and air raid shelters, they had to take care that the dead were recovered and that the rubble was cleared, they had to keep watch that the windows were blacked out, and they also shared in the responsibility of providing shelter and food for those who had been bombed out of their houses or evacuated.

Often, it was now the party who took decisions, whilst the local authorities were asked to provide for the financial means and the technical organization. Depending on the local circumstances and the influence of the *Gau* leaders and the commissioners for the defence of the Reich, the so called *Reichsverteidigungskommissare*, this development could be faster or slower. It seems that in Munich, the expansion of the NSDAP, which was spreading like a disease, had progressed further than in Nuremberg.[13] Nevertheless, it is true for both cities that the party could present and define itself by stressing its basic function as a "friend in need" - a function that could no longer be performed by the municipal authorities, with their inner structures dissolving under outer pressure.

In spite of the critical war situation, the NSDAP still had certain resources in its affiliated organizations like the NSV, the DAF or the Hitler Youth, both men and material, and partly recruited by force. The municipal authorities, however, often had to experience that their emergency plans proved totally inadequate when tested on the reality of the attacks. The aggressive dynamics that local and regional party organisations used to get into the first row of administrative competence, thereby utilizing air raid defence as a means to a certain end, did not meet with great resistance from the part of the existing bureaucratic order, neither in Nuremberg nor in Munich. It goes without saying that the municipal officials were extremely irritated when, for example, the Munich *Gau* leader Giesler used the town budget in order to finance what the *Reich* should have paid for, or that the office of the head of the department for air raid defence fell within the competence of the party.[14]

It would, however, be misleading to infer general political differences from the fact that there were institutional conflicts, founded in polycratic structures, about who was responsible for what - as it was frequently done by officials formerly employed in the field of air raid defence after the war.[15] On the contrary, this was precisely the characteristic trait of the National Socialist regime: the party increasingly dictated how "jobs" were to be shared, and by this principle, the catastrophe was intended to be coped with. And indeed: for a short period, this form of municipal polycraty and of authorities especially created for the purpose of defending the *Reich* was a practicable means to counteract the dysfunctionality and the weakness of leadership at the centre - although the rule of the bureaucracy was deliberately eroded. This was e.g. true for the emergency measures to clear away the rubble, although the resources of building materials were dwindling, and to keep up a minimum of administrative activity. The fact that the power of the party was growing is, at the same time, an essential element of the crisis and of the delegimization of the National Socialist state. For as aerial warfare was getting more radical, it became clear that no effort, however superhuman, would hold out against the superior strength of the allied forces, even if all resources were mustered, even if the party seemed to be untiring.

In the end, the bombing affected the whole social fabric of urban society; from 1943 onwards the latest, the physiognomies Munich and Nuremberg and their capability for self-organization had changed dramatically. This was not only because so many flats and houses had been destroyed. It was rather because the people were on the move, trying to escape, and because demographic change had hit both cities hard. The development had been triggered not least by the evacuees, who flocked to the district of Munich-Upper Bavaria from other parts of the *Reich* and competed for the resources with the city's indigenous inhabitants. Conflicts were inevitable.[16] The relocation of families or their voluntary exodus belongs into this context: many people left the cities and seeked shelter with friends and relatives nearby, sometimes by arrangement of the authorities, but frequently without the knowledge of the latter. In Munich, for example, the number of inhabitants had risen from 826,690 to 863, 384 between April 1940 and December 1942 due to migration from the West and the North. By December 1943, however, when Munich had come into the frontline, too, the population had dropped to 677,739. It was further diminished until it reached, shortly before the end of the war, a number of 430,000. Within five years, Munich had lost half its population![17]

The period during which power was extensively expanded was therefore not of short duration, and not just supported by a lot of propagandist fuss. On the contrary, it contained already the seeds of defeat. The consequences for the local administrative bodies in Munich and in Nuremberg were paradox: As regards the relationship with the party, the bombardments entailed a loss of administrative competence and bureaucratic autonomy. As regards the relationship with the authorities of the *Reich* and the intermediate authorities, there was a gain in the scope of decisions, born of necessity, or rather of self-induced problems and conflicts, a scope which the regional party organs tried to fill

