

# UNKNOWN

'RIVETING, TIMELY AND TRULY REVELATORY.  
THE ORGANISATION TODT IS THE NAZI-ERA SECRET THAT  
STILL NEEDS TO EMERGE FROM THE SHADOWS'

DAMIEN LEWIS, AUTHOR OF *SAS GREAT ESCAPES*



# ENEMY

THE HIDDEN NAZI FORCE  
THAT BUILT THE THIRD REICH

CHARLES DICK



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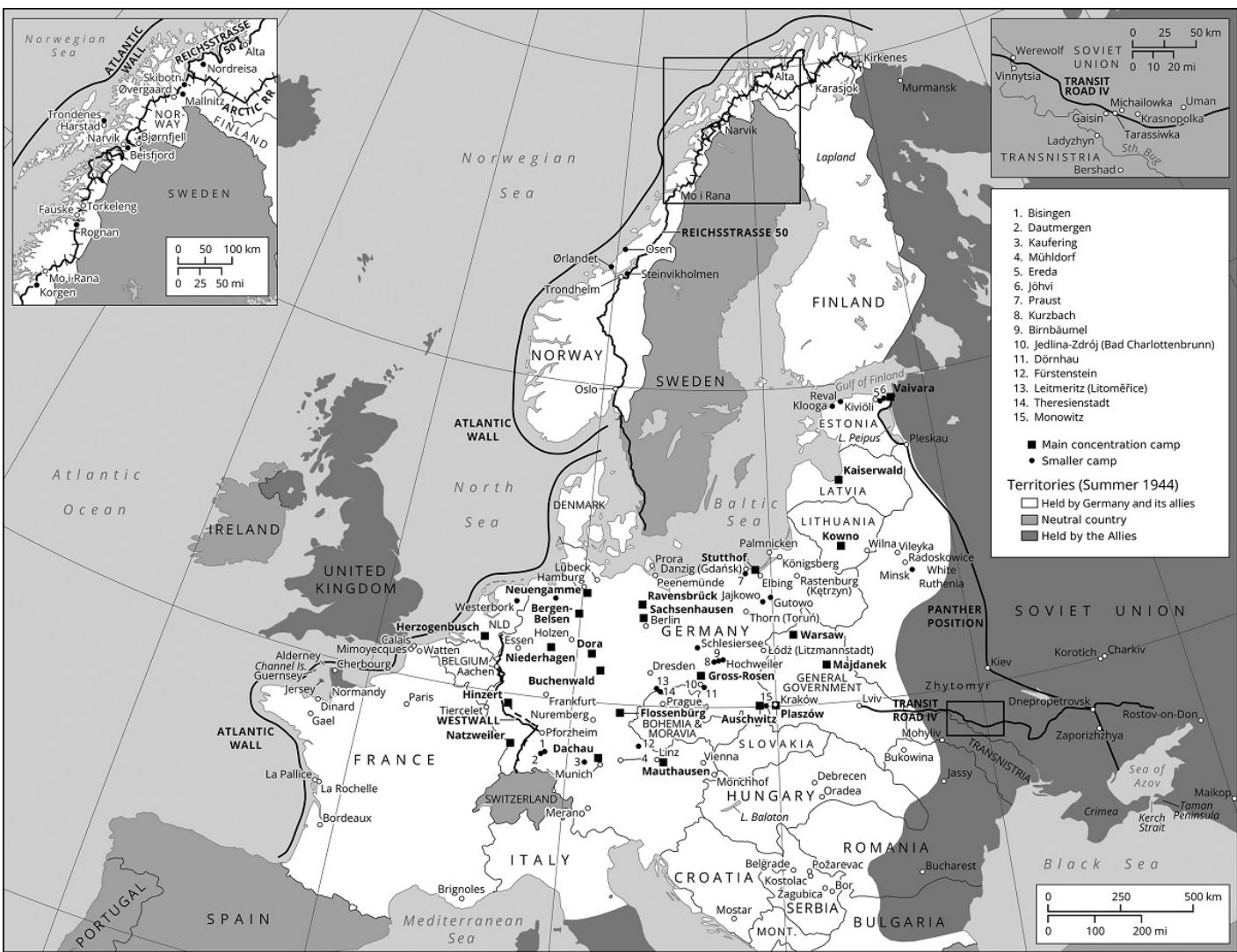
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# INTRODUCTION

Miriam Ejszyszok, a 23-year-old Polish Jew held in the Nazi concentration camp of Stutthof in August 1944, knew only the young and fit were being picked for the labour transport. She feared her mother looked too old. Like other prisoners, Miriam believed being taken elsewhere to work would be better than the horrors they already suffered.

My mother was not young anymore and I feared she would not pass the selection. So I started doing what I could to ‘take some years off her’. I blackened her hair and brows with a bit of coal I found, painted her cheeks with red paper. After all this my mother somehow luckily managed to pass the selection.

About 5,000 Jewish women were chosen, Miriam and her mother among them. As they were taken away from the concentration camp with its barbed wire and watchtowers, there might have been flickers of anticipation among some that the future would hold something better. It would be a forlorn hope.

The women sailed on barges and steamboats from the harbour at Stutthof, close to Danzig (Gdańsk), to nearby Elbing. Then they were taken to camps where they were forced to dig trenches and build bunkers. Miriam and her mother, Fryda, went to Jajkowo satellite camp with around 500 other women, whose task was to dig anti-tank ditches. They slept in tents and were regularly herded between villages to continue their exhausting physical labour in pitiful conditions. Many of them were worked to death. Miriam survived, but her mother died in the Stutthof sub-camp of Praust (Pruszcza Gdańsk) two months before the war ended.

In autumn 1944, about 1,000 to 1,200 other women prisoners ended up in Gutowo, about 200 kilometres south of Stutthof. Hard labour, meagre rations and disease contributed to the deaths of 170 to 200 women at the camp. Some inmates gave birth there and at least five of their babies died. When Soviet dictator Josef Stalin’s Red Army overran the region in January 1945, members of a medical team described the hellish scene they witnessed after the camp’s German overseers had fled.

We have discovered a female camp. One hundred [and] sixty-three women in a state of ultimate devastation, with frostbitten legs, some of them had wounds, 140 had ... ulcers on their arms from injections of some sort of toxic fluids intended to kill them ... Besides that, we also discovered a mass of female bodies in the camp, in canvas tents or nearby, varying in age from twelve to fifty-five. We managed to count 120 corpses upon a rough count.

When the Stutthof concentration-camp system finally collapsed, prisoners were forced on a ‘death march’ leading to the massacre of 3,000 of them in early 1945 near the town of Palmnicken, on the Baltic coast.

The paramilitary force exploiting these women was called Organisation Todt, known as the OT. It helped orchestrate Nazi Germany’s vast slave-labour programme and had a mostly foreign workforce of around 1.5 million by 1944. Yet, unlike the SS, SA or Gestapo, it did not become infamous around the world after the war and its name is never used as a byword for terror. It was headed by two successive Armaments Ministers: the first was its founder, Fritz Todt, and the second Albert Speer, who took over on Todt’s death in 1942. Speer was convicted at Nuremberg, but he escaped a death sentence and was instead jailed for twenty years. Otherwise, the OT seldom figured in war-crimes trials. Astonishingly, in view of its power and importance, the OT’s role has remained largely under the radar. Germany’s slave-labour system was the biggest since the end of the transatlantic African slave trade in the nineteenth century. Adolf Hitler’s Asian ally, Japan, also flouted international law by putting millions of prisoners of war and civilians to work on transport and other projects like those the OT oversaw in Europe. The cruel treatment of foreign workers forced to build the Burma–Thailand ‘Death’ Railway – Asian labourers and mainly British, Australian and Dutch prisoners of war – was portrayed in the 1957 film *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. In Europe, OT operations included the brutal exploitation of prisoners to build an Arctic railway in Norway and a notorious road through Ukraine. Under the German slave-labour programme, millions of civilians, prisoners of war, Jews and other labourers from Nazi-occupied territories lost their lives. Out of 13.5 million foreign workers in the Greater German Reich alone, 2.7 million were estimated to have died.

The OT grew out of Fritz Todt’s pre-war development of Germany’s motorway network and the Westwall defence line, known to the Allies as the Siegfried Line. As the organisation expanded, it shifted from an early practice of seeking voluntary, paid workers to one of coercion and increasing dependence on prisoners of war and concentration-camp inmates. Its tasks included the Atlantikwall (Atlantic Wall) coastal

defence line stretching from Norway to the Franco-Spanish frontier, road and rail links in occupied territories, armaments production including V1 and V2 rockets, large-scale energy and mining projects to exploit captured sources of raw materials, as well as a huge operation to move key German armaments factories and industrial plants underground to protect them from Allied bombing. This last project included subterranean factories which Hitler commissioned the OT to build. They were to produce Messerschmitt Me-262 planes, which at the time were the world's first operational jet fighters.

The OT was at the heart of Hitler's regime and the Führer called it 'the greatest construction organisation of all time'. In 1945, British intelligence credited the OT with having carried out in little over five years 'the most impressive building programme since Roman times'. But this was achieved through brutal exploitation of foreign workers and the OT was deeply involved in concentration-camp networks from Auschwitz to Vaivara. Its staff oversaw foreign workers thrust under the Nazi yoke to carry out mammoth construction programmes required to match Hitler's imperial ambitions. The dictator enlisted the OT's brightest stars – the leading lights of the nation's engineers and architects – to build the empire of his dreams. Whether it was military fortifications in wartime, or grand, imperial cities in peacetime after the imagined final victory, Hitler turned to his loyal favourites in the organisation to design and create them. The OT was therefore at the centre of the Nazi system and a power ranking alongside the SS, Wehrmacht (the armed forces) and Nazi Party. Its uniform included swastika armbands, although it was not a party organisation. High-ranking SS (Schutzstaffel) or SA (Sturmabteilung) officers, including Todt himself, held key positions. OT operations ranged from the Arctic Circle to the Balkans and deep into what the Third Reich termed its eastern Lebensraum, or 'living space'. In the final year of the war, the OT gained control of all military construction in the Reich.

The complexity and scale of the Nazi slave-labour system meant there were no neat chronological divisions and foreign workers' experiences contrasted greatly. At one extreme, a non-Jewish, non-Slavic civilian engineer, working in Germany or elsewhere in Western Europe up to around 1942, could benefit from reasonable wages and conditions; at the other, a Jewish ghetto inmate would suffer unrelenting brutality and the torment of hard labour before being murdered in an extermination camp. Polish workers were deported to Germany and generally suffered brutal treatment virtually from the start of the war. There are other contrasts vital to understanding slave labour and the OT. Todt's organisation operated both inside and outside the concentration-camp system. Its work was mainly outside the Reich in Nazi-occupied Europe for most of the

war, then increasingly inside Germany's core for a final year as defeat loomed. Also, as Miriam Ejszyszok's account shows, it was not just men who suffered and died under OT overseers. Many more women survivors tell their stories in this book. Women were victims, but perpetrators, too. A female OT physician, Dr Erika Flocken, 'selected' hundreds of exhausted slave labourers in a south German aircraft factory in 1944 to be gassed in Auschwitz.

Extreme hard labour in the open in all weathers, which was typical for OT construction projects, represented the worst possible environment for slave labourers. Physical violence was routine – OT staff shot, beat or worked tens of thousands of prisoners to death – but even more loss of life was caused through their failure to meet prisoners' basic needs. Most fatalities in labour camps resulted from abuses for which the OT was responsible, rather than shootings by SS guards. OT staff acted as technical overseers of prisoners at work sites, so they generally set the exhausting pace. Their other duties were to provide rations, medical care, shelter and work clothes, all of them, as a rule, woefully inadequate. Inmates therefore died through extreme hard labour, malnutrition, sickness and exposure; with the exception of the gas chambers in death camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau or Majdanek, these were the biggest killers in the slave-labour and concentration camps.

How has the OT maintained its 'stealth' public profile since the war? One answer is that Nazi Germany's political and military leaders, as well as Heinrich Himmler's SS, were the most obvious targets for prosecution and ended up in the dock at war-crimes trials at Nuremberg and elsewhere. Another reason is that most researchers investigating the OT shy away from comprehensive, Europe-wide studies and, when such an approach is taken, the OT's true nature has been concealed by apologists for the Nazi slave-labour programme. Otherwise, the OT has been treated marginally in scholarly works on the Third Reich or studies are confined to specific camps or countries.

What motivated OT personnel and caused some to commit war crimes? Speer's case has come under intense scrutiny, but other perpetrators in the OT have attracted much less attention. SS officers, as well as leaders of Hitler's regime and the German armed forces, have been extensively analysed by historians, seeking to discern the motives of perpetrators they saw as 'ordinary' men. OT staff, however, perhaps deserve this label more than any Nazi group. These were neither soldiers nor policemen, let alone units of the SS or its Security Service execution squads formed explicitly to commit mass murder. Their fundamental job was not to kill an enemy or implement Nazi racist policy resulting in the genocide of 6 million Jews; they were builders and engineers recruited

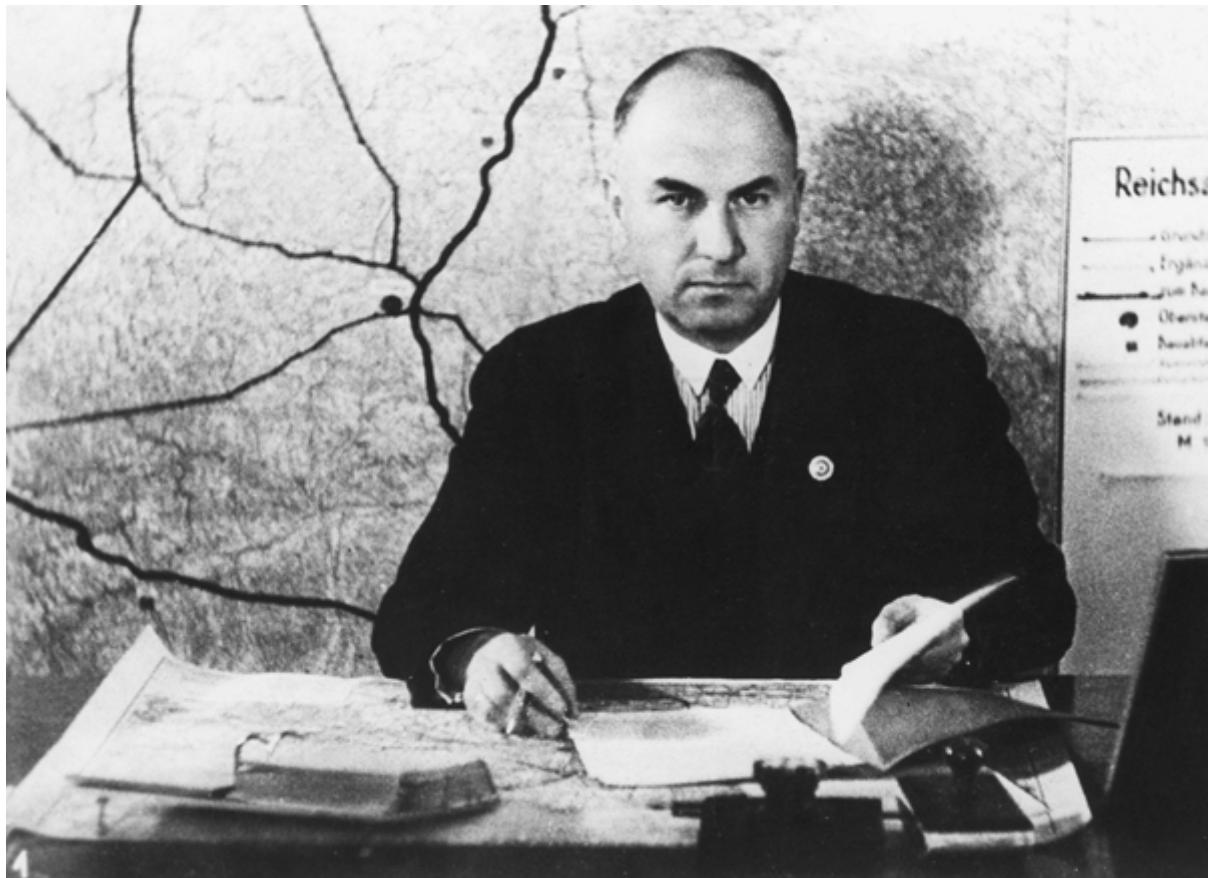
to perform the everyday work of construction, so how did they become Hitler's slave drivers? Why did they kill prisoners through shootings, beatings, or murderous hard labour and neglect, when their job was to construct buildings, bridges and bunkers?

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, little light is shed on this by Speer. He wove a web of deceit in both his post-war memoirs and at his Nuremberg trial, portraying himself as uninterested in politics and engrossed in his 'technical' work. The truth was quite different: Hitler's loyal henchman was a co-enforcer of Nazi racist policy who made pacts with the SS and drove slave labourers to their deaths.

*Unknown Enemy* falls broadly into two sections: the first in Todt's lifetime and the second after Speer took over. Chapters 1–3 trace the early careers of Todt and Speer, as well as the founding of the OT. Chapters 4–6 cover OT operations after war broke out in 1939 and the Wehrmacht's early 'Blitzkrieg' victories, followed by Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union. The section ends with Todt's death in a plane crash in February 1942. Chapters 7–18 describe Speer's reforms and OT operations in the vast network of labour and concentration camps across Nazi-occupied Europe and in the Reich. Chapter 19 deals with war-crimes trials, including those held at Nuremberg.

The book investigates the OT and its leaders, but also for the first time gives survivors of OT violence a voice. Their often harrowing testimony will be woven into the OT's grim story, which ran from around a year before the Second World War broke out in 1939 right up to Hitler's final defeat in 1945.

# TODT: THE ENGINEER



# **THE BEGINNINGS**

# 1

## AUTOBAHNEN

Hitler put Fritz Todt in charge of a key element of his dreams of empire just five months after taking power, choosing the 41-year-old engineer in June 1933 to build the Autobahnen, a new German motorway network destined to radiate out into conquered territory. The Nazi leader saw military advantages in a scheme that promised rapid transfer of troops across the country. Todt estimated that an army of 300,000 men could be transported during just two nights of driving on these highways between the eastern and western borders of the Reich.

The motorways were Hitler's favourite early project and were to become one of the most enduring improvements to German infrastructure of the Nazi era. Todt had 40,000 labourers working on site building the Autobahnen in 1934, one year after he had been appointed to oversee them. At a much-publicised event on 23 September 1933, Hitler, sweating with the effort, had dug the first spadefuls of earth for the Frankfurt-Darmstadt stretch. On 19 May 1935, that section of motorway was opened to traffic and offered an initial experience of how motorists could drive at speed along landscaped, scenic routes through the German countryside. Germany was not the first country to invest in motorways – Italy had already done so – but Hitler was an enthusiastic devotee of the automobile. Addressing his cabinet, he criticised the poor state of German roads during his first weeks of office and declared that the country needed Autobahnen.

Todt possessed impeccable political credentials for becoming part of the Nazi regime. Born in the Swabian town of Pforzheim on 4 September 1891, he joined the Nazi Party early, in January 1923, gaining the very low party membership number of 2465 and becoming a member of the Nazi paramilitary SA in 1931. Like Hitler, he had served in the armed forces in the First World War, having been forced to interrupt his engineering studies to do so. He had entered the army in 1914 and served as a lieutenant in a field artillery regiment. In January 1916, he transferred to the air force, acting as an

aerial observer directing German artillery targeting enemy positions on the ground. He was later twice wounded and received the Iron Cross for bravery. After the war he returned to college and gained his engineering diploma in Karlsruhe before eventually going on to obtain the higher qualification of doctor of engineering in Munich in 1931. Before then, Todt met his future wife Elsbeth through a ski club in Munich and they married in 1921. She was a 37-year-old war widow and he was twenty-nine. Todt then worked for various firms, including the Munich road-building firm Sager & Woerner, gathering experience and contacts in German industry which were to prove exceptionally useful later in his career.

Todt had first written to the Nazi Party about his ideas for improving the country's highways on 26 October 1931, while he was still working for Sager & Woerner. His letter was in response to an appeal in the party's publication, the *Völkischer Beobachter* (Racial Observer), and offered his services as an engineer, suggesting ways to make technical and administrative savings. The party's favourable response brought an invitation for him to join the newly formed Action Group of German Architects and Engineers as head of its section for civil engineers.

A year later, in December 1932, Todt completed a report entitled 'Road-building and Road Administration', known as the 'Brown Report' after the colour of its cover, which set out a way to combat Germany's high unemployment and provide a motorway network with great military potential. Todt provided the report to the Nazi leadership and Rudolf Hess presented it to Hitler, who was delighted with it. Todt's plan was decisive in his appointment to lead Autobahn construction.

Hitler faced stiff opposition to his motorways from the national railways and the Transport Ministry. He assured Todt the week after appointing him that, as overseer of the motorways, he would not be attached to any ministry but directly subordinate to the Reich Chancellery. Emboldened, Todt later in the year demanded – and was granted – responsibilities previously held by the Transport Minister that encroached on his own. When Todt went on to ask for legislative powers relating to the new roads and the right to issue decrees, Hitler allowed for this by according him the position of Supreme Reich Authority directly subordinate to the Reich Chancellor, overruling indignant objections by the Interior and Finance Ministers.

By the end, Todt's motorways represented a gigantic state concern, made up of numerous building sites, contractors and Autobahn labour camps. By June 1936, the number of people working on motorways reached a peak of 124,000 and by the start of the Second World War the Autobahn network was 3,300 kilometres long. Constructing the roads involved building about 3,000 bridges and Hitler insisted that his personal

approval be sought for their design as well as that of service stations. He followed progress on the motorways closely, issuing instructions to Todt and intervening to ensure roads followed routes he favoured. The Autobahnen were dubbed the ‘Führer’s roads’ in Nazi propaganda and Hitler boasted they were his Parthenon, also comparing them to the pyramids of the pharaohs.

Together with the rebuilding and repair of major roads and bridges, the motorways had been the biggest single item in a Nazi programme of state-funded investment for ‘work creation’ at a time of high unemployment. But the real objective behind measures to tackle Germany’s economic problems and reduce the number of jobless, of whom 6 million were registered in early 1933, was rearmament, which had been one of Hitler’s top priorities from the earliest stages of his dictatorship. The showpiece motorway network and fast growth in car production contributed to a German recovery which Nazi propaganda portrayed as Hitler’s ‘economic miracle’, but which in fact owed much to job creation and other schemes inherited by the Nazis from their predecessors, as well as a worldwide economic upturn. When Hitler took office, Germany had virtually no air force and no capital warships, and its army was limited to 100,000 under the Versailles Treaty following defeat in the First World War. Between 1933 and 1935, however, the share of military spending in German national income rose from less than 1 per cent to close to 10 per cent, an extraordinary reallocation of total national production in a capitalist state in peacetime.

Despite the ambition, Todt’s original target of 6,000 kilometres for the motorway network was not reached; their effect on reducing unemployment did not match Nazi propaganda claims and the practical use of Autobahnen for military purposes turned out to be limited. All the same, Hitler praised the builder of his motorways as his ‘most faithful idealist and at the same time most level-headed realist’. Todt could, in return, seem excessively fulsome in his praise of Hitler, declaring:

The great monuments of our time can only be built as long as Adolf Hitler, the Führer of our people and architectural genius, remains among us. It often takes a thousand years before another great man comes, and the ensuing thousand years live off that which was achieved in the time of such a man.

Yet Todt was not driven by single-minded ambition and could speak plainly to Hitler. He was the Nazi leader’s loyal confidant, but also renowned as one of the few among the Nazi elite who would not shrink from telling his Führer hard truths. The fact that Hitler was prepared to listen was a measure of his respect for Todt.

Hitler held the creator of the motorways in high esteem, but few Germans had the means to enjoy the Autobahnen and the country had one of the least motorised societies in Europe. Only 1.6 per cent of the German population owned motor vehicles by 1935, compared to 4.9 per cent in France and 4.5 per cent in Britain. In the late 1930s, car ownership remained only for the small minority in Germany despite big efforts to boost the motor industry, including the elimination of tax on all newly bought vehicles. At a motor show in March 1934, Hitler had announced his intention to launch a ‘people’s car’, a Volkswagen designed for a family of four at the extremely low price of 1,000 Reichsmarks; manufacturers including Ferdinand Porsche developed plans for this and a scheme was introduced for customers to put down deposits towards one. By 1939, 270,000 people had signed up, rising to 340,000 by the end of the war. Hitler’s insistence on the low price and pressures of war presented huge obstacles and not a single Volkswagen was ever delivered to a civilian customer in the Third Reich.

Victor Klemperer, a German-Jewish professor in Dresden, worried about the cost of owning a car but wrote on 4 October 1936 in his diary that the motorways were ‘splendid’. During a brief drive the previous Sunday, he and his wife came upon a section of Autobahn west of Dresden that had just been opened, still bedecked with flags and flowers and with spectators crowding on bridges. He described enjoying a ‘glorious view’ while motoring along and how he even ‘dared a speed of 80 kilometres an hour a couple of times’.