Local communities, forced labour and defence against air raids

Yet one should not disregard that there was a downside to this combination of bureaucratic self-destruction and the new institutionalisation[18] of party power. First, much of what was grandiosely promised by the local branches of the NSDAP remained just propaganda and was outstripped by reality. Second, strategies to deal with problems on a local level were directly linked to an expansion of inner terror. This was because the strain of the air raids was not the least important factor in the process of the rendering the regime's social-utalitarianist premises more radical. Those premises also radicalized the institutional mechanisms of exclusion, which took effect to define the *Volksgemeinschaft*. One example is how the air raid intervention forces in Munich were financed: their basic equipment, consisting of gasmasks, shovels and portable hoses was financed by what had been gained by seizing Jewish possessions.[19]

Another example for the development described was the way in which the rubble was cleared away. It was not only the soldiers of the *Wehrmacht*, civilian employees and voluntary helpers who had to do this frequently life-threatening job, but also prisoners, forced labourers from occupied countries and inmates of concentration camps - in Munich alone, 5,500 of them were deployed after the raid in September 1942. There was a serious shortage of labour (Arbeitskräftemangel), and therefore, the often cited *Volksgemeinschaft* revealed its racist core during the war. It is not surprising that inmates of concentration camps, foreigners doing forced labour, and the few Jews who had not been deported yet were not allowed entry to safe air raid shelters or had to be content with makeshift shelters. The local NSDAP branch München-Keuslingstraße asked the "half Jew" Adolf Franck in March 1944 to not use the

shelter of the "house community" any longer, as the inhabitants "could not be expected to bear this". In future, he was to go into the cellar department belonging to his flat in case of an air raid.[20] In Nuremberg, an employee of the city wrote a letter to the police president in March 1943 to draw his attention to the fact that there were not enough air raid shelters for forced workers: "For a long time camps for foreign labourers have been built without thinking about the question of air raid shelters. According to currently valid regulations concerning what form of air raid shelter must be provided when such camps are said up, ditches for the workforce to seek shelter in are to be dug. This is to be done by the workforce themselves, during their spare time. As these regulations are rather vague, it is not surprising that the question of air raid shelter for forced labourers is not dealt with the due attention when the camps are built. Consequently, many camps do not provide sufficient air raid shelter. This results in a loss of human life and valuable workforce, and, what is more, it entails a direct and serious threat for Germans, because the inmates cannot be contained within in the unsheltered camps, but forcefully occupy whatever shelter available. The danger of a panic must be particularly stressed."[21]

There were no regulations that were universally valid within the whole territory of the *Reich*. Therefore it was up to the cities to decide for themselves how they wanted to protect forced labourers. The priorities of the National Socialist regime were clearly defined: forced labourers were cheap work slaves, who did not only help with clearing away the rubble, but who also toiled in the building sector and in the armaments industry, and therefore, they were of considerable economic use. At the same time, they were ranked so low on the scale of values in the National Socialist *Volksgemeinschaft* that the protection against bombs that they were granted was completely insufficient - if there was any protection at all. It is most cynical to allow the forced workers to dig those ditches "for shelter" only during their "spare time". It was often the case that the foreign labourers of the concentration camps around Dachau, Munich, Nuremberg and Flossenbürg could only find shelter in the woods or in unsecured shacks. This certainly did not improve their chances of survival.

A characteristic trait of "managing the catastrophe" was not so much a hostile, second "seizure of power" as the establishment of a social utilitarianism on the level of the local authorities, whose institutions grew rampant. This could provide the bare essentials that were instantly necessary for survival, at least for a part of society. In the long run, however, this way of dealing with the catastrophe led to the agony and the destruction of the regime. The further tightening of the set screws of radicalized inequality of value was in any case an undertaking performed jointly by the merging institutions of the party and the local authorities.

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[1] For NS health policy see Winfried Süß, Der „Volkskörper" im Krieg. Gesundheitspolitik, Gesundheitsverhältnisse und Krankenmord im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland 1939 - 1945, München 2003, pp. 292 - 310.

[2] For Munich see especially Richard Bauer, Fliegeralarm. Luftangriffe in München 1940 - 1945, München 1987; Ingrid Peermoser, der Luftkrieg über München 1942 - 1945. Bomben auf die Hauptstadt der Bewegung, Neuburg a. d. Donau ²1997; Katja Klee, „Man hat halt immer damit rechnen müssen, daß ein Fliegerangriff kommt". Münchnerinnen im Luftkrieg 1939 - 1945, in: Sybille Krafft (ed.), Zwischen den Fronten. Münchner Frauen in Krieg und Frieden 1900 - 1950, München 1995, pp. 234 - 253; Id., „Im Luftschutzkeller des Reiches". Evakuierte in Bayern 1939 - 1953: Politik, soziale Lage, Erfahrungen, München 1999; for Nuremberg see Georg Wolfgang Schramm, Der zivile Luftschutz in Nürnberg 1933 - 1945, 2 vol., Nürnberg 1983; Neil Gregor, A Schicksalsgemeinschaft? Allied bombing, civilian morale, and social dissolution in Nuremberg, 1942 . 1945, in: The Historical Journal 43 (2000), pp. 1051 - 1070.

[3] Schramm, Ziviler Luftschutz, p. 362.

[4] Stadtarchiv München, Stadtverteidigung 513/II, Martin Bormann an Oberbürgermeister Fiehler vom 29. Juni 1943.

[5] Permooser, Luftkrieg, p. 134.

[6] Luftwaffendienst-Dienstvorschrift 751/1, Grundsätze für die Führung des Luftschutzes (F.L.S.), Dezember 1942, Beiheft 1.

[7] Ibid., p. 18.

[8] Cf. Axel Drecoll/Christine Kuller, Inszenierter Volkszorn, ausgebliebene Empörung und der Sturz Julius Streichers. Reaktionen auf die wirtschaftliche Ausplünderung der deutschen Juden, in: Martin Sabrow (ed.), Skandal und Öffentlichkeit in der Diktatur, Göttingen 2004 [to be published].

[9] Staatsarchiv Nürnberg, PD Nr. 454, Pol.Präs. vom 20.3.1939.

[10] Cf. the convincing study by Carl-Wilhelm Reibel, Das Fundament der Diktatur: Die NSDAP-Ortsgruppen 1932 - 1945, Paderborn 2002, S. 366; besides Armin Nolzen, „Menschenführung" im Bombenkrieg. Die Tätigkeiten der NSDAP nach Luftangriffen in historicum.net [15.10.2003].

[11] BA NS 1-275, Einsatzplan der Partei für die Bekämpfung schwerer Notstände bei Fliegerangriffen im Gau München-Oberbayern vom 7.9.1942.

[12] BA R 36/2697, RdL vom 17.12.1942.

[13] Many of the relevant files have been destroyed; all answers to this question therefore have to remain approximations.

[14] Cf. also Paul Erker, Die Stadt im Krieg. Zum Verhältnis von Nationalsozialismus und Kommune in der Katastrophe, in: München, Haupstadt der Bewegung, München ²2002,. S. 454 - 462, hier: 458.

[15] Cf. among others Hans Brunswig, Feuersturm über Hamburg. Die Luftangriffe auf Hamburg im 2. Weltkrieg und ihre Folgen, Stuttgart 1978 ([10]1994); Erich Hampe, Der zivile Luftschutz im 2. Weltkrieg, Frankfurt a.M. 1963.

[16] Cf. Katja Klee, Im „Luftschutzkeller des Reiches". Evakuierte in Bayern 1939-1953: Politik, soziale Lage, Erfahrungen, München 1999.

[17] For Nuremberg, figures are similar: In December 1939, the city counted 405,000 people, a number which had dropped to 361,000 three years later. In December 1944, there were only 270,000 people left, and in May 1945 180,000.

[18] Winfried Süß, Volkskörper,

[19] Stadtarchiv München, NSDAP 11, Schreiben des Gauleiters des Gaues München-Oberbayern vom 1.4.1943. AN Equally dark chaper ist he distribution of Jewish property to the victims of the bombardments ort he seizure of Jewish flats and houses, cf. Ulrike Haerendel, Der Schutzlosigkeit preisgegeben. Die Zwangsveräußerung jüdischen Immobilienbesitzes und die Vertreibung der Juden aus ihren Wohnungen, in: München arisiert. Entrechtung und Enteignung der Juden in der NS-Zeit, hg. von Angelika Baumann und Andreas Heusler, München 2003, S. 105 - 126; also Ralf Blank, Ersatzbeschaffung durch „Beutemachen". Die „M-Aktionen" ein Beispiel nationalsozialistischer Ausplünderungspolitik, in: Verfolgung und Verwaltung. Die wirtschaftliche Ausplünderung der Juden und die westfälischen Finanzbehörden, hg. von Alfons Kenkmann und Bernd A. Rusinek, Münster 1999, S. 87-101.

[20] Quoted after Wolfram Selig/Richard Bauer, Ein jüdische Schicksal, München 1983, S. 63.

[21] Stadtarchiv Nürnberg, Amt für Zivilschutz der Stadt Nürnberg, Dienststelle Kongreßhalle, Schreiben an den Polizeipräsidenten vom 11.3.1943, quoted after Schramm, Luftschutz, S. 407.