Klemperer wrote these words just a few months before Hitler made another significant appointment, elevating the architect Albert Speer to join Todt on the government benches in the Reichstag (parliament). This young rising star was picked to undertake a massive project: refashioning Berlin in a grandiose style reflecting Hitler’s imperial vision. The city was to be renamed ‘Germania’.

## 2

# ‘GERMANIA’

Hitler appointed Speer as head of the ‘Germania’ project on 30 January 1937, the fourth anniversary of his accession to power. Like Todt, the 31-year-old Speer was answerable only to the Nazi leader and set up his headquarters close to the Chancellery.

Winning the prestigious task of ‘Germania’ marked a decisive point in Speer’s upward trajectory to wealth and power. He had initially worked independently in his profession and, having joined the Nazi Party in 1931, obtained commissions through his party contacts. Describing his enthusiasm as a 28-year-old architect at the time Hitler came to power in 1933, Speer wrote in his post-war memoirs: ‘For a commission to build a great building, I would have sold my soul like Faust.’ In the same year, Hitler gave Speer the job of site manager under the architect Paul Troost, whom he had entrusted with renovating the Reich Chancellery, and when Troost died the following January, he named Speer to take over. But Hitler then wanted a far bigger, grander building altogether to impress visiting dignitaries and told Speer to design an entirely new Reich Chancellery, next to the same extensive gardens attached to the old Chancellery. Preparations went ahead but for Hitler speed was imperative. Having put Speer in charge of ‘Germania’, he called him to his office at the end of January 1938 and declared he would need the New Chancellery, with its impossibly long main gallery and the palatial study which he would himself occupy, to be completed in a year. Speer promised to do this and, with construction racing ahead, the New Chancellery opened in January 1939.

Speer came from a similar middle-class background as Todt, having been born on 19 March 1905 in Mannheim, in the south-western region of Baden. He studied architecture in Munich and Berlin where, at the age of twenty-three, he became assistant to Heinrich Tessenow, a distinguished architect who made his reputation in the 1920s in Germany’s Weimar Republic. Speer joined the SA in March 1931, then left it for the SS eighteen

months later. Like Todt, Speer was a keen skier and met his future wife Margarete through his interest in mountain sports. They married and had six children, four boys and two girls, the first boy named Albert after his father.

The projects to create the motorways and ‘Germania’ reflected Hitler’s megalomania and craving for all things gargantuan. The hallmark of ‘Germania’ was Hitler’s obsession with buildings that would outdo rival colonial powers. A triumphal arch would dwarf its Parisian counterpart, the Arc de Triomphe, and the main north-south and east-west roads were to have been more than 100 metres wide. A massive domed hall next to the Führer’s palace would accommodate 180,000 people, while a neighbouring square was designed for events attended by a million. On seeing a model of the planned city, Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels commented admiringly: ‘Incomparably monumental. The Führer is raising a memorial to himself in stone.’

Speer’s father, himself an architect, expressed a quite different opinion. Having gazed at the model of Berlin for a while, he shrugged and declared: ‘You’ve all gone completely insane’, before walking out. Hitler, though, was enthusiastic. He made arrangements to ensure easy access between his Chancellery and the Berlin Academy of Arts, where the architectural models of the city were set out. New doors were installed and a connecting pathway laid through gardens. The Führer could then cross whenever the fancy took him to feast his eyes on the planned ‘Germania’. Spotlights illuminated the model city, showing how sunlight would fall on buildings at a particular time of day. Whenever Hitler viewed this elaborate display, his keen pleasure was only too evident.

The imperial capital of ‘Germania’ was the biggest of five ‘leader cities’ to be redeveloped at great cost under plans reaching into peacetime – plans which would crumble to dust with Germany’s defeat. The other cities earmarked for rebuilding, under plans conceived when Nazi hubris was at its height, were Nuremberg, Hamburg, Munich and Linz.

Hitler’s personal ambitions as an artist and architect had been frustrated as a young student in Vienna. This early failure stung him. By way of reprisal for the rejection he talked to Goebbels of transforming his hometown of Linz into a German Budapest with an art gallery and opera house, to reduce the cultural pre-eminence of Vienna. He gave the task of rebuilding Linz to Speer’s bitter rival, Hermann Giesler, who was also in charge of Munich’s facelift. Before that, Giesler had been little known. Born in the western region of Westphalia, he had volunteered to join the armed forces in the First World War and afterwards worked as a bricklayer, carpenter and metalworker before studying to become an architect.

Schemes were also drawn up for other cities and places. The Baltic seaside spa of Prora, on the island of Rügen, for example, was to have become the world's largest resort, with 75 kilometres of beaches and facilities for 14 million German holidaymakers a year.

In 1938, Speer reached a highly significant deal concerning 'Germania' with Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS: concentration-camp prisoners would be used to produce granite and bricks for new buildings for the German capital. 'Germania' needed two billion bricks a year, and German industry's existing output could only provide a fraction of that. Speer provided the funds from his Berlin reconstruction budget to enable the SS to develop and build its own quarries and factories to supply these materials.

Previous SS forays into industry had been guided more by ideology than economics and reflected Himmler's artistic tastes, one of his favourite SS companies being a porcelain manufacturer producing items such as statuettes of Hitler Youth recruits. The agreement with Speer, however, was far more important and Himmler looked to Oswald Pohl, whom he had appointed head of SS administration, to maximise its economic potential. The creation and expansion of a big SS enterprise, the German Earth and Stone Works, was central to the scheme. Himmler's accord with Speer enabled him to solve a number of problems, one being constant criticism about the size of his concentration camps and wastage of manpower at a time of acute labour shortage. Now these protests could readily be silenced since the prisoners were producing supplies for a prestigious project. Himmler also wanted to retain control of prisoners being sent out to work, which he could if they laboured in businesses belonging to the SS. Himmler pressed ahead with this new venture and in the summer of 1938 prisoners were building two brickworks, while others were setting up two new concentration camps, Flossenbürg and Mauthausen. These were sited near quarries meant to provide blue-grey flecked granite for Speer's grand buildings, and the camps' own watchtowers and walls were built from the quarried stone.

The schemes to produce vast supplies of granite and bricks failed dismally. An SS brickworks at Oranienburg was a disaster, and had to be rebuilt. The SS granite was not of high enough quality for buildings in Germany's planned imperial capital and much of it was used instead as cobblestones for Todt's roads. However, the cooperation between Speer and Himmler proved to be a milestone in the history of the concentration-camp system.

Much had already changed since Dachau, the first concentration camp, was set up in March 1933, less than two months after Hitler became Chancellor. Initially, the camps

had been viewed as a means of repressing domestic political opponents and German Jews had made up only a small minority of prisoners. While brutal SS guards practised torture and terror, murders of inmates remained relatively unusual in the mid-1930s before a major expansion of the camps around 1937. The establishment of Flossenbürg and Mauthausen was the first time that economic concerns had dictated the location of concentration camps and these developments were a sign of things to come. As Germany stood on the brink of war, the use of concentration-camp prisoners as slave labour would become increasingly important to the Nazi regime. The Himmler–Speer accord of 1938 also happened in the same year the OT was created. This was especially significant because slave labour would be vital to OT operations.

# 3

## ROAD TO WAR

In May 1938 Hitler ordered Todt to take over the building of massive fortifications in western Germany as he advanced along the road to war. Furious at the army's slow pace in building the Westwall defence line, the Führer gave the job to Todt's large labour force which had been constructing Germany's motorways. He viewed the Westwall, facing France's Maginot Line, as essential to his plans for territorial expansion and a grab for Czechoslovakia following his annexation of Austria just two months earlier. He wanted it built to the highest standards by the autumn to protect Germany's western flank. When one German general protested that the Führer's order for an extra 12,000 bunkers was impossible to fulfil, Hitler angrily brushed him aside, declaring that for Dr Fritz Todt the word 'impossible' did not exist. In September, he honoured the man he praised as a miracle worker by naming his specialist construction force 'Organisation Todt'.

Hitler's announcement of the OT's name, at a Nazi Party rally in Nuremberg, was an exceptional distinction for Todt. Having a national organisation named after an individual in the Nazi era was a privilege normally reserved for the Führer alone. It reflected Hitler's regard for the man he had entrusted with the job of building the motorways. Todt had built an extensive Autobahn network in five years and his standing was so high that Hitler believed the Westwall would 'still not have been ready in ten years' if he had left it to the army alone. It was thanks to Organisation Todt, he said, that the whole project had got under way and progress had been made.

Measuring about 600 kilometres in length and up to 50 kilometres in depth, the Westwall required 350,000 German OT workers to build it, 90,000 of the army's fortification engineers and 100,000 from the Reich Labour Service, the national organisation in which all men aged between eighteen and twenty-five served an obligatory six months. Todt set up his headquarters in Wiesbaden, in western Germany,

for what became a round-the-clock operation to construct concrete bunkers, anti-tank defences, machine-gun posts and other fortifications stretching northwards from the Swiss frontier to the eastern border of the Netherlands. He used his excellent contacts with industry to enlist the expertise and manpower of about 1,000 firms, as well as Nazi Party resources such as the National Socialist Motor Corps, the paramilitary organisation that provided the fleets of trucks and other transport needed. It was this kind of improvisation and ingenuity that inspired Hitler's faith in Todt and his workforce. Todt was further rewarded, together with giants of German industry, in October 1938 when he received the German National Prize along with Ferdinand Porsche, Willy Messerschmitt and Ernst Heinkel.

Todt's ability to offer Hitler what he wanted in the right way and at the right time would turn out to be a pattern in his career. Hitler turned repeatedly to the skills and versatility of the OT's labour force and Hitler's favourite engineer worked tirelessly to mould the Third Reich's engineers of the future and promote his vision for technology's place in National Socialist society. Todt used two institutions in particular to educate and politicise members of his profession: the main Nazi engineering association, the National Socialist League of German Technology, which he led from 1934, and the Plassenburg political school for engineers. Training courses at Plassenburg castle in Lower Bavaria began in June 1937. Reflecting the militaristic values of Nazism, participants marched from the train station to the castle, the old Franconian seat of the Hohenzollerns, performed morning gymnastics and slept in barrack-style quarters.

Todt could be a tough taskmaster and cracked down hard when his workers caused problems. Since 1938 the OT had used police detention centres to incarcerate 'workshy' and other offenders from both workforces as a means of ensuring labourers quickly returned to the building sites. Long shifts and hard labour, sometimes under fire after the war began, sparked protests among the workers and Todt, fearing delays, resorted to harsher methods to ensure the pace did not slacken. He acted swiftly to crush opposition among his workers, who at that time were predominantly German. The measures he took to punish OT Westwall workers guilty of mostly minor offences included detention and 're-education' in Hinzert camp, led from October 1939 by a notorious SS officer who later became commandant of Buchenwald concentration camp, SS-Sturmbannführer Hermann Pister. When Pister started work with Todt as part of the SS security staff on Germany's western frontier, he was given OT funding to convert disused barrack camps into detention centres designed to reform OT labourers. The project was fully supported by the local Gestapo. Hinzert and three other SS special

detention units quickly came to resemble small-scale concentration camps, despite Todt's express instruction that they should not do so.

In a report covering his time in charge of Hinzert, Pister said the camp's average total of 600–700 prisoners could be put to work on the Westwall and other sites and their SS guards could ensure 'maximum work performance', combining punishment with productive labour at the same time as relieving the load on the prison system. He bragged that initially reluctant firms had become eager to use his prisoners, whose productivity was two or three times as high as that of other labourers. The concept of re-education or reform of offenders was much favoured by Pister. He believed that his German 'boarders' in the Hinzert special camp could be reintegrated into society and turned into useful members of the community. He relied on traditional techniques based on military-style camp life, strict discipline and extreme hard labour.

Pister claimed Todt had been very satisfied with an increase in productivity among his labour gangs. Todt, for his part, recommended Pister to Himmler, whose SS controlled the concentration camps, as a 'good leader of men'. Hinzert was deemed in its initial phase to have been so successful that it became a model for experiments with police detention centres elsewhere. The Gestapo, whose acts of terror against political opponents earned them a fearsome reputation, also detained tens of thousands of German and foreign workers for non-political, labour-related offences in some 200 'work education camps' around the Reich.

Amid the building mania gripping Hitler's Germany, including the Westwall and Speer's 'Germania' project, Todt became responsible in late 1938 for the country's entire construction sector. He was given the task of General Plenipotentiary for the Regulation of the Construction Industry by Hermann Göring, head of the Four-Year Plan, an economic programme which in effect set Germany's course for war. This expanded his powers considerably and the creation of the OT, together with Hitler's praise for his labour force, raised his profile still further. But the new organisation did not always get a smooth ride and it hit political turbulence. The OT clashed with the Nazi Party over its uniform, which included a swastika armband even though it was not linked to the party. Martin Bormann, in his capacity as head of the Nazi Party Chancellery, objected to the use of the swastika armband by the OT on the grounds that wearing the symbol was the exclusive right of members of Nazi Party organisations. Hitler later intervened to insist on OT staff wearing the swastika.

Hitler's action showed his staunch support for the OT in the kinds of tussles which were frequent within the Nazi system. In the same way as he had appointed Todt to oversee construction of the German motorway network, Hitler had placed the OT

directly under him, rather than subordinated it to another of the Third Reich's power centres. The precedent Hitler set in 1933 when he made Todt inspector general for German roads was crucial. Todt reported solely to the Führer, instead of a government institution such as the Transport Ministry, and this had created a comprehensive special authority which had been the first of its kind. As Hitler loaded more tasks on Todt's shoulders over the next eight and a half years, including leadership of the OT, this led to a significant concentration of power outside the government structure existing under his dictatorship. German historian Martin Broszat described the OT under Todt's direction as one of the Third Reich's most important 'special organisations', comparing it to a 'state within a state', like the SS.

The motorways and 'Germania' had become symbols of imperial might which Hitler relied on Todt and Speer to fashion. Hitler respected Todt, now anointed head of Organisation Todt, valuing his loyalty and competence. He delighted in discussing architecture with Speer, enthusiastically planning his imperial capital. Hitler would turn repeatedly to these two men, conferring special responsibilities on them in succession to do his bidding. One biographer wrote that Hitler saw in Speer not just a talented architect 'but also a "friend" and conceivably his only passion, however surprising the term may seem'. Speer told the Nuremberg Tribunal: 'Through this predilection which Hitler had for architecture, I had a close personal contact with him. I belonged to a circle which consisted of other artists and his personal staff. If Hitler had any friends at all, I certainly would have been one of his close friends.' This common bond of architecture had exceptional significance for the standing of the OT in the Third Reich's power structure. Empire and architecture, in other words the building of that empire, were rich themes running through the OT's history.

Hitler's belief in the OT continued into the next stage of his plans to grab more territory for the Third Reich. OT operations were transformed by the outbreak of a global conflict which would last for around another six years. The OT evolved from a German force into a mostly foreign one during the Second World War, enslaving millions of prisoners of war, civilians, concentration-camp prisoners, Jews and others from conquered states around Europe.

**WARTIME**

## 4

# WORKER SOLDIERS

When Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939, OT units followed the troops, working with army engineers to repair roads, bridges and communications to ensure supplies and reinforcements could reach the front. In the west of their country, Poles were quickly forced to labour for the German invaders. Thousands of OT personnel were there to oversee them and by December 1939 they were working on the country's transport network. By early 1940, 25,000 Polish prisoners of war classified as Jews had died of hunger, cold or maltreatment after being put to work by German forces in those first months of a brutal and murderous occupation.

The OT took its first casualties from French fire aimed at disrupting work on the Westwall. The term OT 'frontline worker' was introduced, and such personnel had the right to bear arms. Military duty was a quality which Todt, as a decorated First World War veteran, wished to promote in the OT. In a message to OT personnel after the assault on Poland he congratulated his team on building the Westwall:

With the outbreak of war, we have handed over our work with proud confidence to the German soldier. We are convinced that the Westwall, manned by German soldiers, will fulfil its task. The Führer has ordered that the Organisation Todt should remain in existence as a fortifications organisation ... In a state of war, every individual, whether worker, employer or construction engineer, even if he does not wear a uniform, is no longer a civilian in his outlook, but a soldier.

In such support for aggression, Todt seemed to suggest that the 'worker soldiers' of the OT should march in step not only with the army but also with Nazi Party paramilitaries, like the 'political soldiers' of the SS.

Some young Poles, who initially escaped being trapped in the OT's net but would later be dragooned into working for the organisation, remembered the first shock of the

invasion. Zecharja Shagrin was thirteen years old when German troops and tanks cut a devastating swathe through the land. Rumours soon circulated that they would kill all male Jews and so Zecharja was in peril. His family was Jewish Orthodox and he lived with his parents and two sisters in a town near Kraków, where his father was a baker. Zecharja later recalled how terrified Polish civilians reacted:

Panic set in, ‘Should you flee, should you not flee?’ Finally, Father packed a rucksack and said to me: ‘Come, we’re going.’ The family stayed. They were still busy selling what was left in the bakery and we went off together with crowds of people. Where to? We didn’t know, we fell into line. I only remember that we had packed one or two plaited yeast loaves into the rucksack. Father had brought along a bottle of vodka and sugar cubes … Because on the way later, whenever I said I was tired he took a sugar cube, dropped a little vodka onto it … Ever since, I’ve liked that.

Other Poles had similar stories of their experiences amid the fear and confusion. Stefan Kulesza, then aged sixteen and living in a village 150 kilometres north-east of Warsaw, recalled his youthful emotions:

There was some sort of order that all young people should go to the East … So I and two friends packed our things and set off. Of course, it seemed to us like a bit of a jaunt. My mother gave me a bit of money to take with me. She said: ‘Off you go, run away from these Germans.’ And we set off.

Although both Stefan and Zecharja managed to escape with their lives, they only avoided the torment of slave labour for a while. As the conflict unfolded, they and many of their compatriots were compelled to work under the OT or other German occupying forces after the Wehrmacht swept into Poland.

Less than three weeks after the German attack, Poland was invaded again – this time from the east. The Red Army entered eastern Poland under a secret agreement Hitler had concluded with Stalin that summer: Poland was to be divided between Germany and the Soviet Union along an agreed demarcation line.

By October 1939 Germany had annexed large sections of Poland’s western territories, gaining 90,000 square kilometres. The rest of Poland – known as the General Government – was left under the autocratic rule of the Nazi Party’s legal expert, Hans Frank, whose personal greed and zealous belief in ‘Lebensraum’ for German settlers threatened Poles in his domain. SS task forces, police units, ethnic

German paramilitaries and regular German soldiers murdered civilians throughout German-occupied Poland.

As the pressure for labour mounted in Germany, Göring, Hitler's official deputy, decreed in January 1940 that Frank's part of Poland was to be used as a labour pool. One million Poles were sent to work in the Reich, where they had to wear the letter 'P' on their clothing. Of these, 750,000 were reserved for agriculture, half of them women.

The next step was to exploit the people of more conquered nations. In 1940 Hitler further expanded his empire with a string of lightning German military conquests. The Wehrmacht occupied Denmark and Norway in a spring offensive, then launched a westward campaign defeating Belgium, Netherlands and France by the summer and Todt was determined the OT should use the labour of these countries. He declared that every German OT frontline worker 'must become foreman for 50 foreign workers'.

In March 1940, Hitler named Todt Armaments Minister. Todt's meteoric rise was thanks in part to strong links to private industry. The chief weapons designer of the giant Krupp concern, Erich Müller, had lobbied Hitler in favour of Todt being given the job. Todt actively sought alliances with big business to improve armaments production and formed committees overseeing various sectors, with Müller in charge of one for guns and artillery. Munitions production figures surged and German armaments production doubled in the first half of 1940. In his victory speech that summer, Hitler gave Todt sole credit for Germany's success in boosting armaments following the invasion and defeat of France.

Hitler would soon entrust Todt with another highly significant task revealing his next military campaign. With relations between Berlin and Moscow sharply deteriorating, Hitler had become convinced that Soviet designs on other countries, for instance Finland and parts of Romania, meant that German and Soviet territorial interests were irreconcilable. He decided that Germany's attack on the Soviet Union would have to be in 1941. Sometime in late 1940, he directed his adjutants to find a suitable spot for field headquarters and they favoured East Prussia, near Rastenburg. Hitler instructed Todt to start construction there, to be completed by April 1941. Plans for the Führer's 'Wolf's Lair' headquarters were under way.

Hitler's thoughts were turning east again after his swift victories in the western campaign. A belief in the Wehrmacht's invincibility opened new horizons and, for Todt, an appetite for more Autobahnen. In 1940 the OT had started a new route to link Calais and Warsaw. Further highways would connect Klagenfurt, in annexed Austria, to Trondheim in newly conquered Norway. Todt had long dreamed of a major highway across Eastern Europe and was on the way to realising a great ambition. He declared: 'I

have two lifelong goals for the motorways. One was a motorway to Vienna, which is now being worked on. The other wish is that one day there is a motorway leading to the Caucasus.' Dreams such as this caused death and misery for many slave labourers, condemned to toil in appalling conditions to achieve them.

Todt had a problem, though. Using Jews as slave labour within the Reich to expand the motorway network eastwards went against the grain of Nazi racist policy. Exploiting German Jews was initially viewed as a possibility, but the idea of establishing labour camps for Polish Jews on these road sections was rejected. Prior to the invasion of Poland, Todt himself had already told the Reich Autobahn Directorate: 'Using Jews on Reich Autobahn construction sites is out of the question. On the other hand, there can be no objection to placing Jewish labourers at work locations ... indirectly connected to construction of the Reich Autobahn system, and located apart, for example, gravel pits, quarries, etc. With that approach, German workers can be released to employers directly involved in construction of the highways.' But wartime brought severe labour shortages that threatened to stall expansion and, by October 1940, Todt pressed the Reich Security Head Office to supply labourers swiftly to motorway construction sites. A response came the same month calling for the provision of 10,000 German Jewish men for highway construction. Initial results were disappointing, even though the Reich Security Head Office allowed concentration-camp prisoners to be included, so Todt received the go-ahead to bring non-German Jews into the Reich for road construction. In March and April 1941, transports left the Łódź (Litzmannstadt) ghetto in Poland to work on the road from Frankfurt an der Oder to Posen and 7,000 men were sent for forced labour in the Reich. Since ghetto inmates faced hunger and death where they were, reports of better conditions elsewhere appeared to offer hope. As ghetto inmate Dawid Sierakowiak said of those sent to Germany: 'They seem to be the lucky ones who have won new opportunities not existing previously in the ghetto to survive the war. All the letters coming in from individuals sent to work promise a degree of satisfaction no longer known in the ghetto: "We can eat, eat and eat again."'

The SS and OT also organised Jewish and other labourers in Upper Silesia for motorway construction. Himmler appointed SS-Brigadeführer Albrecht Schmelt as a special commissioner in the region and his organisation began building its own camps throughout the area. Tens of thousands of men came from Jewish districts in eastern Upper Silesia. But the labour camps were not established and operated by the SS alone; a significant number of the Jewish camps built after autumn 1940 belonged to the OT and the motorway authorities.

Despite labour shortages, Todt pressed ahead with his dream of motorways heading out through the Reich and this is what Hitler respected about him. He valued Todt for his realism, his ability to get things done and because he refused to stoop to the constant political intrigues and lavish excess typical among Hitler's entourage. Whereas Hitler and the Reich's most powerful figures typically had grand residences, Todt had a modest house in the Berchtesgaden area, on the Obersalzberg in the Bavarian Alps. The Führer therefore treated him differently from less favoured members of the regime's inner circle, always ready to receive him or talk by telephone instead of communicating by formal letter.

Speer, who was himself in Hitler's favour, was impressed by Todt's reluctance to advertise his powerful position. 'My wife and I had frequently been Todt's house guests,' Speer recalled after the war. 'The Todts lived in a small unpretentious place off the beaten track on Hintersee near Berchtesgaden. No one would have guessed that the famous road builder and creator of the Autobahns lived there.'

Todt remained among Hitler's closest confidants to the end, together with Göring and General Wilhelm Keitel, the unquestioningly loyal head of the German High Command. Todt's high standing was reflected in the responsibilities awarded to him. After Hitler appointed him inspector general for water and energy in 1941, adding this to all Todt's other titles, only the vain and ambitious Göring had amassed more state and party posts. As Hitler prepared to command the Wehrmacht to attack the Soviet Union, Todt was a key figure in the Nazi war machine.

# 5

## ‘GARDEN OF EDEN’

Less than a month after invading the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, Hitler spoke of a ‘Garden of Eden’ in the east for German settlers, who would live in towns modelled on the finest in the Reich. The significance of the OT’s involvement in this chilling imperial vision, under which the lives of the local Eastern European population counted for virtually nothing, was twofold: building was Hitler’s passion, and this was the area where the OT excelled.

For Hitler, recreating an empire by waging war meant seizing ‘Lebensraum’ in the east, the genocide of Jews and the deliberate starvation of millions of Slavs in the Soviet Union. It also entailed crippling exploitation of the economies, raw materials and labour of German-occupied and dependent countries. Under one of several settlement plans linked to the invasion of Russia, 31 million people plus all the Jews were to be displaced to the east from Poland, the Baltic area, Belarus and north-west Ukraine; they were to be replaced over thirty years by 4.5 million Germans.

Confident of victory, Hitler instructed that the new German settlers should live in communities modelled on the Fatherland’s medieval towns, such as Regensburg or Heidelberg. They were to be ringed at a distance of 30–40 kilometres by model settlements built for the German rural population, with imposing public buildings and fast road links. The territory for these settlements was also to be served by high-speed railway networks stretching out eastwards from the Reich; double-decker trains travelling at up to 200 kilometres an hour would take 600 passengers per carriage from Munich to Rostov-on-Don in southern Russia. Hitler instructed Munich rail authorities to make the necessary changes to the main station: the hall now needed the largest steel-frame structure in the world.

German settlements in conquered lands needed architects and Speer was Hitler’s favourite. The Führer saw him as someone who could design the impressive buildings

he craved to bezewel his ‘Thousand-Year Reich’ and in November he asked Speer to take charge of building the planned new towns. In early 1942, Speer shared his ideas for the new cities with the Minister for the East, Alfred Rosenberg. He pointed to the success of the Westwall, which showed how construction projects were best carried out by a well-integrated force of skilled labourers used to working with one another. The OT’s high performance proved the worth of this model, Speer said, and he suggested using similar practices for the development of the new eastern cities. Hitler approved Speer’s proposals before the end of the year.

Hitler later described, in Todt’s presence, the future he saw for people in conquered eastern territories: he said in October that the Slav inhabitants were to be starved in the cities, some were to be selected for work and Jews were to be exterminated. A month after that Hitler made a third declaration, that ‘the area that works for us now includes more than 250 million people’. This was a realistic figure and since German experts reckoned 40 per cent of a population could be deemed employable, this meant a labour force of 100 million.

Yet what the Nazi regime regarded as a potential workforce, namely Soviet prisoners of war, were dying in droves as a result of shootings or murderous neglect in Wehrmacht compounds in the first months of the invasion, known as Operation Barbarossa. It was Todt’s deputy, Franz Xaver Dorsch, who highlighted the plight of these prisoners three weeks after the invasion. He described how 100,000 Soviet prisoners of war (POWs) and 40,000 civilians had been packed so tightly into a camp in Minsk that they were forced to relieve themselves where they stood. Guards shot prisoners, and some POWs went six to eight days without food. Further south, in the Zhytomyr region west of Kiev in Ukraine, thousands of POWs were dying in camps from starvation, shooting and disease. Some resorted to cannibalism.

Both Todt and Hitler subsequently acted to exploit the prisoners as slave labour instead. In October 1941, Hitler ordered Soviet POWs to be deployed to work in the Reich for Germany’s war effort. And Todt, having ensured the support of Göring and the armed forces High Command, informed German industry in December that Soviet prisoners of war would shortly be available. Skilled workers would be picked out, including miners and metalworkers, so that 200,000 could be deployed in Germany’s armaments industry, after ensuring they were physically fit to work. Todt was well aware that within six months an extra 800,000 workers would be needed and he pledged that Soviet prisoners of war would be fully exploited in future.

It wasn’t enough to remedy the appalling living conditions of the camps, though, and 2,500 prisoners of war were still dying every day in Ukraine’s camps before the year

was out. Nazis branded Slavs as ‘subhuman’, and believed that the eastern campaign would be another ‘Blitzkrieg’ victory. A total of 3.3 million Soviet prisoners of war perished in captivity or were worked to death by the end of the war.

Although actual settlement would ultimately be limited, the military groundwork for Hitler’s ‘Garden of Eden’ was brutally laid in the opening months of the conflict. The OT launched massive operations and its labour force in occupied Soviet territory reached 800,000 at times, more than the combined total of inmates in all Germany’s concentration camps registered in mid-January 1945. An initial German OT force of just 20,000 had followed the Wehrmacht in motorised units at the start of the invasion, mostly equipped for road- and bridge-building. However, Hitler had identified vital projects in the east so that major OT deployments were soon ordered into Soviet territory. The OT’s labour force numbered around 400,000 after a major expansion in summer 1942, and for short periods it was double that figure.

Building settlement outposts in the east was also a key goal for Himmler, as head of the SS and in his capacity as Reich commissioner for the strengthening of the German people. He sought prisoners of war and civilians to build them, but faced stiff competition for such slave labourers from the OT and Wehrmacht. The Wehrmacht’s tasks, such as defence installations and securing supply routes for the German armies, were all carried out within the framework of its cooperation with the OT. There thus remained limited leeway for the SS to acquire the workers it needed to build police outposts and SS bases required for settlements.

In the extreme environment of the war in Russia, the usual rules often did not apply when the OT or army engineers were in need of labour. Allied intelligence observed that manpower was obtained simply by stopping convoys of Russian prisoners of war being withdrawn from the battle area and putting them to work until they were relieved by the next convoy of prisoners. Hundreds of thousands of prisoners of war and civilians were press-ganged in this way and compelled to work by firms often contracted to the OT.

As a result, the SS had to look elsewhere and tried to copy OT methods to obtain the workers it needed. The OT became its model for exploiting an extremely valuable labour pool: private firms with skilled workers and specialist equipment, interlinked under so-called SS Front-worker Enterprises (SS Frontarbeiterunternehmen). The SS used private firms in the occupied territories in the same way as the OT. The name SS Front-worker echoed the one given to core personnel in the OT, known as OT Front-workers, who worked in units providing support to German front-line troops and were typically tasked with repairing bridges and communications.

The SS copied OT practices so closely that, just as OT Front-workers were accorded the status of Wehrmacht auxiliaries, so SS Front-workers were designated ‘Wehrmacht auxiliaries of the Waffen-SS’, coming under the SS disciplinary code. In addition, what was possibly the first SS Front-worker enterprise worked for the OT.

However, even this latest SS attempt to marshal scarce labour resources went awry, and cooperation with private construction firms was anything but harmonious. Since the Dutch were considered ‘Germanic’, in 1942 Pohl’s SS Economic and Administrative Head Office tried to engage Dutch firms to build bases on occupied Soviet territory. The following year the director of the Dutch firm Nederlandsche Oost Bouw NV (NOB), B. J. Hoekstra, complained that Dutch workers were treated like prisoners of war or slaves who had to go around in rags, and he blamed the SS for their misery. In a devastating criticism of cooperation between NOB and the SS Economic and Administrative Head Office, his report stated: ‘With the OT, everything is much better organised.’ Such examples show how Himmler’s SS, despite its status as an elite Nazi force, was often obliged to learn skills from more experienced partners like the OT and adopt its practices to succeed in developing settlements.

The realities of war were now encroaching on Hitler’s dreams of settlements for millions of Germans in his expanded empire, as well as other elements of the imperial scheme. Todt cut back the motorway programme in the winter of 1941 as prisoners of war were switched to work on armaments production. Prestigious projects like ‘Germania’ were also hit, although the SS was helping Speer obtain granite from annexed or occupied territories, including Poland and France. The German Earth and Stone Works set up a quarry near Natzweiler concentration camp in late 1940, where Speer had noticed a remarkable red granite on an inspection tour, and prisoners were used as slave labour to exploit it. In the early summer of 1941, Hitler would still occasionally pay a visit to where the model of ‘Germania’ was laid out, instructing Speer to increase orders for granite from abroad. Common sense said his construction team’s efforts should be redirected to war-related duties, but Hitler was reluctant. ‘It was quite extraordinary how adamantly he opposed this,’ Speer said later. But Speer himself was pursuing his own efforts to push ahead the ‘Germania project’. He or his representatives had made numerous trips to secure the production and delivery of granite to Berlin. By this time, contracts to provide stone involved quarries in Norway, Sweden, Finland, France, Spain and Italy.

His actions were also having fatal consequences for Jews in Berlin. Details of this only emerged after the war when Rudolf Wolters, who worked with Speer on ‘Germania’ and edited his post-war memoirs, revealed material he had cut out that was

highly incriminating for Speer. Angry at what he saw as Speer's betrayal of their beliefs under Nazism, Wolters decided to tell all. Wolters stated that an excised passage confirmed that Speer had seized 23,765 Jewish apartments in Berlin from October 1941, forcing 75,000 Jews to be 'resettled'. This in fact meant their handover to the SS, who organised the Jews' expulsion and murder.

Even though both Hitler and Speer still seemed to want 'Germania' to continue, practical steps to cut back on the Führer's cherished scheme were none the less taken. Units of Speer's specialist 'Germania' team assumed new responsibilities to assist the war effort. They were assigned to build factories for war production both within the Reich and in Nazi-occupied Europe. Other urgent projects included air-raid shelters for Berlin and the repair of Germany's bomb-damaged transport network in the core of the Reich and annexed territories.

Other construction staff were assigned to Eastern Europe, where the Red Army had blown up bridges, roads and railways as they retreated and the transport system was close to collapse. Speer suggested to Hitler that half his 'Germania' team be dispatched to repair it, recalling later: 'Even then he couldn't bear to let me interrupt the Berlin building programme. It took weeks before Fritz Todt was able to persuade him that his OT needed the expertise of our engineers to do the job.' In late December 1941 Hitler finally agreed. He also gave orders for the deployment to occupied Soviet territory of similar construction teams headed by Speer's rival, Hermann Giesler, from Linz and Munich.

Todt assigned Speer's team to the logically more important south of the Soviet Union, while Giesler's was sent to central and northern areas. Speer's 30,000 engineers and construction specialists, named Speer Construction Staff East, were deployed in Ukraine and the southern sector of the Eastern Front. Speer's force also worked with the OT and the SS on projects such as the strategic Transit Road IV through Ukraine, being built by Jewish and Ukrainian slave labourers. Neither Giesler nor Speer mentioned anything in their respective memoirs about the mass killings of Jews which took place in their allotted regions.

Speer first saw his new area of operation when he spent nearly a week from 30 January 1942 in the Ukrainian city of Dnepropetrovsk and his published recollections described at length the relentless snowfalls which delayed his departure. There was no hint of the mass murder of Jews taking place in the region. Yet ominously the city was, in the words of SS-Gruppenführer Friedrich Jeckeln, 'almost though not entirely Jew-free'. Jeckeln had been in Dnepropetrovsk on 5 October 1941, only a week after his

Task Force C took part in the Babi Yar massacre near Kiev of 33,771 Jews, the biggest single Nazi shooting of Jews in Soviet territory.

Even as Todt made these decisions to focus on the war effort, it was clear to him that there was to be no repeat of previous Blitzkrieg victories and that Nazi Germany was in for a long war. In the battle for Moscow, the Red Army and the bitter winter had brought German troops to a standstill, denying them the prize of the Russian capital. Todt viewed Germany's position as increasingly grave. A convinced Nazi and utterly loyal to his Führer, Todt had none the less become certain that Germany could not win the war. He had seen himself what German soldiers had to endure on the Eastern Front during his trips there.

On 29 November 1941, Todt delivered his most emphatic statement to Hitler on the hopelessness of the war, declaring in the presence of Field Marshal Walther von Brauchitsch, the supreme commander of the German army, at the Reich Chancellery: 'This war can no longer be won by military means.' When Hitler asked him what was the alternative, Todt replied that the conflict should be ended politically. To this, Hitler retorted that he could scarcely see how that could be achieved.

At the same meeting, and just before Todt's gloomy pronouncement, the industrialist Walter Rohland had delivered a similarly pessimistic report to Hitler, having just returned from a visit to the front. Rohland was in charge of German tank production, and he warned that the war would be lost for Germany if the United States joined the conflict because of its huge armaments potential. He based this assessment partly on his own experience, gained during a trip to the United States in 1930. Describing what he had seen at the front, Rohland recalled later how the engines and guns of Soviet tanks withstood the bitter Russian winter with temperatures plummeting as low as minus 45 degrees C. By contrast, German tanks failed to start, and weapons froze. Red Army soldiers were well equipped with winter clothing, while German soldiers were thinly clad, some even wrapped in blankets. Todt and Rohland's dramatic meeting with Hitler came just over a week before the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and the US entered the war. Todt must have been aware his efforts would be in vain at this point, but he persevered all the same.

Todt's desire to protect German forces from the extreme Russian winter led him to make a somewhat bizarre deal with Volkswagen in 1941. He urgently requested what became known as 'OT stoves', to provide heating for troops on the Eastern Front. As Volkswagen tried to adapt its output to wartime, it often took on jobs which other firms thought less attractive, such as the production of anti-tank mines and OT stoves. Despite the absurdity of the high-tech Volkswagen plant churning out such simple products,

Todt's order proved to be highly profitable for the firm. The very large number of bunker heaters required – Volkswagen's main plant had produced 221,505 heaters by the end of 1942 – meant that revenue from them more or less kept the company afloat in the winter of 1941–2.

But Todt's fears about the fate of Germany's troops in the east were based on far graver matters than the need for stoves. His sombre mood made a deep impression on Speer when he went to Todt's house near Berchtesgaden in late 1941. Recalling that Todt seemed 'very depressed', Speer said: 'He was just back from a long inspection trip to Russia and he told me how horrified he was by the condition of our soldiers. Later I would remember his words and the utter sadness in his face when he said that he didn't think we could possibly win the war there. The Russian soldiers were perhaps primitive, he said, but they were both physically and psychologically much hardier than we were. I remember trying to encourage him. Our boys were pretty strong, I said. He shook his head in that special way he had and said – I can still hear him – "You are young. You still have illusions."'

Todt's utter despair at this point contrasted with his supreme certainty in a German victory only two months before the launch of Operation Barbarossa. In April 1941, brimming with confidence and looking to a future in which Germany would dominate Europe, Todt wrote to Himmler's faithful lieutenant Reinhard Heydrich about plans for the peace after Germany's enemies were crushed. The letter and its contents were therefore highly significant. Todt explained to Heydrich, who ran the Reich Security Head Office, that he was seeking young talent for the OT. He described how Organisation Todt was expanding operations into newly occupied territory in northern France, Denmark, Norway and Eastern Europe. Reflecting the optimistic mood of the Nazi elite following the Wehrmacht's initial victories in the west, he even sketched out plans to build up the OT's personnel to be able to undertake the extensive construction tasks he envisaged for his organisation 'after the war'.

Todt told Heydrich he was paying particular attention to appointments to the OT leadership and to those responsible for the care of the agency's employees. He needed gifted young men, and one who had caught his eye was then in the police force. Todt explained that the young man, named Zoepf, had displayed great skill the previous year at Plassenburg in caring for OT men who had been injured on the Westwall or at other sites near the battlefield. Zoepf's efforts over just a few days, working with batches of 80 to 100 OT men at a time, had restored their self-confidence so that they had been able to return to serve in exemplary fashion in front-line zones. Todt said he wished to employ Zoepf in personnel management supervising OT leisure-time activities and he

promised to promote Zoepf, who was relatively junior, to the position of Regierungsrat (senior civil servant) in about a year.

Just months after this remarkable letter foreseeing a bright future, however, Todt's mood had changed completely. Deeply worried about the war but seeking to limit the damage, Todt argued that the 'Blitzkrieg economy' should be abandoned and preparation be made instead for a long conflict. Although Todt's attempts to persuade Hitler of the futility of war with the Soviet Union ultimately failed, he was successful in winning him over on armaments production.

The war economy suffered from a lack of centralised control, obstacles to mass production and poor incentives for greater efficiency. Military planners focused too much on trying to perfect technically complex weapons and rationalisation was necessary. There was also an acute shortage of labour and Hitler, aware of the growing economic crisis, called for 'the promotion of crude mass production'. At the end of 1941, Todt obtained Hitler's support for a complete overhaul of armaments production. This broadly involved taking the various weapons systems and creating committees to oversee each section. The reforms meant more centralisation and increased responsibility for industrialists in organising production. By the end of January 1942 his recommendations were before Hitler, leading to the Armaments Ministry being given central control over military production.

Todt's armaments reforms were to be one of his last achievements serving under Hitler. But he and his Organisation Todt were deeply involved in a different, sinister enterprise involving slave labour and a massacre of Jews during that same month. The project was the construction of Hitler's field headquarters in Ukraine, known as Werewolf. Just as Hitler had called on Todt to organise the building of the 'Wolf's Lair' before invading Russia, so the head of the OT was now busy making arrangements for the Führer's latest strategic outpost on the Eastern Front.

Todt needed to assemble a workforce and, just as he had found while building his motorways eastward from the Reich into occupied Poland, now he was encountering objections from the SS Security Services to his requests for skilled Jewish workers. Previously, he had succeeded in pressuring the Reich Security Head Office to supply thousands of Jewish workers to motorway construction sites through parts of Germany into Poland and now he wanted the same to be provided for Werewolf. Both Todt and Himmler recognised the need for Jewish skilled labourers, even on top-security sites like this one. They believed that any Jews remaining in Ukraine, Romania and Hungary, after the SS task-force killing squads had eliminated hundreds of thousands, should be available as slave labour.

Todt's instructions to use Jewish labourers for Werewolf were revealed in a chilling telegram sent on 28 January 1942 to the head of the Reich Security Service, a special force acting as Hitler's personal bodyguards. The message to SS-Standartenführer Hans Rattenhuber was sent by his deputy, SS-Sturmbannführer Friedrich Schmidt based in Vinnytsia, close to the Werewolf site.

As already advised in my messages on 12 and 14 January 1942, the security zone has been cleansed of Jews. The building project leader ... told me today that, at the request of Reich Minister Dr Todt, several hundred Jews are to be assigned to the building site.

Schmidt had previously reported a massacre of 227 Jews from the village of Strizhavka, on the perimeter of the Werewolf site. OT units and the Wehrmacht's Secret Field Police had handed over these villagers to the Security Police and the Jews had then been murdered. In his message to Rattenhuber on 12 January, Schmidt had emphasised the 'great danger' posed by the Jews. He had asked the regional commissar for them to be evacuated, but it had been deemed impossible. The Jews had therefore been killed between 8.30 and 10.30 on 10 January 1942. He described how the bodies had been buried.

In order to carry out the operation, our office had to see to the digging of a pit and, after the transfer, to levelling it off in an orderly fashion. With the assistance of OT men and prisoners of war, the pit was dug out with explosives because of the hard frost.

Schmidt said twelve more Jews were rounded up on the following day and later shot, adding: 'As a result of this action, the security zone is free of Jews.'

Now Schmidt feared Todt was about to undo all he had striven for. In his 28 January telegram to Rattenhuber after the massacre, Schmidt argued against Todt seeking Jews to fill the need for carpenters, bricklayers and other skilled workers. Jews would represent a 'great danger', he said, since most spoke German and would be constantly with OT staff and able to overhear conversations, enabling them to work out what was being built. The enemy would soon be informed and take action, Schmidt warned.

Despite Schmidt's protests, Jewish labourers were indeed exploited at the Werewolf building site, codenamed Eichenhain (Oak Grove). They were also forced to work at an OT-run brickworks in Vinnytsia providing supplies for Hitler's elaborate headquarters and bunker as part of OT Operation Oak Grove. Out of nearly 5,000 Jews in Vinnytsia's

prison and in the brickworks at this time, only 700 were judged necessary for local industry, and 1,000 were selected as skilled labourers for Werewolf construction. The rest were shot.

These events provide clear proof of Todt's role in charge of Werewolf. Historian Wendy Lower concluded that the OT 'initiated the use of Jewish labor at Hitler's headquarters, which effectively linked this organization to the Holocaust'. SS Security Service personnel killed the Jewish labourers after work was completed to eliminate a 'security risk'.

Todt's final legacy would not just be his motorways, or boosting armaments production, or challenging Hitler to negotiate rather than wage war. It would also be his actions as a faithful follower of a dictator carrying out genocide.

# 6

## AFTER TODT

In early 1942, with the US in the war and the battle for Moscow lost, the mood in Hitler's 'Wolf's Lair' near Rastenburg was tense. The large complex about eight kilometres from Rastenburg was hidden deep in the Masurian forests of East Prussia and camouflaged from the air. It included bunkers, barracks for the guards, an airstrip, conference rooms and a dining hall, as well as its own railway link. This line was used on occasion by Göring travelling in his luxurious personal train.

It was at the 'Wolf's Lair' that Hitler received briefings from his military top brass and other key figures. When he first arrived there shortly after the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, he and the leaders of his armed forces only expected him to use it as a base for a few weeks before a predicted victory tour of conquered Soviet territory. But their dreams were never realised. Furious at his military chiefs for failures during the eastern offensive, Hitler took over command of military operations himself. He refused his generals' pleas to allow tactical withdrawals and insisted they hold the line, dismissing those who refused to do so. In the first week of February, Hitler's schedule at the Rastenburg headquarters would include talks with Todt on his Armaments Minister's blueprint to ramp up arms production. Speer would also turn up for an unscheduled stop in the hope of meeting Hitler. Both men managed to have separate late-night discussions with the Führer before disaster struck.

On 8 February 1942, Fritz Todt died when his plane crashed the morning after a meeting with Hitler. His death prompted speculation he had been assassinated, perhaps by the SS, because he had become convinced Germany could not win the war. Todt's beliefs were well known, and he had expressed them openly to Hitler. Nevertheless, there was no hard evidence of an assassination plot against him by the SS or anyone else. The twin-engine Heinkel He-111 had plunged to earth and burst into flames, killing everyone on board. Todt's body and those of four others were lifted out on long poles

from the burning wreckage. Despite intensive investigations, precisely why the crash occurred has never been conclusively explained. At a critical juncture in the war, Hitler's Armaments Minister, who had dared cross his Führer and suggest a political rather than military end to the conflict, was gone.

The night before the crash, Todt had met Hitler to elaborate on his plans to reorganise and boost Germany's armaments production. It is not known if anything else was discussed (no detailed record of their meeting was taken), but it is possible Todt raised his fears about the outcome of the war. To judge by Todt's despondent air on emerging from his lengthy private dinner and talks with Hitler, their discussions had gone anything but smoothly. Speer, who had arrived at Rastenburg from Ukraine, had himself wanted to meet Hitler but Todt was there before him. When Todt finally appeared in the evening, Speer later described him as 'strained and exhausted'. Speer chatted briefly with Todt, who sat dispiritedly drinking a glass of wine. When Todt offered his companion a seat on his plane the next morning, Speer accepted and would have been on the doomed aircraft bound for Berlin had he not pulled out because his own discussion with Hitler that night had continued until 3 a.m. He sent word before retiring to bed about his change of mind. For Speer, his decision to get a little more sleep was a fortunate one. He was woken by a telephone call shortly after 8 a.m. informing him of the crash.

Walter 'Panzer' Rohland, who had backed up Todt's arguments when they met Hitler just over two months earlier, immediately concluded that Todt had been assassinated. He and Todt agreed that Germany could not win a long war, especially with the US now drawn into it, and Rohland was convinced Todt had paid with his life for telling the truth to Hitler. He stuck to this belief long after the end of the Second World War, even though no concrete evidence emerged. However, it seems unlikely that Hitler would have ordered Todt's murder or warned Speer not to travel on his aircraft. There were easier ways for him to get rid of troublesome subordinates if he wished. Simply dismissing Todt or removing him on the excuse of 'health grounds', for instance, would have involved fewer risks and less speculation.

As for Speer, various drafts of his memoirs show how he agonised over how to present his version of what happened and Hitler's reactions, but there is little reason to doubt he was in Rastenburg purely by chance. He had been in Ukraine supervising the repair of the region's roads and railways, but his return to Berlin had been delayed by heavy snowfalls. He had tried in vain to leave the southern city of Dnepropetrovsk on a hospital train and then accepted a pilot's offer to fly him as far as Rastenburg. By the time Speer did get his turn to see Hitler, he wrote in his post-war memoirs, the Führer

seemed exhausted and out of sorts. As soon as discussion turned to ‘Germania’ and Speer’s Nuremberg building project, though, ‘Hitler visibly brightened’.

Speer said Hitler reacted to Todt’s death with ‘stoic calm’ but wanted an investigation because he suspected in the first few days that foul play might have been involved. Later, he irritably forbade discussion on the topic because ‘this loss still affects me too deeply’. A German Air Ministry commission of inquiry ruled out sabotage, but Speer repeated some of its findings that were later convincingly challenged. One was a statement that Todt’s plane, which had been converted for passenger use, had a self-destruct mechanism that could be activated by pulling a handle by the pilot’s seat; the other was that the aircraft exploded at low altitude. Todt’s son, a fighter pilot, revealed that the plane did not in fact have the emergency mechanism to destroy it. Hitler’s air-force adjutant, Nicolaus von Below, mentioned neither a self-destruct device nor a mid-air explosion in his post-war memoir. Below, who had been closely involved with Todt’s plans that day, suggested a quite different reason for the crash: ‘The weather was not good, the sky and the snow-covered ground equally grey, without a visible horizon between them. I suspected human error by the pilot, who wasn’t yet sufficiently familiar with the plane in difficult weather conditions.’ He contradicted the inquiry’s description of Todt’s plane as being on loan to him, stating, rather, that it was a new twin-engine HE-111 the Armaments Minister had obtained at the end of 1941 for his travels.

All these various accounts failed to resolve the mystery. Rohland told Allied interrogators after the war that Todt’s fatal accident meant the German government of the time had lost ‘the only man who had total oversight of the situation because of his international contacts and clear judgement’. There is little doubt of Todt’s immense value to the Nazis, as a man level-headed enough to argue the case for diplomacy to Hitler, yet still do his utmost to increase German armaments production when his efforts at persuasion failed. Even after his death Todt’s reform of the armaments system helped produce dramatic improvements in production. Others who shared Todt’s pessimism about Germany’s chances of victory had already despaired. Three months before Todt died, Ernst Udet, head of the air force’s procurement organisation, shot himself, having failed to convince Hitler and Göring of the hopelessness of Germany matching the surge in British and American aircraft production. Prior to Todt’s death, Walter Borbet, the head of a major arms manufacturer, Bochum Association, also shot himself because he felt the war could not be won and Germany would not make peace. By contrast, Todt had achieved all he could in the face of Hitler’s pursuit of war. If he had survived the

conflict and remained Armaments Minister, he would have appeared before the Nuremberg war crimes tribunal with the rest of the leading members of Hitler's regime.

Hitler lost no time in appointing Speer as Todt's successor. Speer remembered that, within a few hours of the crash, he was 'summoned to Hitler as the first caller at the usual late hour, around one o'clock in the afternoon'. He admitted to being 'thunderstruck' when Hitler told him: 'Herr Speer, I appoint you the successor of Mr Todt in all his capacities.' Brushing aside Speer's weak protest about a lack of expertise regarding Todt's responsibilities as Armaments Minister, Hitler instructed him to get in touch with the Ministry at once and take over. As Speer took his leave and headed for the door, an unexpected visitor was announced: Hermann Göring. Hitler, visibly irritated, asked Speer to remain in the room and Göring swept in. 'Best if I take over Dr Todt's assignments within the framework of the Four-Year Plan,' he said. But Göring had not acted in time. Hitler simply repeated that he had already formally instructed Speer to assume all Todt's responsibilities. Göring had no option but to accept that his bid to grab more power had failed.

# SPEER: THE ARCHITECT



# **THE NEW BROOM**

# 7

## SPEER REFORMS

Less than a week after Todt's death, Speer addressed staff in the courtyard of the Armaments Ministry. He pledged to continue Todt's work, asking for their trust and cooperation. As an architect rather than a civil engineer, and a man with no military background, he must have been aware he needed to win over sceptics who valued the qualities that Todt possessed which he did not. A 1945 British intelligence report said there was a 'decided temptation' to describe Todt in more favourable terms than Speer. Todt 'had the true technician's ability of adapting the method of execution to the nature of the operation', although Speer was 'obviously ... a skilled politician'.

Speer wrote in his post-war memoir that he certainly appreciated qualities he saw in his predecessor, and believed Hitler's feelings towards Todt reflected 'respect, bordering on reverence'. His own view of Todt, while the latter was still alive, was that he was 'irreplaceable' and 'one of the very few modest, unassertive personalities in the government, a man you could rely on, and who steered clear of all the intrigues'. Yet Speer chose not to remain in Todt's shadow for long.

Less than three months after Todt's death, the OT publication *Der Frontarbeiter* (*The Front Worker*) marked Hitler's fifty-third birthday with articles praising the organisation's founder. It cited the Führer's now widely known remark about Todt's extraordinary resourcefulness: 'The Organisation Todt, created by Dr Todt, overcame everything; for the man himself, the word "impossible" did not exist.' On Hitler's next birthday, the cover of *Der Frontarbeiter* showed Speer walking in OT uniform to the right of the Führer before Germany's top military brass – an image intended to portray him as his eventual successor.

Speer swiftly introduced changes, which came under two main headings: reorganisation and efficiency. Seeking to show his commitment to the organisation which Todt created, Speer made a highly significant gesture as soon as he was

appointed: he announced the incorporation into the OT of his team originally assigned to rebuild Berlin, known as ‘Construction Staff Speer’. With the inclusion of Speer’s transport and other units, these numbered 98,000 by the start of October 1941. Speer’s move underlined what was to be his guiding policy principle as the new minister and leader of the OT: the concentration of all available resources on the war effort. Within a month of his appointment, he told a meeting of the Nazi Party’s powerful regional chiefs that all activities not essential to the war effort were being postponed. ‘Increasing efficiency in the factories is chiefly a technical and economic matter. It is therefore ... only the task of the Party and its organisations to be active in this area if I think it necessary.’

Speer’s readiness to confront party stalwarts created enemies, but the man Hitler praised as having ‘tremendous organisational talent’ managed in the first weeks of office to restructure not only the OT but his Armaments Ministry as well. Speer reorganised the OT into seven Einsatzgruppen (task groups), the same name given to the squads which committed mass murder in Eastern Europe. Three of the groups covered the occupied west, north and south-west, while four were located in the occupied east following Hitler’s invasion of the Soviet Union. They varied in number and name as the war progressed.

In the expanding territory of Nazi-occupied Europe, regional OT chiefs supervised giant construction projects in their areas, often covering more than one country. These engineers led the core of the OT’s task force on the ground, supervising specialists in charge of operations cascading through the levels of multiple construction networks down to individual building sites. In an important early victory, Speer managed to outmanoeuvre Rosenberg, the Minister for the East. He did this by securing control of all technical operations in the occupied eastern territories, wresting it from the man who was supposed to be in charge there, thus bolstering the OT and increasing the responsibilities of his men in the area. The extension of OT control significantly boosted its profile in an area of ideological importance for Nazi racist expansion and transferred control from civilian administrations in the Baltics, Ukraine and other Soviet regions.

In June 1942 Hitler decreed that Speer would take over all matters in the occupied east regarding armaments, construction, energy, road-building, waterways, ports and the water industry. This had the most impact in southern areas, where the OT greatly increased its operations in Ukraine, in food production and coal mining. Other big areas of expansion included river transport, irrigation and the repair of the huge hydroelectric plant at Zaporizhzhya, on the Dnieper river. It was these OT operations, as well as

others carried out in cooperation with the Wehrmacht, that undermined SS plans to exploit Soviet workers for its own ends.

Speer's victory over Rosenberg in the east was highly significant, but OT engineers in charge of regions wielded considerable power throughout Nazi-occupied Europe. One of the biggest OT projects was the Atlantikwall, intended to turn the continent into a defensive fortress, which was run by the head of Task Group West, Karl Weiβ, the OT engineer in charge of France, Belgium and the Netherlands. Hermann Giesler led Task Group Russia-North before being switched back to the Reich to head Task Group Deutschland VI in the final year of the war. Another OT regional leader was Willi Henne, based in Norway. The task group leaders (*Einsatzgruppenleiter*) were the highest ranked OT engineers in the field, equivalent to a general in the Wehrmacht, followed by *Einsatzleiter* (major general). Under their administrative control were normally several construction networks known as *Oberbauleitungen*, each headed by a *Hauptbauleiter* or *Oberbauleiter*, respectively equivalent to colonel or lieutenant-colonel. Next came *Bauleiter* (major), through various grades to *Haupttruppführer* (sergeant major) down to *OT-Meister* (corporal) and simple *OT-Mann* (private).

OT staff included many civil servants from German city and regional housing and construction administrations. Its headquarters were set up in Berlin in early 1941 under Todt's second-in-command, Xaver Dorsch, an experienced engineer who was five years older than his boss and had worked with him at Sager & Woerner. Not all the staff were men. Apart from its predominantly male engineers, the OT recruited German female staff including physicians, while others were employed in technical drawing, accounting, secretarial work and communications.

Speer also restructured his ministry's administration to direct armaments production under the system of Main Committees which Todt had initiated. Under the system, the Armaments Ministry would set targets, leaving industry to ensure these were met. Speer called the new organisational principle 'self-responsibility of industry', a notion echoing Todt's idea of allowing private companies to take decisions independently within set parameters. As head of Central Planning, Speer managed the supply of raw materials, and his aim was to control the entire war economy. In September 1943 he took a giant step towards this goal when Hitler issued his Decree for the Concentration of the Wartime Economy, which broadened Speer's authority still further. Speer's Ministry for Armaments and Ammunition was renamed to reflect his new responsibilities, becoming the Ministry for Armaments and War Production.

Like Todt before him, Speer strove constantly to improve the OT's performance to ensure efficiency and expansion. Soon after taking office in 1942, he issued decrees

demanding better productivity from the OT's German and foreign workers, including prisoners, and formulated a harsh business model. Documents recording the running of the organisation's vast projects exploiting slave labour employed language typical of international corporations. Performance targets and deadlines had to be met; a bonus system was required to motivate the workforce; labourers, both skilled and unskilled, needed to be recruited and retained; OT staff were instructed to set an example, show leadership and encourage teamwork. In practice, though, OT methods differed from those of most European businesses before or after the Second World War. Performance was determined according to a racist scale measured against a German worker; bonuses were small amounts of food supplementing what remained grossly inadequate rations; recruiting labour meant round-ups executed by force; worker retention meant tighter security to prevent escapes; and OT leadership meant modelling an exemplary 'superior' race using routine violence.

As the war progressed, Speer introduced even more brutal methods. By the end of 1943 he was recommending a system that gave a sinister new meaning to incentives for workers: performance feeding, under which food 'bonuses' were created by taking it away from others. The principle was to withhold a proportion of prisoners' already meagre rations and share the reserved food between labourers deemed to have deserved it under a work-performance rating system. Hitler put his official seal on the use of performance feeding in February 1944.

In the drive to improve efficiency, OT administrators gathered statistics on a range of indicators to assess the output and strength of the workforce. Speer issued a decree in autumn 1942 to all OT regional chiefs, calling for better performance and skilful management of labour. He pointed out that foreigners, prisoners of war and detainees were in short supply, and ordered all OT regions to send him reports to show how productively they used their labourers. His action was in response to setbacks in the Wehrmacht's campaign in Russia. Big projects being undertaken by the OT meant that the effects of a generally worsening labour shortage across Europe were being felt ever more keenly.

The workforce should only be used according to their capabilities and experience. It is forbidden to assign skilled workers, especially German skilled workers, to work which could be carried out just as well by trained or even unskilled labourers. If a German carpenter is employed as a navvy, or to supervise a few foreign manual labourers, this use of such a valuable skilled worker is absurd.

Speer also ordered that only performance-based contracts should be made with firms, except where this was impossible for mobile OT units in occupied Soviet territory. The emphasis was on productivity, and the mark of a good construction-site manager was to achieve the highest output with the fewest workers. ‘The performance of every labourer deployed by the OT must be increased by every possible means. Basically the same work output is to be demanded from foreigners as from a German worker.’ He declared further: ‘Only appropriate, economical and profitable deployment of human labour resources will enable the OT to fulfil its allotted tasks.’

Such decrees by Speer reflected the level of detail he went into to ensure the OT functioned as he wished, as well as the importance he attached to this. Being the consummate ‘networker’, Speer put his own teams in place when he restructured the OT and brought it under the administration of his Armaments Ministry: his favourite architects and engineers were given top jobs. The OT’s regional chiefs in the furthest regions of Hitler’s European empire conducted their operations energetically to achieve goals which they and the staff in their task groups showed every sign of viewing as prestigious and worthwhile.

Bonds within the organisation formed by a system of patronage and common experiences, such as working on the motorways and Westwall before service in occupied Europe, were important. Both Todt and Speer fostered such ties. Many members of the OT had spent time in the military and a significant number of personnel appointed to senior positions were recruited from among construction managers in the Luftwaffe, including Giesler. Todt himself served in the air force in the First World War and was made a Generalmajor in the Luftwaffe in 1939. The construction corps of the SS Economic and Administrative Head Office had a similar connection to the Luftwaffe; its leader, Hans Kammler, was a doctor of engineering who had worked in the construction arm.

The system of patronage based on social and professional networks resembled practices governing appointments within the SS leadership of concentration camps in the latter half of the war. Such networks often provided the only means for ambitious members of the concentration-camp SS to succeed in their careers, and a similar system operated in the OT at high levels.

Speer possessed extraordinary skill in creating motivated teams of gifted young managers to put his plans into practice. He positioned capable engineers in critical areas in occupied Europe. One of these men was Professor Walter Brugmann, who had worked on the Nazi Party building in Nuremberg while Speer was in charge of the city’s facelift. Brugmann became head of the OT’s Russia-South region in mid-1942, an area

which attracted Hitler's intense interest as the gateway to the Caucasus oilfields. A year later, Brugmann accompanied Speer in an assault boat speeding over the Kerch Strait during a visit to mark the OT's completion of a cable railway linking Crimea to the Taman Peninsula; the celebrations included servings of the local delicacy – Russian caviar. Brugmann was killed in an air crash in May 1944 and, in recognition of his dedication as Speer's key local troubleshooter, the region's OT task group was named after him.

Another senior OT manager under Speer was Arnold Adam, who was put in charge of Transit Road IV, a highway built by Jews and prisoners of war across Ukraine towards the Caucasus oilfields. Having presided over road-building carried out by Jewish and other prisoners held in camps where death rates were exceptionally high, Adam went on to oversee OT repairs after the devastating British 'Dambuster' air raid in May 1943, which caused disastrous flooding in the heavily industrialised Ruhr and Eder valleys. He then became regional chief in the important northern sector known as 'Hansa' (Task Force III) after the partial OT withdrawal into the Reich.

Speer's willingness to devote time and effort to protect valued individual staff earned him loyal followers he took with him on his meteoric rise. One of them was Rudolf Wolters, who was among Speer's three protégés placed at OT headquarters, partly to monitor the danger posed by Todt's potentially rebellious old guard. The others were Gerhard Frank, who was business manager, and Erwin Bohr, chief of personnel. Wolters was a fellow architect Speer employed on the 'Germania' project, in the Armaments Ministry and in the OT. Wolters wrote an office journal recording Speer's work on all these tasks. Some other key members of Todt's team went on to be promoted under Speer, including Henne and the pugnacious and ambitious Karl Otto Saur. Saur eventually went on to replace Speer in Hitler's favour and was named Armaments Minister in the Führer's last 'will and testament' before his suicide.

While Speer developed a network of loyalists, there also existed 'counter-networks' whose members harboured resentment of the OT chief. An 'old guard' led by Todt's deputy, the experienced engineer Xaver Dorsch, turned out to be a constant thorn in Speer's side. They were markedly unwilling to pledge their support.

Among Speer's other prominent opponents was Giesler, who had his own protégés. They included Max Gimple, who served as his deputy in OT task groups. Gimple had worked under Giesler after the latter was given the prestigious job of redeveloping Munich in 1938. While working in the OT Russia-North task group, Gimple had a notorious collaborator, the former detention camp leader in Auschwitz, Hans Aumeier, who was then commandant of Vaivara concentration camp in Estonia.

OT engineers were set gigantic tasks to secure and develop Hitler's empire but they could never have achieved them without huge numbers of foreign workers. Out of the OT workforce of close to 1.5 million at the end of September 1944, just over 351,000 were Germans and nearly 1.1 million were foreigners. These foreigners included nearly 165,000 POWs and more than 140,000 other prisoners, including Jews. The remaining 775,000 were civilians.

The figures represent only a snapshot at that date since numbers fluctuated throughout the war; British intelligence estimated the total OT workforce as high as 2 million. However, they provide a basis for estimating the number of foreign workers who died on slave-labour projects involving the OT: more than 185,000. The exact number of foreign slave labourers who died solely as a result of OT violence or neglect will probably never be determined, since the organisation did not generally operate without either the SS, Wehrmacht or German firms.

Crucially, though, the OT bore a large part of the responsibility for the total estimated death toll among slave labourers. OT staff killed prisoners outright by shooting, hanging or beating them; they forced camp inmates to perform extreme hard labour in all weathers, working many of them to death, and workers under the OT generally suffered the worst possible conditions because the agency specialised in construction. Over and above all this, the OT gave its foreign labourers pitifully insufficient food. Altogether, hunger, sickness, exposure and exhaustion generally caused more deaths among labour-camp inmates than physical violence by guards.

Despite the hugely increased numbers of foreign slave labourers toiling for the OT in autumn 1944, the organisation's desire for even more was often left unsatisfied and its efforts to maintain the numbers of core personnel to oversee the slave-labour force faced similar problems. German OT staff numbers reached a maximum of around 350,000, but at its lowest point they may have dropped below 75,000. Successive drafts into the military drained young professionals from the OT and, at the start of the Second World War, it lost almost two-thirds of its employees, despite Hitler's order that work should continue on the Westwall and that the OT's wartime tasks were fortifications and road-building. OT workers were either conscripted into the Wehrmacht or broke their contracts to return home, resulting in the Westwall labour force drastically reducing. Waves of military drafts from 1942 meant the average age of OT staff rose to over fifty and appreciable numbers of wounded and incapacitated Germans were sidelined into OT administrative posts.

What's more, German personnel became vastly outnumbered by their foreign slave labourers, and the ratio of German to foreign OT personnel fell particularly low in

occupied Soviet territory and the Balkans. Foreigners grew to represent a significant proportion of supervisors employed by the OT to manage forced labourers, especially in Western Europe where conditions for foreign workers were generally milder. In this book, the term ‘forced labourer’ is used to describe non-Slavic, non-Jewish foreign labourers who were compelled to work but paid a meaningful wage. ‘Slave labourer’ is used where conditions were more severe, especially in Eastern Europe.

In the OT region encompassing France, Belgium and the Netherlands, routine supervision of manual labour was placed as far as possible in German hands until manpower shortages in the latter stages of the war forced a shift: Dutch, Belgian and French workers assumed low-level supervisory roles, such as assistant foremen. Those persecuted under the Nazi racist code, such as Jews and Slavs, including Soviet civilians and prisoners of war, were excluded from any such positions.

The trend towards hiring more foreigners into OT ranks also affected healthcare for the organisation’s employees (as opposed to the vastly inferior, or virtually non-existent, care available to labour-camp inmates). Greater numbers of foreign OT doctors were appointed as the war progressed in occupied Western Europe.

The OT tried various strategies to encourage staff to join its ranks. Incentives were offered to attract Volksdeutsche and ‘people of German descent’ into the OT, promising German nationality and equal status with citizens in the Reich. Volksdeutsche referred to ethnic Germans locked outside the new borders of the Reich after the redrawing of European frontiers under the Versailles Treaty after the First World War; Reichsdeutsche were those within the new borders. Hitler’s decree of 19 May 1943 offered German nationality to foreigners having at least two German grandparents who joined the Wehrmacht, Waffen-SS, German police or the OT. OT headquarters issued detailed instructions on categories of staff, including how Volksdeutsche with the required official papers could be classified under the ‘German’ column in forms for compiling labour statistics.

Staff were also recruited or joined up from nations allied to Germany, such as Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, and from Italian firms. However, after Italy’s armistice with the Allies in September 1943 large numbers of Italian soldiers designated as military internees were forced to work in the Reich. In France, at least 500 German and 500 French companies worked for the OT, along with some Belgian and Dutch ones, and foreigners from Western and Northern Europe, such as employees of French, Dutch, Belgian and Danish firms, joined the OT in various ways. Foreign firms could put their entire workforce and equipment at the OT’s disposal and work under contract,

individuals could also sign up and foreign firms or individuals could be conscripted into the organisation.

OT operations were almost entirely confined to Nazi-occupied European territory for most of the war, with the core of the Reich largely out of bounds, and this made the organisation especially focused on Hitler's imperial ambitions expanded by military conquests. But Hitler issued a decree on 2 September 1943 which was pivotal and changed the OT's reach. It legally set out the OT's functions for the first time and placed Speer directly under the Führer. The OT had long acted as a parastatal organisation driving the slave-labour economy to boost the war effort, and signed contracts with German and foreign businesses across occupied Europe in the name of the Reich. However, Hitler's act of formally making the organisation and its chief answerable only to him greatly increased the OT's power as 'an agency to carry out construction tasks of all kinds decisive for the outcome of the war'. It dealt a severe blow to rivals such as the German Labour Front, which was headed by Robert Ley and subservient to the Nazi Party.

The decree also formalised the inclusion of the Greater Reich in the OT's sphere of operations, although the organisation had already strayed beyond its otherwise almost complete restriction to occupied Europe. One such instance was in April 1942 when Hitler, on Speer's suggestion, directed that OT technical experts be diverted to Germany's core to repair devastation caused by Allied bombing. On that occasion, damage to the northern city of Lübeck prompted the move. Another case followed about a year later, when tens of thousands of OT personnel were pulled back from the Atlantic Wall and other tasks following the 'Dambuster' raid. This mass transfer of OT workers was so great that Karl Weiß, the Paris-based OT regional chief, wrested a promise that they be replaced when he met shortly afterwards with Fritz Sauckel, the ruthless Thuringian regional Nazi Party leader whom Hitler made general plenipotentiary for labour mobilisation in spring 1942. All the same, the need for the emergency OT task force in the Ruhr was extreme. Dorsch, the OT deputy chief, believed German military leaders were convinced at the time that the war would be lost if the damage were not quickly repaired. Despite the success of the British bombing of the Möhne and other dams, OT engineers did, in fact, work speedily to help complete the repairs within five months. But these two examples of OT deployment in the core of the Reich were exceptional before Hitler's 1943 decree, which he issued without bothering to wait for the views of General Wilhelm Keitel, head of the High Command of the Wehrmacht, one of the OT's closest partners.

While the OT went through these changes under Todt's and then Speer's leadership, its headquarters were run by Dorsch. The administration had been moved to Berlin after work was stopped on the Westwall in the summer of 1940 and staff numbered about 100 in early 1941, growing much later to 3,500. The OT's administration became ponderous and over-extended, struggling to keep up to date with projects being carried out by far-flung construction teams across occupied Europe, including vast areas of Soviet territory seized in the Wehrmacht's Barbarossa campaign. Specialist staff scrambled to keep abreast of rapidly changing developments, working feverishly to match available workers and supplies to tasks, compiling reports and issuing directives. OT documents and post-war investigations provide a fascinating glimpse into the organisation's nerve centre.

# 8

## OT, SS, SA

SS-Obersturmbannführer Fritz Schmelter worked at OT headquarters and had a passion for statistics. He required strict categorisation of workers in monthly records sent to him and would examine the columns of figures giving tallies of labourers on building sites around German-occupied Europe. Sometimes the forms were typed, sometimes handwritten or incorrectly filled out, with staff in the field failing to follow guidelines to ensure that a shared column had prisoners of war entered on the left, with Jews on the right. ‘Jews always count as prisoners,’ he informed staff in instructions sent out in a regular OT information bulletin.

Schmelter joined the Nazi Party in 1932 and, like a number of other members of the OT leadership, was an SS officer. He was born in Lissa, in the Prussian province of Posen, and became the OT’s manpower administrator in mid-1942 at the age of thirty-eight. He was married and his wife gave birth to their first child when Hitler had just come to power.

Other OT leaders were also members of paramilitary groups, like the SA. Todt had been an SA-Obergruppenführer, the OT’s deputy leader, Xaver Dorsch, had been an SA-Brigadeführer and Speer was in the SA before leaving it after eighteen months to join the SS. Alois Poschmann, the SS-Sturmbannführer, was in charge of health at OT headquarters in Berlin; it was on his orders that pitifully inadequate, or non-existent, medical care was provided for prisoners in the camps.

The number of SS and SA officers in the OT made cooperation simpler with Himmler’s SS across occupied Europe. But how much did the presence of SS and SA officers within the OT alter the nature of an organisation whose purpose was simply construction? Were OT engineers who were also SS officers ardent Nazis or, above all, professionals? The answer was that, in many cases, they could be both.

Although loyalty to the Nazi Party could be a passport to success in some jobs under the Third Reich, all SS officers with important positions in the OT had one thing in common: they were well educated and qualified for their tasks. The OT required a whole range of professionals to provide medical care and perform other specialist tasks, as well as cater for staff. Personnel included doctors, miners, mechanics, electricians, administrators, architects, accountants, cooks and drivers. In the higher ranks of the OT, the superior level of academic and professional qualifications was remarkable and around 40.7 per cent of around 1,400 senior staff possessed them.

Not all OT staff were engineers but, all the same, the OT's central purpose was construction and its leaders, pursuing efficiency drives, greatly valued qualified ones. Some held titles in the regional state administration in fields including construction and management, or were trained architects or engineers, with many having the Diploma of Engineering (Dipl. Ing.) or the higher academic title of Doctor of Engineering (Dr Ing.). Regional leaders overseeing the building of bridges, roads and railways required expert knowledge of the technical challenges that construction teams faced when dealing with extreme climates and terrains. Todt had been a highly experienced and capable engineer and the same was true of Dorsch, who continued to serve under Speer. The only high-ranking SS officer among the original seven OT regional chiefs deployed in Nazi-occupied territory, SS-Standartenführer Willi Henne, was also a fully qualified civil engineer.

Todt had been proud of the OT's links with the SS and was prepared to make exceptions and not always insist on OT uniforms. In an exchange with Himmler in October 1941 about SS members working for the OT, he argued that about seventy such SS officers should keep the field-grey uniforms worn by the Waffen-SS. He felt this would show 'that the OT's leadership developed strongly from party structures'.

Although Todt emphasised these bonds, the OT was a latecomer among Hitler's paramilitary organisations. The SA dated back to 1921, when it became the new name of the Nazi Party's paramilitary movement; also known as Brownshirts, it specialised in brutality and street violence as Hitler moved towards his seizure of power. The SS, meanwhile, had its origins in a small unit created to act as Hitler's bodyguard in 1923 and was always seen as an elite formation, in contrast to the broader membership of the SA. The SS had various leaders before Hitler appointed the loyal Himmler to head it in 1929. Himmler built it up, moulding the force to be strictly disciplined, racially pure and unquestioningly obedient. He established the SS Security Service, the SD (Sicherheitsdienst), in 1931 and put Reinhard Heydrich in charge, a man who became an ice-cold organiser of the extermination of the Jews.

The OT and the SS developed similar organisational methods. Schmelter's style of managing labour deployment for the OT had a parallel in the administrative and economic hub of the SS. One of its officers, Obersturmbannführer Gerhard Maurer, won the respect of his superiors by introducing a system of work deployment cards showing prisoners' professional skills. The idea was to gather information centrally to use prisoners on work sites in a more targeted and efficient fashion, although in practice it proved of limited value. At the OT, Schmelter issued directives on pay and benefits for German OT personnel, while his forms provided OT managers with a mass of information. He was praised by Dorsch, who called Schmelter's figures 'indispensable'.

Schmelter was an example of an OT manager carrying out a vital task which linked to other power centres in the Third Reich. He not only held the brief of manpower chief at OT headquarters, but was simultaneously responsible for labour deployment at the office managing Germany's entire construction industry, headed by Todt since 1938 and taken over by Speer. At the same time, he was on the specialist staff of labour supremo Fritz Sauckel, so many reins were gathered in his hands. As illustrated by the series of decrees jointly issued by the various offices in ensuing years it was a simple matter for Schmelter to match construction plans to the available labour and resources of the OT. In the occupied territories, OT regional leaders, as representatives of Speer's office managing overall construction, organised the labour of prisoners of war, civilian slave labourers and Jewish workers on OT building sites. In this way, Speer not only planned construction projects in the occupied territories, but also carried them out via the OT.

Despite the OT's emphasis on professionalism, it's also true that some OT staff were appointed primarily because they were Nazi stalwarts. Noting the significant numbers of SS and SA personnel in OT ranks, British intelligence concluded in the closing stages of the war that a number of factors contributed to firm support for Nazi ideology among the OT leadership. Early Nazi Party members were traditionally offered the perk of a supervisory post in the OT because it was a safer option than combat duty. These Alte Kämpfer (old fighters) had served Hitler and the party in the 1920s. Another group given access to such OT jobs included well-connected party officials and older SS members. This suggests that at least some SS and Nazi Party officials entered the OT because they had the right ideological credentials.

Although many OT personnel forged their careers entirely in the organisation, some switched either to or from working for the SS and that is how some notorious names became associated with it. Hermann Pister went on to be commandant of Buchenwald after working with the OT while Todt was still in charge. Pister was condemned to

death in 1947 by an American military court, but died of an acute heart condition in prison in the following year before the sentence was carried out.

Heinrich Courté also started his career in the OT then, like Pister, his subsequent employment with the SS was connected to Buchenwald. He joined the Nazi Party in 1933 and then the SS later that year. Having gained his engineering diploma in his hometown of Aachen in 1936, he worked on Todt's motorway-building team until the war started and transferred to the OT at the end of 1939. At first deployed in the western occupied territories, then in Romania and elsewhere, he returned to the Reich and joined the Waffen-SS and Oswald Pohl's SS Economic and Administrative Head Office. On Himmler's orders, he was put in charge of the construction of a railway running from Weimar to an armaments factory near Buchenwald concentration camp. Around 800 prisoners from Pister's Buchenwald camp were assigned to Courté's task force, whose SS Death's Head guards included Ukrainians.

Courté later joined SS engineer Hans Kammler's special staff, was promoted to Obersturmführer, and used slave labour once more to transfer Germany's key armaments production facilities underground to protect them from Allied air raids. Kammler's elite team of SS engineers specialised in the same rapid construction projects as the OT, including tunnels in the Harz Mountains for V2 rocket production using 60,000 prisoners as slave labour. After the war, Courté used the cover name Hendrik Jaspers and tried to avoid capture, but was arrested and interrogated, giving a statement to the tribunal in Nuremberg in January 1947.

These examples of staff switching jobs between the OT and SS show yet another way in which the two organisations intertwined. But did OT staff become more violent because of the notoriously brutal practices of the SS and SA? Did they beat or work to death more prisoners because of the influence of some SS and SA officers working alongside them? Comparison of death rates among prisoners in camps where the OT was in sole control, or possessed very high levels of control, reveal that no such SS influence was necessary for OT staff to use lethal force. Death rates remained extremely high and, where direct comparison could be made, OT staff caused about as many deaths as the SS. Some camp survivors also considered violence practised by OT staff to be as great, or even more brutal, than the SS or soldiers.

As for the question of how much control OT headquarters wielded over operations stretching across Europe, OT and SS cooperation was essential. SS officers helped supervise OT construction projects, and the SS ensured its representation in every section of the OT through liaison officers. OT cooperation with the SS involved working closely with Pohl's Economic and Administrative Head Office after its

founding in February 1942. The Economic and Administrative Head Office had its own construction unit of civil engineers and architects, known as ‘Office Group C’, headed by Hans Kammler; it contained the highest concentration of technically trained officers in Pohl’s entire organisation. This tight-knit technical elite corps achieved success in wartime projects but was ‘horrific for its brutal efficiency’.

In March 1942, the Economic and Administrative Head Office took control of the concentration camps and oversaw all SS economic interests. It had a staff of up to 1,700 in five main departments. Compared to the OT and Kammler’s corps, concentration-camp commandants had few managerial skills, whether technical or administrative, before Pohl’s reorganisation in the summer of 1942. They excelled only at terror. When Pohl replaced nearly one-third of his camp commandants, he picked new ones for their administrative skills and soldierly capabilities.

The SS had little success in its efforts to cooperate with industry from 1940 to 1942 because firms shrank from using concentration-camp prisoners while alternatives were available. The SS also had little interest at that time in hiring out prisoners. However, Speer’s arrival brought a decisive change in the organisation of the armaments production industry. This was coupled with radical change in the management of the supply of labour with the appointment of the ‘strongman’ Fritz Sauckel. This transformation led Himmler to fear he would lose control of the concentration camps and their prisoners because of these major shifts affecting the armaments industry and labour needs, so he hurriedly integrated the SS Inspectorate of Concentration Camps into Pohl’s Economic and Administrative Head Office on 16 March 1942, just five days before Sauckel was installed. This absorption of the concentration camps into the Economic and Administrative Head Office prompted Pohl to declare that his initial aim was to boost armaments production and drive prisoners until they dropped.

During 1942, the SS had been using prisoners in its concentration camps as a slave-labour pool to build up its armaments production inside the camps, rather than in Germany’s existing armaments factories. In September of that year, however, Speer won Hitler’s backing to break SS insistence on this practice and instead allow prisoners to work outside the camps and be deployed in the factories. This led to an explosion of satellite camps close to factories and construction sites, accelerated by a serious labour shortage in autumn 1943, when industry scrambled to acquire concentration-camp prisoners to keep their plants running. Many of the new subcamps were for the aircraft industry, which absorbed more than a third of all working concentration-camp prisoners.

Outside the armaments industry, many SS concerns suffered from a lack of technical know-how and commercial expertise, but there were economic successes, such as the Texled firm supplying clothes for SS armed units. Crucial factors in this success were that the company was run by a businessman and a tailor, while women prisoners in Ravensbrück concentration camp used modern sewing machines. Texled's profits appeared to prove, in the words of historian Michael Thad Allen, that 'there is no inherent contradiction between modern business organization, slavery, and barbaric ideology'.

As the war continued, the sheer scale of the Third Reich's labour needs often proved impossible to meet. Because German labour was scarce as a result of repeated military drafts, Schmelter focused on foreigners for the OT. However, promises of their availability frequently proved empty. He requested 100,000 Italians be sent to Germany in 1944, but since this figure could not be provided by Sauckel, that number was reduced to 50,000. Despite Sauckel's promises of quick action, it was not until mid-June of 1944 that Schmelter announced the arrival of just 300 Italian military internees. Schmelter also sought large numbers of Soviet labourers, but once again Sauckel could not provide the requested workers. Himmler said in May 1944 he would transfer 200,000 Hungarian Jews into concentration camps 'to deploy them on major construction sites of the OT and other tasks important for the war'. Despite such statements by Himmler and directives by Hitler, the numbers of Hungarian Jews deported to the Reich remained well below those desired by industry and Speer's ministry.

Addressing the Jägerstab (Fighter Staff), an armaments initiative created in March 1944 to centralise control of fighter production, both Speer and Schmelter complained at the meeting in late May about this situation. Speer expressed doubt about being able to fulfil Dorsch's requirement for 220,000 labourers, including 100,000 Jews from Hungary, and commented 'we have often made such calculations, but the people never came'. Schmelter, for his part, protested at the lack of younger male workers. 'Till now, two transports have arrived at the SS camp Auschwitz. For fighter construction were offered only children, women and old men with whom very little can be done ... Unless the next transports bring men of an age fit for work the whole action will not have much success.' In the following month, even though Himmler had spoken of 200,000 Jews, Schmelter announced to aircraft industry representatives that just 20,000 Jewish women from Hungary and a further 20,000 women from concentration camps were available as labourers.

The Third Reich's wartime switch to heavy dependence on foreign labour in its economy was mirrored to the extreme in the OT workforce. From a virtually all-German pre-war strength of around 350,000 for the Westwall, its labour force became predominantly foreign after the outbreak of war. Guidance issued by OT headquarters in April 1943 stated that tests had been carried out in south Russia to see whether 'Bolshevism' had extinguished good traits in the local population, but it had been established that 'prisoners of war are a valuable workforce'. After Hitler's decision in 1941 to exploit Soviet POWs as workers, Sauckel's appointment as labour supremo heralded new levels of violence to procure foreign slave labour. He initiated brutal round-ups resulting in 2.8 million new foreign workers being sent to Germany between January 1942 and June 1943.

But there never seemed to be enough. During labour shortages, OT managers operating deep in occupied Soviet territory became desperate, as this note shows:

Awaiting urgent reply when I can expect further supply of Polish labourers. Lack of workers approaching catastrophe. I beg you, do not leave me in the lurch.

OT-Task Force Kertsch

Signed: Dr. Ertl

The appeal came from the OT engineer in charge of completing a bridge Hitler ordered to be built in March 1943, over the Kerch Strait from Crimea to the mainland. His message to Schmelter in July 1943 followed a letter he had sent the previous month to OT headquarters in Berlin, pleading for hundreds more Polish labourers. Out of 2,000 promised, only 369 had been sent and about a third of those had escaped. Dr Ertl declared he could no longer work under such circumstances and project deadlines could not be met. Machines were constantly breaking down, and Polish labourers on site mostly did not possess the skills they were supposed to. All Dr Ertl's pleas were, in the event, for nothing. The bridge, being constructed beside a cable railway the OT completed that year, was only one-third finished when retreating German forces blew it up in October 1943.

# **CAMPS AND GHETTOS**

# 9

## ROAD TO RUIN

Speer was briefing Hitler in the ‘Wolf’s Lair’ on 19 February 1942 on an important agreement he had reached with Himmler. It was about a plan of intense interest to the Führer: a road heading through Ukraine to the Caucasus oilfields. Transit Road IV (Durchgangsstrasse IV, or DG IV) was crucial, too, because it would provide a vital supply line for a German advance to Stalingrad. Speer, less than two weeks in office, won Hitler’s approval, with the proviso that the road should be ‘primitive’. Speed was of the essence and Speer had held a meeting two days earlier with the SS officer in charge in Ukraine and southern Russia, Hans-Adolf Prützmann, together with SS engineer Hans Kammler. The SS was to provide guards and slave labourers to build the road, while the OT was in charge of all technical oversight. On the same day as Speer briefed Hitler, Himmler met Prützmann and Arnold Adam, the OT engineer in charge of Transit Road IV. Adam set up his office in Vinnytsia, central Ukraine, while Prützmann chose the southern city of Dnepropetrovsk as SS operational headquarters for the road.

All these preparations came just a month after the Wannsee conference in Berlin, which was convened by Reinhard Heydrich on the ‘final solution of the Jewish question’. The minutes of the meeting on 20 January showed how some of the discussion focused on how Jews were to be forced to build roads.

In the course of the Final Solution and under appropriate leadership, the Jews should be put to work in the east. In large, single-sex labour columns, Jews fit to work will work their way eastwards constructing roads. Doubtless the large majority will be eliminated by natural causes.

Among the Jews and prisoners of war forced to work on Transit Road IV were a Jewish couple, Arnold Daghani and his wife Anishoara. Arnold, an artist, gave an account in his diary of how they were first rounded up and deported. He described how

harsh shouting had alarmed them early on 18 August 1942 after they had spent the night on hay strewn on the floor of a garage where they had been forced to shelter. The roar of Organisation Todt trucks added to the tumult as SS officers rounded up Jews in Ladyzhyn, in Romanian-ruled Transnistria.

A corpulent man in SS uniform stood in the door. ‘Get out of here with all your garbage!’ he cried, waving his truncheon threateningly. His sudden appearance made the Daghanis scramble to their feet with the rest of their group and hurry out, clutching their possessions. People milled around frantically outside and three trucks with ‘OT’ drawn in chalk on their sides arrived. An SS officer prevented an elderly woman from picking up a potato she had dropped in her alarm and confusion. ‘Forget that!’ he commanded. ‘You’ll get enough to eat over there.’

Those rounded up were loaded onto the trucks and driven to the nearby Bug River, which they crossed on an improvised ferry to reach Nazi-occupied Ukraine. ‘There were people of all ages, from a six-month-old baby to a venerable 91-year-old man,’ Daghani wrote in his diary, published after the war. ‘A conglomeration of contrasting types: some still looking well, others frail, blind or hunchbacked, children and infants, as well as, finally, strong workers – all abducted for the Organisation Todt.’

Having landed on the opposite bank the prisoners – all civilians – were made to board the trucks again. Before starting the engines, OT men and soldiers came looking for money they thought might have been hidden by their prisoners. ‘Where you’re going, you won’t need money,’ they said. And for good measure, a Romanian border policeman yelled: ‘If any of you try to go back, you’ll be shot immediately.’

The trucks set off and finally reached Michailowka labour camp. Daghani described how he and his fellow prisoners were herded one by one through a barbed-wire fence surrounding stables. A policeman warned that anyone disobeying orders would be shot or hanged. He pointed to a gibbet on the gate; a few days before, an escapee had been caught and hanged. ‘We don’t distinguish between educated and simple folk – all must work, a Jew is a Jew. Is that clear?’

Daghani, then aged thirty-three, and the other new arrivals witnessed a pitiful sight when the doors to the stables were opened. Emaciated, ragged figures stood on the threshold. These slave labourers had been brought from Ukrainian ghettos in Teplyk and Uman as cooks’ helpers or to do manual work. A young woman holding a baby came over to Daghani’s group. ‘It’s two weeks old,’ she said, holding up the baby. ‘One day they will take it away from me.’

A cloud of dust in the distance drew nearer and finally a column of several hundred men and women, separated according to sex and flanked by guards, halted at the camp

gate. When ordered in, they pressed towards the kitchen barracks window with shouts and curses filling the air. Exhausted, they reached out for food. Daghani shuddered as he and Anishoara briefly exchanged glances, wondering: ‘Will we end up like this?’

Arnold and Anishoara were part of an SS round-up of Jews to reinforce a dwindling number of labourers toiling to build Transit Road IV. The labour shortage in Ukraine was partly because so many prisoners of war and Jews had been worked to death in atrocious conditions or murdered by task-group units carrying out mass shootings. The SS and OT therefore started looking for Jewish slave labourers across the Southern Bug River in Transnistria, the part of Ukraine then ruled by Germany’s ally, Romania. Matatias Carp, a survivor who researched and published a history of the persecution of Romanian Jews, said the OT discussed the plan to round up Jews with the Romanian prefect for Tulcin County, where Ladyzhyn is situated, in advance. Around 3,000 prisoners, including the Daghanis, crossed the Bug into German-occupied Ukraine as a result from various camps in Transnistria that August.

Speer became Himmler’s main ally in managing Transit Road IV, which was the biggest slave labour project in what German occupiers called Reich Commissariat Ukraine, the Third Reich’s largest wartime colony in Europe. About 25,000 Jews and tens of thousands of prisoners of war died building it. The road stretched in total for more than 2,000 kilometres from Lviv through Ukraine towards the Caucasus oilfields, which Hitler ultimately failed to capture. Around 50,000 prisoners of war, 50,000 local civilians and 10,000 Jews were working on it by spring 1942. They were being overseen by 5,000 German officers, engineers, managers, security personnel and other specialists. Transit Road IV was designed to link up with highways stretching back to the north-west through occupied Poland all the way to the Reich. Hitler had seen Ukraine as a ‘breadbasket’ to ensure vast supplies of grain to Germany following his invasion of the Soviet Union, so for him its construction was of the utmost priority.

Overall, the OT had the task of developing 25,000 kilometres of roads in occupied Soviet territory, ranging from the most primitive to the Transit Roads. The most northerly of these highways was numbered XII, the most southerly IV, each with an OT engineer specifically responsible for it. OT maintenance depots were built every 50 kilometres on the Transit Roads. Local factories were taken over to produce construction materials for these depots and OT bases.

About twenty primitive camps lay on the Ukrainian section of Transit Road IV, run by the SS, police or OT. Newly arrived prisoners were subject to ‘selections’ of the sick, elderly or those otherwise deemed unfit to work, to be sent off for extermination. Food was totally insufficient, the camps often lacked running water, and prisoners were

invariably infested with lice so that epidemics of diseases, especially typhus, were frequent. Most Jews worked directly on the road, broke stones in nearby quarries or laboured in gravel pits. Several hundred Jews – men, women and children – were typically held in existing buildings that were commandeered and surrounded by barbed wire. Prisoners were frequently packed into barns or cattle sheds alongside animals.

During nearly a year working on Transit Road IV, Arnold described prisoners crammed together at night in animal stalls. His first night at Michailowka camp was spent outside with all the other new arrivals, since there was no room inside the stables. On the second day, he described how he and other prisoners among the 480 held there were ordered to clear out horse dung from the stables.

In common with other camps, disease, hunger and shootings took their toll in Michailowka. Arnold also spoke of mass graves. He said that surviving prisoners had to force themselves to carry on even after family members died. ‘There was no time for grieving. The road-building firms abandoned the prisoners, pleading to survive, to the murderers: the Lithuanian guards and village henchmen. For the Organisation Todt, it was only important that the road-building went ahead smoothly.’ Sometimes Jews in camps were shot when a particular section of road was completed, since they were considered ‘used up’.

Arnold records the mounting death toll in Michailowka camp from executions, disease and exhaustion. He calculated there had been forty-three executions in the first month of his captivity and many deaths from typhus during the first winter, finally reducing in number in January 1943. ‘Heart failure’ and typhoid were other causes of death. Both he and Anishoara fell ill but recovered. He described a mass grave in a clearing 400 metres from the camp. One OT man warned them they would not escape death. ‘You are like cattle bought by the slaughterman,’ staff member Hennes (Hans) Wippenbeck told one of the prisoners. ‘One of you will be killed today, the other tomorrow. You are all done for.’ Arnold recorded in December 1942 that another OT man had shot dead a prisoner.

It was Arnold’s skill as an artist that paved the way to freedom for him and Anishoara. Born into a German-Jewish family in Bukowina in what had been the east of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Arnold had frequently been required by OT staff to paint their portraits. While these assignments posed no danger for Arnold, he risked his life by secretly sketching scenes of daily life in Michailowka and writing notes for his diary. He hid his artwork in a tin cylinder made for him by a fellow prisoner; if these and his shorthand notes had been discovered, he would have been shot.

He struggled with being able to draw and write at all as his precious personal stash of artist's materials dwindled. Painstakingly and through trial and error, he made himself a new paintbrush. He had no success with hairs from a shaving brush, or with horsehair, but sheep's wool took up the paint well. It was supplied illicitly by his wife after she had snipped a tuft off a village guard's sheepskin coat. Another prisoner, skilful at such things, fixed the woollen fibres to a stick. Sometimes Arnold depended on gifts: a priest who was a neighbour of an OT staff member gave him some writing paper when he discovered Arnold's talent. Those requiring portraits often paid Arnold with bread, but he lost one such payment when he refused to blacken the subject's hair in the picture to improve his appearance.

In June 1943 Arnold had his big break, being given a special artistic assignment outside Michailowka camp. He was sent to Gaisin by Werner Bergmann, head of the local August Dohrmann operation, one of the German firms involved in constructing Transit Road IV. Bergmann instructed him to create a mosaic for the firm's base there in the form of the Imperial Eagle of Hitler's Third Reich. Arnold and Anishoara were ordered to sleep in a garage each night until the mosaic, composed of coloured stones from the highway quarries, was completed.

While Arnold was in Gaisin, hundreds of Jews, prisoners of war and civilian slave labourers were working on Transit Road IV in the area. The August Dohrmann firm was contracted by the OT to build a 50-kilometre stretch of road between Gaisin and Krasnopolka, with Michailowka being situated about midway. Labourers worked seven days a week, although their numbers were much reduced on Sundays. August Dohrmann sent daily figures of workforce strengths to the OT and these appear in OT records covering the period from 1942 to 1944. A directive from OT headquarters in Berlin in January 1943 instructed firms to fill in forms each month to report worker strengths under column headings, including German foremen and skilled workers, company employees and Ostarbeiter (Soviet civilian workers). Jews and prisoners of war generally figured in greater numbers on these labour reports, but on some days Ostarbeiter equalled or considerably outnumbered them. On 1 July 1943, for example, while Arnold was in Gaisin working on Bergmann's mosaic, the August Dohrmann firm reported to the OT that 254 Ostarbeiter, 259 Jews and two other non-Germans laboured on Transit Road IV in that area. They worked under twenty-nine German overseers.

Arnold and Anishoara escaped from Gaisin in July 1943, helped by a Jewish shoemaker called Abrasha. While hiding overnight in an apparently deserted building in Gaisin, they narrowly avoided being caught. Abrasha had directed them to hide on an upper floor but very early the next morning they were horrified to hear German and

Ukrainian voices, as well as hammering and sawing. They then heard footsteps and doors opening to their right and left, but, by some miracle, no one entered the room in which they had concealed themselves.

Eventually, they escaped and met up again with Abrasha and his wife, who had both observed what turned out to be renovation work in the building and feared the Daghanis had been caught. The shoemaker had been doubly fearful because he might have been given away to their captors. Terrified of being arrested as they continued their flight to freedom, Arnold and Anishoara eventually made their way back across the Bug River with the help of a local guide. They held their possessions, including his sketches, paintings and diary notes, precariously in sacks above their heads as they waded across a shallow part of the river and continued to the relative safety of the Bershad ghetto in Transnistria.

The Daghanis had escaped just in time. Michailowka camp was abandoned later that year and the remaining inmates transferred to another labour camp, Tarassiwka, where they were murdered. The Daghanis returned to Bucharest in 1944. Arnold made dozens of sketches and watercolours of life and death in Michailowka, including portraits of guards and fellow prisoners. One of his sketches depicts the body of eighteen-year-old Selma Meerbaum-Eisinger, a Romanian-born, German-language poet, being lifted down from her sleeping place, having died of typhoid on 16 December 1942. Arnold described in his diary how he drew the scene in pencil from memory two weeks later.

Arnold's diary first appeared in Romanian in 1947, then in German in 1960, before being published in English in 1961 under the title *The Grave is in the Cherry Orchard*. Arnold gave a witness statement in 1965 to West German prosecutors investigating SS war crimes in Nazi-occupied Ukraine, but inquiries dragged on and ended in disappointment. In 1971, Lübeck prosecutors told him those accused of murdering prisoners from Michailowka in Tarassiwka in December 1943 could not be brought to trial. Arnold remained determined to provide his own full account and worked on a revised German-language version of his diary, which was published as '*Lasst mich leben!*' ('*Let Me Live!*') in 2002.

The diary illustrates how Jews from Transnistria were switched to different sites where the OT was operating in the region. His entry on 10 October 1942 records that about fifty Soviet Jews, both men and women, had arrived in Michailowka from the Mohyliv ghetto set up by Romania on the other side of the Bug River. The OT used Jews to help build a bridge over the Dniester River there and this was an operation which came under the auspices of the Transit Road IV project.

Another survivor described how the German OT staff spoke derisively about Romanians as ‘gypsies’, even though the two countries were allies. Liviu Beris worked on the bridge as a teenager in Mohyliv and heard scathing comments exchanged between two German OT overseers:

Romanian police were responsible for guard duty and two Germans were also on site from the construction organisation called Todt. The Organisation Todt ... I remember that these two Germans were extremely dissatisfied. We could understand what they said ... As soon as we paused briefly, the policemen hit us with rifle butts. That was their work ... But the Germans also spoke extraordinarily scornfully about the Romanian policemen ... They spoke the whole time about ‘these gypsies’. That is what they thought of their allies, who unfortunately behaved terribly cruelly for as long as I worked there. They delivered a beating immediately, as soon as they saw that anyone was not shovelling busily.

Beris also worked in a joinery after a Jewish carpenter asked one of their overseers if Liviu could be transferred as an assistant. Liviu spoke of the despair among the community there:

Very many died who had lost hope, who had in their own minds given up the fight ... They died above all from the cold and typhus. We were crawling with lice, there were no washing facilities, the conditions ... the level of hygiene was abysmal. The only chance of having a wash was to walk to the Dnestr [Dniester] ... All these factors led to a high death rate, above all death through hunger edema, which was typical for the camps.

In 1943 the number of Jews sent as slave labourers to construction sites in Transnistria – a place of both deportations and deadly assignments – increased. In August that year – a month after Arnold and his wife made their escape – the Romanians put a hundred Jews at the disposal of German construction teams building the railway bridge where Liviu had worked at Mohyliv-Otači.

Bridge-building for rail and road was one of the most important tasks for the OT and, because of their strategic value, a highly dangerous operation. Transit Road IV went via Rostov in the south, using a bridge built by the OT over the Don. The bridge was completed in just over six weeks as winter closed in in 1942, with a workforce that comprised 1,100 prisoners of war and more than 660 Soviet civilian labourers, plus

about half that combined total of OT personnel, or ‘front workers’. The construction site was vulnerable to Soviet air raids. Two bombs fell on the OT POW camp for the bridge-building operation, killing or wounding around a hundred prisoners of war and causing the deaths of two OT staff in an air attack on the night of 24–25 September 1942. Another particularly challenging task linked to the Transit Road IV operation was restarting what was at that time Russia’s biggest hydroelectric plant at Zaporizhzhya, on the Dnieper. Despite considerable success, German engineers were compelled to blow up their own work when the Red Army drove German forces back.

When OT officials arrived in the region where Hitler’s Werewolf headquarters were to be built in Ukraine in August 1941, they targeted Jews for road-building in the vicinity. But since many Jews were beaten or killed during this work, the number of available labourers diminished, and it became much harder to find more. The OT therefore switched to Soviet prisoners of war. Local German military commanders transferred groups of 150 POWs to Vinnytsia, where they were divided up and assigned to one of the Transit Road IV camps. Up to 10,000 Soviet prisoners of war helped build the Werewolf complex and, like the Jews, they were viewed as a security threat and killed when the job was completed. During the construction phase, 2,000 prisoners of war died. The remaining 8,000 ‘disappeared’. Construction of the Werewolf bunker continued until just before Hitler arrived there on 16 July 1942 to position himself closer to the front and take tighter control. Sixteen aircraft were required to fly him and his entourage from the ‘Wolf’s Lair’ at Rastenburg to the new field headquarters in Ukraine, where he stayed for three and a half months. The summer heat was stifling in the initial period of his stay and the area was plagued by mosquitoes, which meant staff had to take daily doses of anti-malarial medicine.

German occupation forces gave the highest priority to transport links through Ukraine to the Caucasus. Extending the road network in Ukraine had added urgency because much of the Soviet railway system had been destroyed. However, one senior transport chief blamed some army officers for causing delays to road construction by failing to grasp front-line realities. Willi Nagel of the National Socialist Motor Corps, interrogated by Allied officers after the war, complained:

Firm roads were as good as non-existent. If the need to create them was occasionally grasped and somebody, for example the O.T., tackled it, these works would nevertheless soon be halted. Some army officer, who understood nothing of the importance of supplies and was himself on an official flight, or travelling in

good weather in a field vehicle, had suddenly a far ‘more important’ use for the construction troop and it was withdrawn.

Hitler was bitterly disappointed at failing to seize the Caucasus oilfields. Germany’s shortage of fuel was its Achilles heel, since the Allies controlled 90 per cent of the world’s natural oil output. Hitler’s Axis ally, Japan, managed to conquer Southeast Asian countries and prime targets had been the valuable oilfields of Borneo, Java, Sumatra and Burma, but Germany had no such success. German troops managed to reach the Maikop oil town in their thrust to the Caucasus only to find its wells and refineries had been set ablaze and destroyed.

During an inspection of Transit Road IV in 1942, OT press and propaganda chief Rudolf Wolters noted in his diary the ‘exceedingly wretched’ appearance of Jews working on the highway under OT supervision and made it clear they understood the grim fate they faced. He said he had been told some of the Jews ‘work voluntarily for two successive shifts. They know what’s at stake now.’

The OT and SS collaborated successfully in building highways linking motorways in the Reich into occupied Poland from the west, but discord flared further east in Ukraine. The SS were heavily involved in marshalling and guarding slave labourers needed to work on Transit Road IV in Ukraine. Prützmann made clear he felt the SS was bearing too much of the burden and complained about the resulting drain on SS resources. Overlapping responsibilities led to conflicts. The result was a compromise, but the OT retained control of technical supervision of work sites.

Because the German occupiers had limited resources, the civilian administration in Ukraine, as well as Himmler’s SS and its Security Service, required help from virtually all local German agencies, including the OT. A Nazi Security Services officer might therefore request OT engineers to perform tasks normally undertaken by police, such as providing trucks to transport Jews or acting as guards in an upcoming operation. German military units collaborated in such actions, but the involvement of the OT was especially notable in Zhytomyr. SS police inspectors and their mostly Lithuanian auxiliary guards relied on OT personnel to pick out Jewish and other slave labourers seen as incapable of further work. These would then be murdered.

This lethal collaboration between the OT and SS, resulting in the extermination of exhausted or sick prisoners, was routine in Ukraine and elsewhere in occupied Europe. Nazi law practised in this environment starkly displayed its values. A judgment against OT foreman Johann Meisslein is a case in point. On a stretch of Transit Road IV in north-west Ukraine, Meisslein issued instructions for two Jewish women to be killed

and was sentenced to three months in prison by a military court as a result. However, his crime was not ordering the killings, but acting outside his official jurisdiction. Meisslein supervised Jewish labourers on the road between Lutsk and Vinnytsia in 1942 and told his Polish assistant to ‘do what he could to remove’ two Jewish women he judged unfit to work. Meisslein’s assistant duly took the women to Lithuanian guards, who shot and buried them in nearby woods. Meisslein, not expecting to be punished, reported the executions to the local SS office, but an SS officer complained he had interfered in ‘police matters’. Meisslein was subsequently convicted by a tribunal of military, OT and SS police officials. Under Nazi law, he had exceeded his authority, acting without the ‘power of a public office’. The case shows how the SS and police, when working with other German agencies, sought to maintain what they saw as their supreme right to order such executions.

Many Ukrainians worked under the OT repairing roads elsewhere in the region. Andrej Kljutschko, who lived in the Ukrainian village of Korotich, was just sixteen when he was forced into manual labour, like most other local youths, following the German invasion in the summer of 1941. He worked throughout the winter of that year on the Charkiv–Kiev road, learning surfacing techniques so he could be classified as a skilled worker by the following spring, and continued working on the roads until 1943. As a skilled worker, he was paid some money in German marks but, like his fellow labourers, every midday he received no more than thin soup and 200 grams of bread to eat. As long as he continued with this work, his overseers told him, he would not be deported to the Reich.

Kljutschko worked in relatively small groups of labourers under insufficient OT staff in remote areas. Communications with regional administrative centres, let alone Berlin, were poor. The concept of an effective centralised OT leadership in these situations was therefore at its most tenuous and the prisoners’ fates depended entirely on individual OT personnel, whom they perceived to be either ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Kljutschko judged his boss to be a good man, while an assistant who beat them repeatedly was ‘evil’:

And under ... the Organisation Todt, we had a commandant – Willi Gras. A very good, clever man ... he’s no longer alive, may he rest in peace. He was an engineer himself, an educated man, and he took pity on us, honestly. He stuck up for us. But there was his assistant ... August Rosche[r] – he was a genuine fascist. He had this golden, this badge ... This Hitler badge ... He was so evil. Still, he was a bit afraid of his boss ...

In Kljutschko's case, though, even the 'evil' OT assistant was capable of showing some humanity. Kljutschko recalled that while they were in Hungary, Gras, his OT chief, protected a couple of Ukrainian labourers in their group who were caught stealing from a local miller's house. August Roscher also intervened, refusing to hand them over to Hungarian police and insisting they would be delivered to German headquarters for punishment. Gras then simply had them detained for two weeks in their makeshift camp in a local synagogue before ordering them back to work. Kljutschko had some praise for the normally 'evil' Roscher:

So he did well, he didn't hand them over, otherwise the Hungarians would have shot them. Theft was punished very severely in their country. And this August was, it's true, a vicious man, but he had pity on them ... He beat you straight away if you did anything. But we deserved it. Mostly it was because we pilfered something from somewhere. Sometimes vegetables, sometimes fruit. Well, we just wanted some of it. And the owner came out and complained. So he beat us with a stick. And then that was the whole punishment.

On remote and poorly staffed projects, the whims of individual staff determined the fate of the labourers. In Kljutschko's case, the relatively benevolent nature of his OT boss, who Kljutschko believed commanded the respect and obedience of his violent deputy, rendered his ordeal more bearable. Kljutschko said Gras gave them working gear, including wooden-soled shoes with leather uppers, and they were treated better than wretched-looking prisoners with 'OST' (Ostarbeiter) on their backs, whom they saw being marched along in groups.

In addition to the positive actions of his OT boss, Kljutschko described humane behaviour by SS personnel during his travels: two young members of an SS Death's Head armoured division, whom he got to know because they were billeted with a neighbour, protected him when he hid in a chest to avoid being rounded up in a German operation to deport young locals to the Reich. He described Erich and Willi as 'good lads, even though they were SS soldiers'.

Kljutschko worked in the Kiev area, in Jassy in Romania from early 1944, then he was taken to Kovin, Yugoslavia, where he was part of a 1,000-strong labour force building a big air base. A larger number of Italian military internees were already working there. As Russian troops approached, Kljutschko's group was sent to Debrecen, in Hungary, then to the eastern Alps in Austria. He was liberated by American troops in Linz on 7 May 1945.

Many Soviet citizens were deported further afield than Kljutschko. Tens of thousands of Soviet prisoners of war and civilians, together with other nationalities, were sent to Norway, where an SS officer in the OT had plans for them.

# 10

## SS-STANDARTENFÜHRER HENNE

The OT offered a great deal to tempt ambitious SS men away from other career options within Himmler's elite corps. For Willi Henne it was power; he became chief of OT operations in three Nordic countries – Norway, Denmark and, from 1943, Finland. Born on 12 July 1907 in Grab in Württemberg, which bordered on Todt and Speer's home region of Baden in south-west Germany, he joined both the Nazi Party and Himmler's elite SS in 1933 at the age of twenty-five despite barely meeting the SS height requirements. As a member of the SS, he had to seek permission to marry Charlotte Schnechenberg, with whom he had two daughters during the war, because SS rules required 'racial purity' to be preserved.

The first shipments of Soviet prisoners of war arrived in Norway in August 1941, less than two months after the start of Barbarossa, to work on important OT projects there. Major extension of road and rail networks was a primary objective. Plans also included grandly redesigning the Norwegian port city of Trondheim as a settlement for more than a quarter of a million Germans. The most northerly naval base in Hitler's empire would have protected this colonial outpost, which Hitler claimed would have made the prestigious British-built base at Singapore look like 'mere child's play'.

It was Todt who put Henne in charge of the Wiesbaden office managing construction of the Westwall, then assigned him to Norway. When Speer took over, he clearly shared Todt's high opinion of Henne and recognised the dynamism and ruthless efficiency displayed by the chief of the OT's Oslo-based operation. Henne rose to the rank of SS-Standartenführer and in 1942 was offered a Waffen-SS rank involving temporary suspension from OT duties. Speer quickly intervened, anxious to protect such a valuable OT regional leader, and wrote a series of letters to Himmler and senior SS officers. Speer insisted on Henne wearing OT uniform after his promotion into the Waffen-SS Reserve and finally got his way. Speer bore heavy responsibilities as Armaments

Minister and OT chief, but the lengths to which he was prepared to go to support Henne were remarkable. His determination to uphold the importance of serving in the OT and a volley of letters to maintain the principle showed how much he valued the organisation and staff seen as prime talent within it.

But the qualities Speer saw in Henne – his determination to achieve goals no matter what the human cost – had a fearful outcome for those held in the hundreds of labour camps across Norway. The following comes from the diary of Konstantin Seredintsev, one of tens of thousands of Soviet prisoners of war deported to Norway after the German invasion of their country:

If you only knew what hardships your father must endure in damp, foggy and rough Norway. There cannot be anything worse than such a life. More correctly termed it is no life, at any rate not the life of a human being, but that of a beast ... When they laugh at you and have the right to spit in your face, to strike you without having to answer for it and being punished for it, that is the condition of a slave, what can be worse and more shameful?

Seredintsev was writing on 2 February 1943 to mark the fifth birthday of his elder daughter, Tamotseka, who was back at home with the family in Russia. The diary entry expressed both his love for his daughter and his plight as a prisoner in Norway in one of at least 460 camps in the country. He complained of being ‘half-starved’ as an inmate of Camp 3, near Trondheim, where he was forced to carry out construction work near a fjord. He was tormented by being so far from his family and tried to describe his feelings to Tamotseka:

My dearest daughter, I know that this day, your birthday, surely would have been celebrated and that your father, who loves you, surely would have given you a present. But this infernal war ... has destroyed the lives of all.

When Seredintsev and 200 fellow prisoners were transferred by ship to a more northerly camp in the Arctic Circle in Norway, reaching their destination on 23 February, he writes in his diary:

We have arrived in the new place, an island. In Harstad we were taken ashore. The camp is situated 3 to 4 kilometres from the town and is much worse than the one we left. There are summer barracks, which look like stables and are dirty, damp and cold ... even now it is clear to me that we have been brought here to perish. Of

the old 600 PW [prisoners of war] who arrived here 4 months ago, there are only 274 left, the rest are dead.

Seredintsev's diary provides an unusually detailed account of what Soviet prisoners of war endured labouring under the OT in Norway. He had turned thirty-one in captivity the previous month, on 14 January, the same day as Orthodox New Year when he and his family would in happier times have enjoyed a double celebration. He spent his birthday in the camp ward during treatment for an undescribed illness which required a three-week stay. His younger daughter, Alja, had only been a few months old when he left home to join the Red Army and would herself celebrate her second birthday in April. He worried about what had become of his wife Tatyana and his family in Russia under Nazi occupation.

Describing camp life in Norway, Seredintsev said rations were pitifully insufficient. Standard fare included watery soup, about which he comments wryly: 'At home I used to give better things to my pigs.' His diary describes the ceaseless search for food, begging for scraps from guards and being plagued by 'hunger dreams'. He writes of working overnight shifts from 7 p.m. to 5 a.m. building fortifications such as concrete bunkers and conveys his despair in the diary: 'To be compelled to trample around in the cold in wooden shoes for ten hours on meagre rations, it is plain murder. So I have given up hope of living through this to the end of the war and of being rescued [from] this damned bondage.'

Labour-camp documents drawn up by the Germans show Seredintsev was taken prisoner on 6 August 1942 in the Russian town of Armavir, about 300 kilometres south-east of Rostov, and his condition had been 'healthy'. They state that he had been an accountant before serving in the Red Army and that he had been born in 1912 in Businowka, in Stalingrad's administrative region. Surviving personal items include a photograph of Seredintsev, showing a clean-shaven, smartly uniformed soldier, gazing resolutely at the camera.

In his diary, which runs from December 1942 to April 1943, Seredintsev speaks warmly of his Russian homeland, under Stalin's leadership for most of his lifetime. He welcomes snippets of news he picks up of Red Army successes, gleaned from other prisoners, or even sometimes from German guards or newspapers. Later entries in his diary record his strength ebbing away and on Alja's second birthday, on 1 April 1943, he is overcome with fear and communicates this in an emotional message to his absent younger daughter:

Dear child, you do not know me, and I cannot picture to myself what you are like. I do not know whether the Lord will be so merciful as to let us succeed in being together once more and learning to know each other. I am alarmed by the thought that I shall not see you again, and especially that you will grow up without knowing your father.

His final entry on 25 April 1943 ended abruptly in mid-sentence and the diary was found at Trondenes camp, where the OT used Soviet prisoners of war to build coastal batteries. More than 1,000 of the prisoners died. A handwritten note in German on Seredintsev's personal file stated that he died on 25 May 1943 due to 'general physical weakness, poor circulation'. Almost sixty years later, his elder daughter Tamotseka, about whom he wrote so movingly in his diary on her fifth birthday, paid a visit in 2002 to the site of the camp at Trondenes, where her father had toiled to the very end under his German taskmasters.

Seredintsev and other Soviet prisoners of war had worked on batteries including four 406-millimetre guns, part of the Atlantikwall defending approaches to the port of Narvik. In August 1942 Hitler had fretted about delays in the construction of batteries at Trondenes and in the Narvik region, complaining about shortcomings in the navy's planning and authorising the OT to report to Speer if work failed to meet Westwall standards.

Soviet prisoners in Norway were also forced to build road and rail links up into the Arctic Circle. The objectives were to exploit raw materials and foreign labour from existing and newly won sources across the continent, as well as guard assets needed to power the Nazi war economy. Hitler's invasion of Norway in April 1940 was partly to safeguard the supply of Swedish iron ore and copper vital for Germany's armaments industry. When Hitler listed his top priorities for raw materials in 1936, laid out under Hermann Göring's Four-Year Plan, high-grade iron ore from Nordic states was one of them. The Führer declared that substitutes should be developed for other vital imports, such as petrol and rubber, so that the country's economy would be ready for war within the plan's timescale. To help attain Hitler's goals, the state-run Hermann Göring Works became a vast industrial conglomerate reaping the spoils of Europe.

A total of 110,000 Soviet POWs and civilians, as well as 6,600 Yugoslavs and Poles, suffered every type of violence at the hands of OT, SS and Wehrmacht guards while carrying out extreme hard labour on vast construction projects in Norway. More than 18,400 of the prisoners died. OT responsibility for violence and deaths among prisoners in Norway derived from complete or shared control of individual labour

camps or networks, supervision of hard labour and provision of profoundly inadequate rations, medical care, clothing and shelter. Mass graves were discovered near Skibotn, Mallnitz and other Arctic camps, around 175 kilometres to the north-east of Trondenes.

After the war a British investigation into crimes in Norway condemned the OT for its ‘inhuman use of slave labour’. Although there are few remaining accounts by Soviet survivors which can only provide fragments of the overall picture of their camp life in Norway, some further details can be gleaned from the responses of Russian survivors questioned by British war-crimes investigators.

Dr Klementi Gogia, aged thirty-four and a camp survivor, helped to care for around 560 fellow Russian former prisoners at Øvergaard hospital immediately after the war. Many of the Russian survivors from camps where they worked under German army supervision, including a POW labour battalion assigned to the OT, were severely emaciated and suffering from tuberculosis or gangrene. The British even found evidence of cannibalism on some bodies in the mass graves. Dr Gogia, a navy captain in the Caspian fleet who was captured at Stalingrad and deported to Norway, said he thought many of his patients would die in Øvergaard hospital or on the journey back home. The names of thousands of Russian survivors shipped back to the Soviet Union via Murmansk in summer 1945 were listed in OT records but thousands more Russian prisoners perished and were buried in Norwegian soil.

Uroš Majstorović was another Slav prisoner who worked on fortifications following his arrival in Norway in September 1942. Majstorović, a Serb from Croatia then aged twenty-two, reached Ørlandet labour camp about two months later. He endured extreme hard labour, innumerable beatings and near-starvation while working for the OT under a regime he later described as ‘pure terror’.

Lying about 500 kilometres below the Arctic Circle on Norway’s west coast, Ørlandet was one of the few camps where the OT was in complete control of prisoners over a set period, and surviving records show what happened there. The OT generally worked together with one or other of its slave labour partners, the SS, Wehrmacht or industrial companies, so assessing the OT’s share of responsibility for maltreatment of prisoners can be difficult. Where the OT had sole, or very high levels of control – as was more frequently the case late in the war – it is simpler.

Majstorović and other prisoners worked at Ørlandet day and night in appalling conditions to build a big underground complex and coastal battery to guard the sea approaches to Trondheim. These consisted of a turret with three 28-centimetre guns from the former battleship *Gneisenau*, along with accompanying accommodation and ammunition stores.

Exhaustion, illness – slave labourers infested with lice died in typhus epidemics – starvation, as well as fatal beatings and shootings, were common causes of death among the foreign prisoners across Norway. In summer, the Nazi occupiers took advantage of the polar ‘midnight sun’ and forced prisoners to work in shifts around the clock. In winter the cold weather brought fresh menace.

In Majstorović’s camp, just like elsewhere in the country, prisoners wore wooden clogs and inadequate clothing when temperatures fell to minus 10 degrees Celsius or below. Majstorović said the first six months were the worst. He estimated the camp held up to 500 prisoners and a post-war investigation reported that in total 160 of these inmates had died. Among the victims were three hanged for escape attempts, their bodies left dangling by way of warning. ‘They were hanged and we had to march by them, so that all could see what might happen to them,’ recalled Majstorović. ‘That was during the time of the Organisation Todt. When the Wehrmacht came, there were no more hangings. It only happened while we were still under the Organisation Todt.’

Majstorović described how there had been no running water, no power and no heating in the prisoners’ huts when he arrived at Ørlandet in the winter of 1942 and that there were about 300 prisoners. Fifty men were put in each hut and buckets provided because there were no latrines. Subsequent transports brought the camp’s prisoner total to as high as 500. The OT had been in sole control of the camp from when an initial transport of 156 Yugoslavs arrived in Ørlandet in September 1942 until March 1943, when the Wehrmacht took over. During Majstorović’s stay of more than two years there, constant beatings took their toll on prisoners weakened by hunger as a result of the meagre rations provided. When the army took over the camp, conditions became ‘a little better, more bearable’. He declared after the war: ‘The Organisation Todt, they were worse than the Wehrmacht ... and the question was, if the Wehrmacht had not taken us over, who would then have survived at all?’ All this proves the OT did not require influence from brutal partners like the SS to encourage its staff to practise violence; it was integrally involved in labour-camp systems under which the sick were isolated in specific camps and OT personnel selected exhausted prisoners for ‘liquidation’.

Before Ørlandet, Majstorović was sent to Steinvikholmen, another camp in the Trondheim area, where he was among about 200 other inmates. Describing physical violence by OT staff, he recalled a particularly brutal OT-Meister whom they nicknamed St Ilya, apparently a darkly humorous reference to the Orthodox seventeenth-century saint renowned for his strength. ‘He was probably a sadist ... Not a single camp inmate he hadn’t beaten at least once. And he took delight in it, that was terrible ... We

came early in the morning to wash. People took their shirts off to wash and he came and beat them all on their backs! Terrible.'

In spring 1943, the Wehrmacht took over all camps where mainly Yugoslavs like Majstorović were held. However, this did not mean that members of the Wehrmacht were always more moderate, although the death toll slowed. Elsewhere in Norway, abuses and resulting deaths continued under the Wehrmacht. In a notorious camp called Rognan-Botn, beatings, torture and persecution persisted until the camp commander, Captain Karl Weustenfeld, was court-martialled and dismissed because of a permanent order for punishment beatings. Some Wehrmacht officers resisted orders to commit war crimes, the British post-war investigation said, but the general commanding Luftgau (Air District) Norway 'personally ordered the shooting of 20 prisoners of war as a reprisal for the murder of two Germans'. One commander of a battalion guarding the 'notorious extermination camp at Mallnitz' ordered beatings and shootings. The popular belief that the Wehrmacht's behaviour was generally good was 'completely erroneous ... for in number the Wehrmacht crimes exceeded those of the Gestapo and in some instances equalled them in intensity'.

The appalling treatment suffered by Yugoslav prisoners at the hands of the OT, Wehrmacht and the SS came about partly because they became mixed up in power struggles between the German occupiers. The cast of characters in this drama were Hitler's top representative in Norway, the ruthless and autocratic Reich Commissioner Josef Terboven, Henne, Wilhelm Rediess, Himmler's senior regional SS and police chief, and a disgraced former Dachau concentration camp commandant, Hans Loritz.

Labour was in short supply for the huge projects the Germans were running in Norway and Terboven saw 2,600 Yugoslavs as manpower he could lay claim to. Prisoners of war were usually managed by the Wehrmacht, but German authorities had instead designated the Yugoslavs as 'illegal gangs', so outside the Wehrmacht's automatic control. Terboven therefore proceeded to prepare them for work and how they should be deployed. Construction of the Reichsstrasse 50, a road link between Oslo and Kirkenes in the far north, came under the Main Technical Department in Terboven's administration and the OT Wiking task group, one of the organisation's seven original Task Groups set up across Nazi-occupied Europe: Henne was in charge of both so assigning the Yugoslavs to this project was operationally simple. The Yugoslavs would work under OT supervision at work sites and be guarded by the SS.

The guard was arranged by Rediess, who appointed Loritz to command them. Highly unusually for an SS commandant, Loritz had been sacked for corruption during his time in charge of Sachsenhausen concentration camp: he had ordered prisoners to build him a

luxury villa near Salzburg, with terraced gardens and water features. Himmler initiated an investigation and decided to make an example of Loritz, who was dismissed and sent to Norway. Loritz was appointed under Rediess in November 1942 and put in charge of labour camps set up for the Yugoslavs. Murderous conditions in the camps were then reported in the international press. As a result, Terboven came under pressure and agreed to the remaining Yugoslav prisoners being transferred to Wehrmacht control in March 1943. At this point, there were only 960 survivors out of the 2,600 Yugoslavs Terboven had commandeered.

Further details about conditions in camps in Norway emerged after the war. A West German investigation condemned ‘inhuman’ living and working conditions for slave labourers under the OT in Norway. Prosecutors focused on SS-run camps at Karasjok, Beisfjord, Osen, Korgen, Rognan-Botn and OT-administered Ørlandet where many Yugoslav prisoners were killed by SS guards before the Wehrmacht took over in March 1943.

Of a total of about 4,000–5,000 Yugoslav prisoners transported to Norway during the war, only 1,622 survived. Out of 400 prisoners originally sent to Karasjok camp in Norway’s northern Arctic region, guards shot about 130 and roughly the same number died of other causes, such as disease or exhaustion. Beisfjord and its subcamps had the highest death toll, with around 900 Serb prisoners transported there when the camp was set up in July 1942 and when the camp was closed in October the same year only 80 to 150 were estimated to have survived. These survivors were moved to Osen or Korgen camps. ‘The rest of the prisoners either fell victim to the hard work and living conditions or were killed,’ the West German report said.

Sometimes guards shot sick prisoners dead to protect themselves from disease. Stjepan Pištignjat, then eighteen and from Yugoslavia, witnessed a mass killing of prisoners in Beisfjord camp on the night of 17–18 July 1942. The commandant of Beisfjord, SS-Obersturmbannführer Wilhelm Goecke, had 287 sick prisoners shot dead that night by guards with machine guns, and then reported their loss in a typhus epidemic to his superiors in Oslo.

At night, but it wasn’t proper nighttime, the night is as light as day there ... They divided us up. They asked whoever ... didn’t feel well, not well enough to work, to go over into the huts over there, where they would get better food and recover, and once they had recovered they should go back to work again. And many did respond. Those who were sick went forward ... and went over there behind the huts. And when they had gone over there, the German ... soldiers stood there with

wire and fence wire. They separated them from us. They forbade us to go up to the wire and they forbade them to do that too. And then the shooting began in the course of the day, as soon as someone went out from the huts there, where they had isolated them, he was shot immediately. They [the Germans] reported that typhus had broken out in the camp. And with that they then covered up the fact that they had killed the people there. It was scarcely credible, there was no typhus at all. In this way they murdered around 200–300 people between 17 and 18 July '42.

Terzic Hilmo, another Yugoslav inmate of Beisfjord, also described the mass shooting and agreed that the murdered prisoners did not have typhus, only a ‘slight fever’.

The mass killing at Beisfjord was another example of how direct and indirect types of violence became so interconnected that they appeared to merge. Whether or not typhus cases were among those shot, fear of disease among OT and SS personnel was very real, and measures to avoid infection of their own ranks were vigorous and frequently extreme.

The extent to which OT personnel were involved in denying basic needs to prisoners within SS-run camps in Norway was revealed in some detail by a remarkable report by SS-Sturmbannführer Dr Bauer, who was sent by the senior regional SS and police chief, Wilhelm Rediess, to inspect camps in Norway in July–August 1942. He described serious failings and health dangers to both prisoners and German troops in his report, criticising the OT especially for providing insufficient food. Because of inadequate rations given out by the OT at Osen camp, ‘the work output of the prisoners on this diet would very soon drop’. An OT staff member named Schmidt, a building surveyor, had already informed his superiors of the situation at Osen and received promises of extra prisoner rations, but up to that point only on paper. Rations were deficient in vitamins, and some prisoners had died of food poisoning after eating fish remains scavenged from a waste bin. In Rognan, Dr Bauer noted that there were only a few cases of exhaustion caused by insufficient food.

Describing Jernvatn, where Goecke had built an overflow camp because of typhus in Beisfjord, Dr Bauer said the OT building officer in charge of the sector had refused point blank to rectify the camp’s failings, including inadequate rations and shelter for the prisoners and guards:

There can be no talk of a camp here of any description, neither regarding accommodation for the prisoners nor that of the guard detail. Describing any of the

accommodation as a camp is laughable ... Weather conditions provoked the most serious illnesses among the prisoners and also coughs and colds among the guards. Greater losses by the day were therefore unavoidable. Some of the prisoners were half-naked and could not be put to work. They lay in snow and rain, completely drenched, without means of warming themselves in the open air. Food was provided by the OT in insufficient quantity, both for the prisoners and for personnel. It was anyway impossible, since the access roads were completely unusable for vehicles and 3 of the 4 OT trucks were out of action. Baurat Köhling in Narvik, who is responsible for this camp sector, explained to me regarding my ideas, in response to repeated questioning on many occasions in front of witnesses: 'He was not in a position to offer any remedy.'

At Nordreisa, further north, Dr Bauer was astonished that a camp supposed to accommodate 800 prisoners and their guards had scarcely been started, with only the bare structures of four huts for 120 men on site. Bauer insisted on a written confirmation from the OT leader there of this state of affairs. Prisoners were said to be already on their way to Nordreisa, to labour on the route of the Arctic railway ordered by Hitler.

At Karasjok, to the east of Nordreisa, Dr Bauer once again appealed in vain to army officers and a regional OT chief to take steps to tackle the health risks to German troops and prisoners alike from lice-infested straw bedding in the makeshift camp and the lack of basic medical facilities. 'Lice infestation of the prisoners poses a very great danger of epidemics, especially also for the troop barracks directly next to the prisoners' camp,' he wrote, saying that OT engineer Dr Walter Beck had declined to help. Beck, interviewed during a post-war West German investigation, spoke of 'bad food, bad equipment and the unfavourable weather conditions' hampering his road-building task in Karasjok using Serb labourers. He suspected SS personnel running the camp, who had lavish meals, of claiming for themselves some of the camp rations destined for prisoners.

After his time in Beisfjord, Stjepan Pištignjat was sent on to other camps heavily criticised by Dr Bauer, including Osen and Korgen. Brutality by guards was not as extreme as at Beisfjord, but shootings and torture occurred. Cakic Avdo, another Yugoslav prisoner in Osen, described the notoriously violent camp commandant, Sturmbannführer Hermann Dolp. He said Dolp used to visit the hut for the sick every morning to find out how many prisoners had died during the night. If he saw that some were very ill, he ordered they be buried alive. Avdo said he and fellow Yugoslav Terzic Hilmo, who had also been transferred to Osen, had to bury a still-living prisoner,

Jurisic Josip, in December 1942. Hilmo told a guard that Josip was still breathing but was threatened with being shot himself if he did not keep quiet and obey instructions.

Extraordinarily, Pištignjat said Dolp intervened to save his life when his leg was crushed by a rock and he could no longer work. ‘I certainly expected him ... to say: “Throw him in the pit” ... and then one shot and finished!’ Instead, he called over a Yugoslav doctor among the prisoners, who examined Pištignjat and said the leg could be successfully treated. Dolp ordered this be done, and Pištignjat was allowed to stay in the camp for some months until his leg healed.

After the mass shooting in Beisfjord, Pištignjat and Hilmo both said they were taken with up to 500 other prisoners from Beisfjord to Bjørnfjell for road construction work. Many died in Bjørnfjell, and those who fell sick were shot. ‘Every day about 10 people were buried and thrown into this common grave that we had dug when we arrived,’ said Pištignjat. They had to sleep in the open for three weeks before they were told to build huts.

In 1944, Willi Henne’s OT Task Group Wiking was implementing the ‘performance feeding’ programme endorsed by Speer which had already been introduced in German industry. Statistics were gathered on the work performance of foreigners and prisoners of war compared to German workers and the measure was viewed as having consistently shown its worth by boosting output. Since improving the quality of rations was not an option in rewarding prisoners’ work output, food could only be increased in volume. The OT manager in charge of the top-priority *Valentin* and *Hornisse* submarine projects in Bremen was enthusiastic. Edo Meiners, a chief naval architect, gave his foremen complete discretion on implementation of the policy for all prisoners of war. ‘It [is] hereby ordered that foremen, pit-shaft overseers, supervisors etc. of the various firms should be responsible for whether a prisoner of war receives food or not. All sentimentality should be set aside in such judgements, since in this case only severity can bring results.’

In a highly unusual network of camps in Norway, the victims were mostly Germans. In Prison Camp North, as this string of camps in the Norwegian Arctic was called, the idea of ‘Aryans’ being honoured at the pinnacle of the Nazi racial hierarchy had been turned upside down. These ‘Aryans’ were deemed worthy of the cruellest punishment at the hands of their own countrymen because they were hardened criminals or former members of the armed forces who had been found guilty of crimes such as desertion.

The Justice Ministry and the OT had set up Prison Camp North in August 1942, and the commandant at that time reported there were 1,998 prisoners, 97 Justice Ministry officials and 53 OT staff. The original number of prisoners dwindled by the end of 1944

to just over 1,000, of whom more than 760 had been sentenced by German military courts. At its peak, there were about thirty Arctic camps in the Prison Camp North network, reduced to seven by October 1944, based further south in Narvik. Death rates were high among Prison Camp North prisoners but the overall toll was hard to determine. Hundreds of sick inmates were shipped back to Emsland prison in Germany and some replacements were provided, but gaps exist in available records. The British investigation into war crimes in Norway found that 210 convicts perished by execution, violence or exposure, without mentioning deaths from hunger, exhaustion or disease. A German prisoner who had been a doctor in Berlin was told to give lethal injections to the sick and prisoners suffered to such an extent that it was clear both the Ministry of Justice and the OT regarded them as ‘expendable’.

The last commandant assigned to Prison Camp North in early 1944 was Martin Bauer, a senior German civil servant. As he prepared for his 9 a.m. flight on 21 January from Trondheim to Tromsø, he knew he had a challenging task ahead. With so many German convicts under his charge, his responsibility was to the Justice Ministry, but OT engineers would oversee his prisoners at work sites for tasks like fortifications or road-building. OT Task Group Wiking was paying his travel expenses. He had already had a long journey, having gone by rail on the express from Vienna to Berlin before continuing across German-occupied Europe to Norway. From Tromsø, he still had to reach Alta, the administrative centre for Prison Camp North.

Having been in command of Prison Camp North for more than a year, during which he oversaw the reduction of the camp network, Bauer was forced to prepare for Germany’s impending defeat. In March 1945, he started evacuation shipments of staff and prisoners. But an escape bid by one of the prisoners led to a drama coinciding with the very end of the war.

While Prison Camp North was exceptional because ‘Aryan’ deserters and criminals were cruelly treated, not all the prisoners were Germans. A minority of non-Germans in the camp endured extreme brutality for a more familiar reason in the Nazi system: they were viewed as racially inferior. Johann Sierpinski, a Polish-speaking labourer born of a German mother and Polish father near Kelheim, Bavaria, was described in Prison Camp North’s records as stateless. Before he left Germany, Sierpinski had been detained in Berlin’s infamous Plötzensee prison and sentenced to five years’ penitentiary for theft. He was sent to Norway on 29 June 1943. Sierpinski escaped, but was recaptured and executed by firing squad at around 10.30 a.m. on 9 May 1945. The fact that the 26-year-old’s execution occurred after Germany’s official surrender took effect at one minute past midnight that morning illustrated the level of violence in the

camp, as well as the extent to which camp officials acted at will. Witnesses told British war-crimes investigators after the war that Sierpinski was interrogated and beaten by Commandant Martin Bauer's number two in the camp's Justice Ministry administration, Inspector Otto Bauer. Sierpinski was forced to sign a confession that he had attempted to escape, even though the witness statements described how the Polish-speaking Sierpinski mostly understood neither his interrogator nor the document he was signing. It seems he was simply scavenging for food, but paid for it with his life.

Many Poles came to Norway and risked sharing Sierpinski's fate. Duped by OT recruitment propaganda, they volunteered for work and were sent to Norway, while Polish prisoners of war were also shipped there. Little is recorded about the experiences of Polish prisoners persecuted by German occupiers in Norway, but OT documents shed some light on this. They show the names of two Poles who suffered a cruel fate in May 1944. Tomasz Staniak, then aged forty-three, and his son Janusz, aged sixteen, were listed on a work detail for a firm under an OT building administration in the Arctic at Fauske. They had left Warsaw on 26 April and reached Norway on 16 May, where they started work on 25 May. Janusz was shot dead by German forces that month, and his entry in OT records states simply that he ended work on 31 May and that he was 'shot'. The OT records do not identify who killed him, but Janusz was one of eight Poles shot after escaping from a camp in the Sørfold region. His father, who played dead and so survived the shooting incident and the war, had to watch his son die beside him.

There was no doubt life could be more tolerable for some slave labourers if they ranked relatively high on the Nazi racial scale, having a 'voice' to protest about their treatment in a way that Jews or Soviet prisoners of war did not. Danish civilian workers, for example, made plain their disapproval of conditions in Norway's Arctic region in 1942, protesting about delays in salary payment, inadequate meals and pest infestations in their accommodation, OT documents showed. Regarding complaints about payments, Sager & Woerner said salaries of 250 Reichsmarks (RM) were promptly paid, although delays could occur if employees had filled in Deutsche Bank questionnaires incorrectly. The firm requested further details and promised to follow them up. Two Danish drivers, Gunlaug Larsen and Otto Lindhardtzen, complained of inedible food and bedbugs and, in response, National Socialist Motor Corps Hauptsturmführer Rieckmann in Ørlandet wrote that staff had taken energetic steps to improve catering standards, although they 'cannot yet be described as good'. All drivers had been deloused and their barracks rendered pest-free.

Skilled workers from the Reich Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, which Hitler established in 1939 with a nominal Czech administration following Germany's invasion of Czechoslovakia, also voiced their grievances. Engineer Franz Duben, together with twelve others from the protectorate, complained they had worked for fourteen months for the OT without being permitted to take leave, whereas German colleagues also working with the organisation in Narvik were allowed leave every six to eight months. OT headquarters in Berlin, which sent on the complaint to the OT task force in Oslo, requested that the matter should be dealt with 'conscientiously and swiftly'. Within three months the senior OT manager in the region declared the dispute resolved: arrangements were made for foreigners who had been waiting for more than a year to take leave, including Duben and others working under the OT with the firm Laule-Kirchenbauer.

These examples illustrate how OT staff generally made every effort to investigate and rectify problems highlighted by civilian foreign workers such as Danes. They were sensitive to complaints from this quarter because, as OT correspondence reveals, the organisation was struggling to recruit workers in Denmark in early 1944. As for the dispute involving Duben and twelve others from the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, the OT acted relatively swiftly to ensure retention of skilled workers, even when they came from a Slavic population.

Other Slavic workers, specifically Soviet prisoners of war and Yugoslavs, were not so considerately handled by their German overseers in Norway. They toiled in the country's Arctic zone on a remarkable project which Hitler considered to be of the highest priority: the Arctic railway.

# 11

## ARCTIC RAILWAY

In late 1941 Hitler ordered Todt to investigate whether an Arctic railway could be built in the region of mountainous northern Finland. Todt flew there and carried out a survey but concluded that it was not feasible. However, the idea of a railway through the Arctic region of Nazi-occupied Norway was floated again and so obsessed was Hitler with the scheme that it became one of his pet projects. This is the start of an astonishing story of how the entire task ended up being handed over to the OT.

The original problem for Hitler was how to reinforce one of his armies, which had been halted outside Murmansk, to enable the city's capture. Nikolaus von Falkenhorst, Germany's military commander in Norway, failed to convince Hitler on the telephone that existing transport was insufficient to take troop reinforcements and everything else that was needed, so he had to fly to the 'Wolf's Lair' to persuade his commander-in-chief in person. He succeeded, but Hitler's reply was: 'Then we'll just build a railway up there!' When Todt gave his verdict to Hitler, the idea was buried, according to Falkenhorst. But then Reich Commissioner Josef Terboven saw the project as his chance to bring himself closer to Hitler and managed to talk the Führer into accepting a modified version. In order to take the story further, though, some background is needed on the tasks undertaken by OT Task Group Wiking.

The OT was deeply involved in securing vital raw materials, especially slave labour, from occupied territories to power Germany's war machine. Around 60,000 Norwegian workers were employed in building the OT's huge defence, transport and industrial projects in Norway by June 1941. In April 1944, about a year before the end of the war, roughly half the total OT labour force of more than 79,000 in Norway and Denmark worked on fortifications, with the next biggest share going to railway building, which required more than 19,600 workers. The ratio of foreign workers to German personnel

was more than thirteen to one for the railway programme, higher than in any other sector.

The OT managed extraordinarily ambitious road and rail networks in Norway. They were primarily designed to safeguard raw materials from Scandinavia bound for Germany: the transport system was to provide a secure land route for Swedish iron ore, which represented 83 per cent of German imports of the commodity in 1940. Germany had to import more than half its iron ore. Apart from neutral Sweden, Norway was also a source of this key raw material. Norway's biggest reserves were in the far north-east and it exported 95 per cent of its ore, two-thirds of which went to Germany. The iron ore was shipped via Narvik in the winter months, but Hitler feared the Norwegian port could be seized by the British, thus blocking a vital commodity and strangling German armaments production. The planned road and rail links, stretching hundreds of kilometres along Norway's jagged coastline through mountainous Arctic areas, were therefore to provide an alternative route for the precious cargo. The road link was called Reichsstrasse 50 and was intended to be kept snow-free and passable all year round for heavy trucks travelling between Oslo and Kirkenes in the far north, a distance of around 2,500 kilometres. The OT took over the task from army engineers and the Reich Labour Service in July 1941.

As for the railway, this enormously costly and challenging task might never have been undertaken had it not been one of Hitler's favourite projects in Norway. It illustrated how powerful individuals close to Hitler kept alive an unrealistic and ultimately doomed project, one which was in the end entirely run by the OT and resulted in misery or death for thousands of slave labourers. For a very good reason, considering the geographical challenges and comparatively cheap alternative of sea transport, Norway possessed one of the least developed railway systems in Europe before the German invasion. Terboven's plan for the railway was a different route and he persuaded Hitler that the scheme was workable, despite Todt's conclusion. While the original 1,200-kilometre railway had been planned to run from near Mo i Rana to Kirkenes, Terboven suggested its length could be reduced by nearly a third by cutting out the section between Narvik and Nordreisa, a stretch of land where offshore islands offered some protection for coastal shipping against enemy attack. He promised Hitler the railway would be completed within two years, an unrealistic pledge for such a technically demanding engineering feat in such harsh terrain. It was early 1942 before Hitler gave his approval, and Todt was killed in February. Hitler therefore told Speer that, as well as shouldering all Todt's other responsibilities, the job of building the Arctic rail link now fell to him.

Even this did not finally see the Arctic railway advance from blueprint into full-scale construction and Speer attempted to offload the task onto Terboven. At a meeting on 14 April 1942, Hitler demanded speedy progress with the railway, recalling Terboven's promise of completion within two years. Speer was absent but Dorsch and Henne were there to relay their boss's view that Terboven himself should shoulder responsibility for the project and meet his own deadline.

Speer's obvious scepticism did nothing to diminish the Führer's enthusiasm and huge volumes of material were transported to sites along the planned route. Hitler issued a written order on 13 May 1942 listing the railway as one of the most urgent construction tasks in Norway and specifying it should be a single-track line running from Mo i Rana, via Fauske and Narvik to Kirkenes. However, following the momentous defeat of the German Sixth Army at Stalingrad in early 1943, Hitler decided to scrap the most northerly section to Kirkenes. He held steadfastly, though, to the southern section which would now terminate at Narvik. In mid-1943, after all the prevarications in the planning, the OT took over the building of the railway from army engineers who had to be switched to the Eastern Front.

Progress constantly failed to meet expectations, but Hitler continually demanded that more resources be diverted to the scheme. On 22 March 1944, he issued another written instruction, this time ordering the deployment of 4,000 more German skilled workers and 15,000 extra Soviet prisoners of war to ensure completion of the project on time. Astonishingly, he even ordered the 'urgent' continuation of work as late as the start of November. In autumn 1944, further German military losses meant troops had been forced to retreat southwards, ultimately rendering the railway superfluous. A message to this effect was sent to Hitler, but blocked by the blindly loyal Keitel, head of the military High Command, who refused to disobey an order from the Führer to build the railway. Supplies sorely needed at home therefore continued to be shipped from Germany to Norway. As a senior railway official, Bahnoberrat Ottensmeyer, wrote in a post-war report on his activities in Norway: 'Railway equipment therefore continued to be removed from bombed German stations and transported to Norway and there literally put on ice.' By the end of the war the line was completed up to Fauske, less than 200 kilometres north of Mo i Rana, only a fraction of the original target length.

Mindful of Hitler's intense preoccupation with the railway, Willi Henne had kept up the frenetic pace of work. Around 30,000 mostly Russian slave labourers were toiling in abysmal conditions on the OT rail project alone at the time of the German surrender. The high rate of OT activity in Norway showed up starkly in overall figures for Europe: while the OT labour force was shrinking across the continent as German forces

retreated, the number under the OT in Norway increased sharply. OT records show that the enlistment of more foreign workers and Norwegians meant the total rose to nearly 137,500, a surge of nearly 35 per cent by the end of September 1944 compared to August.

Just like the Arctic railway, another huge project in Norway – to produce aluminium for German warplanes – promised vastly more than it delivered. It had been proposed by Heinrich Koppenberg, head of the Junkers aircraft company, and sucked in tens of thousands of workers, as well as large amounts of raw materials and funds. In late 1940, when German aluminium output was a world-leading 300,000 tonnes, Koppenberg planned to quadruple Norwegian annual production to at least 200,000 tonnes by 1944. This was designed to counter American plans to increase its aluminium production to 450,000 tonnes per year by 1942. However, the vast cost, transport problems and shortfalls in raw materials and labour meant Koppenberg's forecasts proved wildly optimistic.

The company created by the Reich Air Ministry to carry out Koppenberg's scheme was Nordische Aluminium AG (Nordag). Out of more than 50,000 Norwegians working on German building sites in 1944, just over 11,800 were under the OT and more than 4,000 were assigned to the aluminium operation. In addition, OT records show that foreign workers from Denmark, France and Poland and other labourers from occupied Eastern Europe all worked for Nordag; more than 1,000 Danish workers were employed by them by January 1944 out of over 10,300 who had gone to work in Norway. In 1940 the Danish building contractor Christiani & Nielsen went to Norway to help build an aluminium plant with the OT and Luftwaffe in Aardal/Tyin.

Aluminium is a stock material in the manufacture of aircraft and the ingredients for making it commercially need to be sourced from many countries. The metal had been universally used in the aircraft industry since before the Second World War because of its lightness and strength when alloyed with materials such as copper. Norway became the centre of Koppenberg's gigantic programme to increase aluminium production as its vast potential for hydroelectric power could satisfy the high energy requirements, and Göring gave his approval to the idea in November 1940. Under the scheme, Norway carried out the smelting and the raw aluminium was shipped south for processing at plants in central Germany.

Since aircraft production took such a sizeable share of the Third Reich's war economy, the way the OT gathered and shipped materials to supply the sector provides a good example of how the organisation plundered European resources for Germany's benefit. A key raw material in the production of aluminium is bauxite, which was sent to

Norway from countries such as France, Yugoslavia and Greece. The OT managed to quadruple output at the bauxite mine at Brignoles in southern France in 1943 through a combination of improving road and rail links with its 15,000-strong onsite workforce and supplying extra mining equipment. It also helped in bauxite mining in Mostar in Yugoslavia and on the shores of Lake Balaton in Hungary. Copper needed for aluminium alloys in aircraft production, as well as for the many other uses in the armaments industry and the war economy, was supplied by Sweden, which was Germany's most important source of the metal. The Third Reich's second biggest source of copper was the Bor mine in Yugoslavia, situated south-east of Belgrade, which the Nazis seized in April 1941 in their Balkan offensive. The OT mounted its largest operation in the region to exploit the metal from Bor and transport it back to Germany. Apart from constructing administration buildings and accommodation for the workforce, the OT opened up a new mine and built extensive new road and rail links including a 75-kilometre railway to connect with an existing line leading to the River Danube. They also built 150 kilometres of roads and a new port on the Danube at Kostolac. Although pre-war production levels were never reached, Bor provided almost a quarter of Germany's copper requirements between spring 1942 and September 1944.

Jewish labour was increasingly in demand for the Bor mine and in February 1943 the OT put out an urgent request for 10,000 more labourers. A letter to the Foreign Ministry in Berlin stated that Jews were sought from Hungary for this purpose. A total of 6,200 Jews worked in the Bor mine up to September 1944 and on the railway between Bor and Žagubica. Few survived. Overall, around 80,000 workers, among them Soviet prisoners of war, were deployed in Bor in the summer of 1944.

Nándor Halper, a Jew born in what was then Hungary, recalled tunnelling in the Bor mine as 'extremely hard labour'. After blasting with dynamite, workers were sometimes killed by falling rocks. Apart from mining copper, labourers were required to work on railway lines between Bor, Žagubica and Požarevac. Milan Pantović, a Yugoslav then in his early twenties, worked on a Žagubica tunnel and described how the Italian military detainees in the slave-labour workforce were treated so harshly that many were driven to trade some of the few clothes they possessed for extra food.

Pantović's fellow Yugoslavs, working in Norway under Henne, were also ravaged by hunger as they strove to satisfy Germany's huge appetite for raw materials and build transport links and fortifications. Like other OT regional chiefs in countries across Europe, Henne was a significant player within the administration headed by Terboven. Hitler had appointed Terboven as Reichskommissar in April 1940, giving him almost unlimited power in the country, and Henne was put in charge of the OT's Wiking group

from 1942. Hitler's 1940 decree left unclear the exact division of responsibilities between Terboven and the Wehrmacht, so struggles between these two centres of power lasted throughout the occupation. Terboven used his close links to Hitler to resolve such tussles and ensure that he invariably ended up the winner. He also used industry contacts, established while he had been Gauleiter (regional chief) in Essen before being assigned to Norway, to guarantee that big firms such as IG Farben and Krupp had representatives appointed to his administration. Against this political backdrop, the OT's Henne established control of construction projects in Norway, depending on Terboven to help force through his demands for resources. Henne's powers rested partly on an agreement between Todt and Terboven to widen the OT's role in Norway and on an order by Hitler in May 1941 providing the basis for Wiking's central role under Henne in construction there. Henne amassed an impressive array of titles and his powers, including that of plenipotentiary for construction, meant he took all major decisions regarding construction in the country. His overriding goal became to press ahead with Hitler's Arctic railway and this had devastating consequences for slave labour. Henne and Terboven shared a fanaticism that drove them to the bitter end. While Henne defied all reason with his fixation on the Arctic railway, Terboven, rather than surrender, preferred to blow himself up with dynamite in the bunker at his Oslo residence just before midnight on 8 May 1945.

Norway was the northernmost point of Hitler's Atlantic Wall protecting his 'Fortress Europe', and slave labourers built massive fortifications along the length of Europe's western coastline to the south and west. OT documents and survivor accounts tell of their ordeal.

# 12

## ISLAND FORTRESS

Hitler's Atlantikwall, which consisted of coastal fortifications stretching from Norway to the Franco-Spanish frontier, was designed to defend Nazi-occupied Europe against invasion, but spectacularly failed to do so when Allied troops landed in Normandy on 6 June 1944. Before D-Day, Hitler had agreed to award the Ritterkreuz (Knight's Cross) to the OT regional chief in charge of the Atlantikwall, Karl Weiß. Speer presented it to Weiß, but German embarrassment prevented a press notice being issued following the Allied assault. Although Allied bombing was devastating, the remains of many Atlantic Wall bunkers, towers and gun emplacements, such as at 'Battery Todt' sites in France and coastal defences in Ørland in Norway, can still be seen today.

Apart from the coastline of the French mainland, the Atlantikwall extended to include the Channel Islands off the northern French coast. The Channel Islands – dependencies of the British Crown but autonomous on domestic policy – attracted considerable attention from Hitler as a prestigious propaganda prize, being the only British soil conquered by Nazi Germany. In October 1941 he ordered them to be turned into an 'impregnable fortress' to prevent any British attack, following up with a directive in March 1942 to build the entire Atlantikwall. Conditions for forced labourers under the OT were relatively mild on the French mainland despite the gigantic size of projects undertaken, including fortifications, long-range weapons installations and an underground factory for the V1 flying bomb. But on the Channel Island of Alderney, where both the OT and SS operated for a time, their treatment was exceptionally brutal. One Jewish survivor, Albert Eblagon, was held at one of four main camps operating from July 1942 on Alderney. Foreign workers told of routine violence by OT staff in camps on the island which, although not French territory, came under the OT's administrative structure in occupied France. Eblagon described the start of his ordeal.

We arrived at night and disembarked on 15 August 1943 at three o'clock in the morning. In the darkness we were forced to run the two kilometres to [the camp], while the German guards continuously stabbed into our backs with their bayonets while also kicking us all the time. There were many men among us over seventy years of age but nobody was spared. Work, hard physical work for twelve and fourteen hours a day, every day, building the fortifications. Every day there were beatings and people's bones were broken, their arms or their legs. People died from overwork. We were starved and worked to death, so many died from total exhaustion.

Eblagon was held in Norderney camp on Alderney. The other three camps were Helgoland, Borkum and Sylt, the last of which the OT handed over to an SS building brigade when it arrived in March 1943. The SS-Baubrigade-1 (SS Building Brigade I) had been sent to help the OT fortify Alderney, which was the only one of the Channel Islands on which both the SS and the OT operated. Alderney was an example, like Ørlandet in Norway, where the OT was in complete control for a time, until the SS came to the island. No matter who was in charge, the consequences for slave labourers there were equally lethal. While the OT and SS overlapped only partly on Alderney and comparative death rates for identical periods are lacking, overall prisoner death rates were 11 per cent in OT camps and 10.6 per cent in the SS-run Sylt camp.

By May 1943, there were 4,000 foreign labourers on Alderney, many of them Russians, Ukrainians and Poles. Each day they toiled for twelve hours or more on construction sites, seven days a week, with a half-day off one Sunday a month. Inevitably, the death toll mounted.

One Russian former camp inmate, Kirill Nevrov, recalled how bodies found in the huts of Norderney camp were collected and tipped from trucks into pits on the seashore.

In the morning, many people were found dead in their beds, and the naked corpses were loaded into trucks. A truck would tip the corpses at low tide into pits dug in the beach fifty to a hundred metres off the shore. There would be about twelve people in each pit ... I saw the bodies being buried with my own eyes, because I was working about fifty metres away, on a concrete wall.

Former Norderney camp inmate Norbert Beernaert described the brutality of two of the OT staff: 'The big boss was [OT-Haupttruppführer Adam] Adler, who was drunk from morning to night, and all the time he played with his gun. [OT-Meister] Heinrich Evers,

the deputy camp commandant in Norderney, was a small man and a sadist; I saw him beat people to death many times.'

While an estimated overall death toll for the Alderney camps varies from 437 to 1,000 or more, a definitive figure may remain elusive since many of the records were destroyed. Along with the Slavs on Alderney were 700 French Jews; the graves of eight have been identified. The relatively few deaths among Jews, who were so ruthlessly persecuted under Nazism, may partly be explained by the fact that they were only on Alderney for a comparatively short time, when much of the heavy construction had been done.

OT engineer Leo Ackermann took charge in late 1943 on Alderney, where death rates in OT camps had peaked nearly a year previously. He worked closely with the SS, which had arrived in spring that year with concentration-camp prisoners in SS-Baubrigade-I. Ackermann strove to improve performance and extend his control over prisoners for the benefit of OT operations there. After the war, former camp inmates told Allied interrogators that Ackermann inspected work sites with SS and Wehrmacht officers and did not usually intervene to prevent severe beatings of prisoners. Testimony by survivors and witnesses showed conditions remained pitiful for prisoners in OT camps under Ackermann's leadership until foreign workers finally left in 1944.

To impose his authority as senior engineer controlling prisoners on technical matters at work sites, Ackermann clashed with the head of the SS Building Brigade, SS-Hauptsturmführer Maximilian List, in a way that dangerously backfired. Ackermann raised objections on one occasion that SS guards were beating up prisoners from the SS-run Sylt camp on 'his' work sites 'so that their capacity for work might be adversely affected'. It turned out, however, that one of the beaten prisoners had been a Russian army major who had managed to conceal his Jewish background, and who for the first time had been included in an SS building brigade. So Ackermann faced a counterclaim by the SS that he was soft on Jews – a charge that could have had exceptionally serious repercussions for him if the matter had not been dropped following intervention by the senior OT administration in Cherbourg.

Apart from Alderney, prisoners were also obliged to undertake construction work on the neighbouring Channel Islands of Jersey and Guernsey. Between 1,000 and 3,000 labourers are estimated to have died on all the Channel Islands, including those travelling to and from them.

Defence of the Channel Islands as a whole absorbed one-twelfth of the resources needed for the entire Atlantikwall, for whose construction the OT used a labour force of around 200,000 in France, working together with army engineers. Overall, an estimated

600,000 people worked for the OT on its construction sites in the country between 1940 and 1944. Efforts were made to enlist labour from every available source, including workers from France's colonies, and a significant number of North African labourers worked on the Channel Islands. Most were deployed along the French Atlantic Coast and by mid-1944 the OT had at its disposal in France about 25,000 workers from countries including Algeria, Morocco and Indochina. The need for labour was acute and other nationalities joined the ranks of labourers in the Channel Islands, including Spaniards – so-called 'Red Spaniards' because many were communists who escaped to France in 1939 after General Franco's victory in the Spanish Civil War. The OT had deployed about 11,000 Spanish Republicans on construction sites on the French Atlantic coast up until November 1941. In agreement with collaborationist Vichy authorities, these forced labourers were put to work building submarine bases at La Pallice and Bordeaux, and later on the Atlantikwall at La Rochelle.

Two Spaniards, both from pro-Republican families, described conditions working for the OT on the French mainland, which reflected far milder treatment than on Alderney or the murderous brutality typical of Eastern Europe. Enric Casañas, who worked in France as a welder in 1940 when he was twenty-one, said conditions were acceptable and he was paid. When he worked later for the OT on the Atlantikwall near Bordeaux, even as late as 1943, it was not much worse. 'It was not labour as punishment, no, no, they really did pay us.' He described himself, though, as a forced labourer, and said this was the worst of working for the OT.

The fact that I had to work for a system I did not want to support. That, in itself, was already very bad for me. For, in fact, forced labour did not mean being beaten or having to carry heavy loads or something like that, you see? Because, no, the work was basically quite normal, like any other ... It was normal work, but it just was enforced.

Another Spaniard, Joaquín Gálvez, was sent to work under the OT in north-west France in 1941–2 to help construct and camouflage airfields in Gael and Dinard. 'At any rate, your hands go to pieces and are full of cuts, blood and cement. The only remedy consisted of pulling out the "flute" in the evening and urinating over your hands. That helped. So in the evening, at dinner time, it was called "Operation Flute".'

Enric Casañas's view was that even relatively well-paid jobs were forced labour, but such work could seem attractive for the young unemployed from occupied territories early in the war. The OT advertised for workers on billboards and in newspapers,

offering wages significantly above the average in the sector up to late 1941. A secure source of food, amid inflation and shortages, was another bonus, as well as protection in principle from deportation to work in the Reich, although this last benefit often proved illusory. While the OT found it easy to recruit skilled labour in the initial period, it had to resort to economic, legal or violent methods later on to secure the workers it needed. From January 1941, workers rendered unemployed by the closure of local construction sites were told by regional labour offices to apply for jobs with the OT. If they refused, they were threatened with loss of unemployment benefit or ration cards.

As well as treating Western European labourers comparatively well early in the war, the OT also made business deals with foreign firms in the region. It did not rely wholly on German industry and recruited staff from the occupied state's own construction companies. The OT contracted French firms which brought their own staff and hired more locally as required, or recruited workers individually, or sought them through local labour offices. When the OT did employ German firms, local French labourers saw little difference between being supervised by OT core personnel and being employees of German firms coopted into the OT. The head of the German firm was generally in charge of a particular construction project and received the requisite OT rank, while his subordinates received lower OT ranks according to their status in the firm and were employed on tasks as they would have been in their original jobs.

Building the Atlantikwall involved exceptionally hard labour for foreign workers, whether for heavy coastal batteries, submarine pens or launch sites in northern France for 'wonder weapons' aimed at London. In spring 1943, the OT developed its plans for giant bunkers in northern France to act as launch sites for rockets aimed at England. The project for the large V2 rocket launch sites near Watten, in French Flanders, was codenamed 'Northwestern Power Station', but the installations were bombed before work could be completed. The army's V2 rockets weighed 14 tonnes, including a 1-tonne warhead, while the air force's V1 'Doodlebug' rocket was much smaller and had a shorter range. OT work crews began construction of ninety-six V1 launch sites in October 1943, but bombing destroyed most of them by December in that year.

The OT was also heavily involved in building a launch site on the northern French coast for another weapon designed to target London, which was 165 kilometres away: a high-pressure pump action 'super gun' sited near Calais. Hitler closely followed its development, and the OT had around 5,000 workers excavating the site for the 'Centipede' gun in late 1943. It was a system of 150-millimetre guns with barrels more than 120 metres long placed in shafts embedded largely underground. The barrels of the

gun were fitted at intervals with angled side chambers along their length to allow propelling charges to be fired automatically in succession to keep increasing the speed of the projectile before it left the gun. An underground railway, lifts and ammunition galleries enabled gunners to load and fire the weapon. But technical problems meant the weapon failed to reach its intended range. In August 1944, British air raids caused heavy damage to the site at Mimoyecques, 20 kilometres from Boulogne-sur-Mer, on France's northern coast.

At this momentous point in the war as Allied armies pressed ahead with their offensive, the OT was involved in a major operation in north-eastern France to relocate some production of the Fi 103, better known as the V1 flying bomb, underground. Erhard Milch of the Reich Air Ministry had picked the small aircraft firm of Fieseler to design the missile, and Volkswagen was chosen to take on orders for the manufacture of the Fi 103. Its new 'bomb-proof' subterranean site was in the Tiercelet iron-ore mine. The OT developed and carried out construction at the mine, situated near Thil in the part of Lorraine retained by France. In mid-March 1944 transports of slave labourers from Russia, Ukraine and Belarus joined French and Serbian POWs there, overseen by German OT personnel. The OT also took care of guarding the prisoners, employing Flemish and Danish guards armed with rifles and batons. In May, Volkswagen sent an engineer, Arthur Schmiele, as its representative to Auschwitz to recruit Hungarian Jews as additional labour. Schmiele chose two groups of concentration-camp prisoners. The first group of 300 included metalworkers and around forty engineers and technicians, who were all sent to Volkswagen's main plant for instruction in manufacturing the Fi 103. A second group of 500 metalworkers were transferred directly to Tiercelet, where the first group joined them about a month later. SS and Luftwaffe guards were assigned to the concentration-camp prisoners who, because of the site where they were deployed, came under Natzweiler concentration camp. Despite being recruited as skilled workers, the prisoners were made to perform routine tasks such as transporting quarried stone and laying cables and cement. In August 1944 the Tiercelet workforce numbered around 2,000, including 800 concentration-camp prisoners. However, as the Allies advanced, the Germans evacuated Tiercelet to focus underground production of the Fi 103 in Mittelbau-Dora instead. Concentration-camp prisoners were sent from Tiercelet via Dernau to Mittelbau-Dora in various transports by around the end of 1944.

At this time, in the desperate last stages of the conflict, French and other Western European labourers in OT operations close to advancing enemy forces could lose advantages they had previously enjoyed in their home countries. OT workers ranking highly in the 'racial hierarchy' now suffered pitiful conditions.

Frenchman Maurice Villemoz was one such individual. He laboured under the OT in what was then the German city of Breslau (Wroclaw) in Silesia, digging defensive positions in bitterly cold weather in December 1944. Before that, he had done arduous overnight work in a metal foundry in the city. When the foundry was closed, he was among 300 to 500 French workers held in a labour camp established in an abandoned factory. They were guarded by army soldiers, although their labour was supervised by the OT. Out of 1,680 French workers trapped in Breslau, only about 400 survived, Maurice said. At the start of every shift they would work furiously to ensure the trench they dug was deep enough to shelter from the frequent Russian air raids, slackening off their pace only once this goal had been reached. Before Breslau was taken by the Red Army in early May 1945, bombs had landed to left and right at their work site in the central administrative quarter, but their trenches saved them, just as they had hoped. Hitler Youth supervisors were brought in to replace the middle-aged soldiers now required at the front. Young people who had grown up under the Nazis proved even tougher taskmasters.

Like Maurice, fellow Frenchman Paul Raillon undertook hard labour building defensive lines, having been arrested and sent to the Reich following German reprisals against the French Resistance in mid-1944. Paul dug anti-tank trenches under OT supervision near the village of Wolkow, close to Danzig, having arrived there in early 1945 just before his twentieth birthday. He described the OT as being ‘as bad as could be’. Paul was among fifty or sixty slave labourers, including other Frenchmen and Spaniards, on the small military site. They slept on straw in a school in the village.

But there, we had it bad because it was the Todt concern ... they were the yellow dogs, we called them that because they had overalls, they had a black and yellow cap ... They were sort of SS ... In the morning, they came to gather us together, to count us ... Then they sent us there, out into the fields, to make trenches. Then, afterwards, there was too much snow. So they made us clear the roads to let the army pass. And the railway track, too.

Paul explained how he and his fellow prisoners twisted up rags to protect their hands because their skin stuck to the shovels in the bitterly cold weather, calling them ‘Russian socks’. They also wrapped rags round their shoes to help insulate their feet. He said the Germans forced local Polish civilians, including teenagers and the elderly, to work for them too.

As the advancing Russian army approached, one of Paul's tasks under the OT was to clear the roads of snow so that retreating German forces could take with them mostly French civilian forced labourers from farms in East Prussia, as well as other prisoners. Describing catastrophic scenes in which German forces shot dead those too ill or exhausted to walk, Paul recalled how refugees in covered wagons, 'like the Americans, the cowboys', passed by among columns of slave labourers and concentration-camp prisoners.

So there were lines of, I don't know, 300 to 400 women sometimes, from camps for women, from camps for men. So, they passed by ... in the snow. Well, we were the ones who cleared the snow. These poor, thin people were being made to pass through. Those who couldn't walk, Bang! There was one, they killed him, like from here to that chair over there, and my shovel, my shovel in my hand. He couldn't go any further. They lifted him up, Bang! And afterwards it was us, the deportees, who picked them up, we put them on a sledge, they were taken, I don't know where. That was sad.

With the Red Army about to overwhelm the German positions, Paul and his fellow prisoners suddenly found themselves without OT guards: 'the next morning, the yellow dogs, they had made themselves scarce'. Although the abandoned prisoners hid as best they could, they were discovered by German soldiers still in the area, who, after listening to their story of the OT leaving them to their fate, somewhat bizarrely gave them the job of looking after 500 to 600 cows. Having fed and milked the animals for about three weeks, Paul and the others escaped and made their way to Danzig, which Russian troops reached in early April.

Stefan Kulesza, who, in [Chapter 4](#), told of his flight from German soldiers invading his Polish homeland, described desperate scenes in East Prussia in similar terms to Paul Raillon. He had worked for more than two years as a forced farm labourer in the region before being switched to trench digging under the OT. Like so many other Poles persecuted under the Nazi racist code, Stefan had been compelled to work in agriculture after being deported to a farm run by a German couple in 1942, when he was nineteen years old. Although he was beaten by a local policeman when the farmer's wife reported him for 'disobedience', Stefan said food was plentiful and the work, while involving unremittingly long hours, consisted of routine tasks. He had to use a horse-drawn plough, look after farm animals, clear out stables and perform other maintenance jobs. It was not until August 1944 that he was ordered by local authorities to dig

trenches at various locations, including under the OT at Ragnit, near the Lithuanian border. His spell of hard labour on such defensive work ended in October and he was soon caught up in the westward flight ahead of advancing Soviet troops, in his case in a horse-drawn cart carrying members of another German family who briefly employed him.

About 500 kilometres to the south-east of where Stefan fled from the battlefield, the regional head of OT operations in a German-occupied town in modern-day Belarus was imposing another brutal regime in the area under his control.

# 13

## OT IN THE EAST

When the alarm was raised in February 1943 that twelve Jews assigned to a wood-cutting squad had escaped, armed OT men in Radoskowice, in German-occupied Soviet territory, were ordered to surround the ghetto. Bullets whistled through the icy air as they got into position. The object was to corral the remaining 200 to 300 Jews and ensure they could not escape. Rifles at the ready, the OT men stood guard until a force led by the SS Security Service arrived from a nearby German base. At that point the Jews were herded into a barn, where they were ordered to lie on the ground. Members of the newly arrived execution squad then shot men, women and children systematically, in the back of the head. Their bodies were doused with petrol and set alight and the barn was quickly ablaze.

The head of the local OT operation where these events took place in the German wartime administration of White Ruthenia (post-war Belarus) was Winand Schneider. Colleagues described him as having two sides to his character: on the one hand a gregarious, if overbearing, boss whose civilian life as a surveyor had catapulted him into war; on the other a man with an extraordinary capacity for violence.

A post-war investigation into Schneider's actions around the time of the mass murder in the barn provides exceptional insights into OT methods in German-occupied Soviet territory, opening a window onto a vast area where German treatment of slave labourers was notoriously brutal. It showed how an OT construction leader like Schneider could act in his particular fiefdom with virtually no fear of being held to account. Witnesses gave testimony which caused prosecutors to scramble to meet legal deadlines so that possible charges of murder or aiding and abetting murder could be brought against Schneider nearly twenty years after the event. One witness accused Schneider of prompting the reprisal shooting and burning of Jews by tipping off security troops about the twelve who escaped. Others reported how he shot dead one of the Jewish escapees

who had been recaptured. A witness to yet another incident told West German prosecutors how Schneider shot a Jewish boy in the marketplace. Elisabeth Gareis, the witness to this last shooting, described both sides of Schneider's personality.

'I'm no enemy of Schneider's, he always behaved correctly towards me and treated me in a companionable way, although I kept my distance from him because of his drinking,' said Gareis, who was a 21-year-old salaried accountant when she arrived to work for the OT in Radoskowice in April 1942. 'It wasn't planned that I should stay there. My clothes were inadequate for the conditions. I had to wear trousers since I needed boots because of the mud. The Jewish tailor in the ghetto was supposed to make some trousers for me. I didn't know my way around. I had only been there about ten days. Schneider told me he wanted to show me the tailor's house.'

Schneider's gesture was helpful to the new arrival. As head of the OT in the area, he was fulfilling duties and showing the sort of qualities that convinced his Cologne-based road-building firm, Rom, to select him to head the OT's Radoskowice operation. He had led a steady lifestyle, working in business and as a surveyor for about fifteen years before being sent to war. Nevertheless, Gareis was about to discover the shockingly brutal side of Schneider's nature.

It was in the afternoon when I left our office with Schneider. We went together across the marketplace towards the ghetto. There was a Jewish boy walking in front of us who was about thirteen years old. The boy was going in the same direction as us, also towards the ghetto. Schneider always carried a loaded pistol in the pocket of his leather coat or in a pocket of his uniform. On this day, Schneider drew his pistol for no apparent reason and shot at the Jewish boy, hitting him in the back. The boy fell at once to the ground.

Gareis was so deeply shocked that she ran straight back to her office and did not know if the boy had been killed outright or was wounded. When she challenged Schneider later over his action, he made out that it was a trifling matter.

He made light of the incident. He dismissed everything with a wave of his hand. I can't remember whether he said on this day that the Jews were no great loss. It could be, though I'm not sure, that he said on firing the shot: 'Get out of the way, you Jewish lout!' Schneider used that sort of language constantly, although I just don't know whether he said it this time as well. I am firmly convinced that Schneider shot the boy intending to kill. He considered the Jews fair game.

Gareis said Schneider regularly took part in retaliatory raids against Soviet partisans who attacked the German occupiers. It was as a result of a similar raid that a young Jewish man was recaptured two or three weeks after the original twelve escaped, and OT staff said Schneider shot him dead. Hermann Körtgen, who worked for the OT under Schneider, described events:

One day, I saw that a young man, aged about twenty-one, had been tied to a tree, Indian-style, just by the construction site. The young man was a Jew. I knew him, he had worked previously in my detail. After some hours, the man was led away by Schneider in the direction of the edge of the wood. After some time, Schneider returned without the young man ... On the same day, I was told by a work colleague ... that Winand Schneider had killed the young man with a shot in the neck ... The grave was said to have been prepared beforehand. The man who told me that at the time was also in the Rom firm. He had been working alone in the wood, according to his account at the time, and observed from close by how Winand Schneider shot the boy.

Körtgen's account was recalled in similar terms by another OT foreman from the Rom firm, Heinrich Frantzen, who also described the 1943 massacre and burning of Jews in the barn. Both men, as well as other OT staff, gave their accounts of the horrific events, together with descriptions of an even bigger mass shooting in the area about a year earlier. Some versions of what occurred at this earlier mass slaughter of Jews in February or March 1942 mentioned Schneider as having been present but without implicating him in the shooting. OT staff agree that Latvian or Lithuanian squads, commanded by German officers, shot around 1,000 Jews in the first mass killing in 1942 and 200–300 in the second killing in 1943. Victims were herded into barns on both occasions, after which the buildings were set alight.

Witnesses of the 1943 massacre reveal that OT staff were required to be armed and to open fire on prisoners to prevent escapes from the Jewish ghetto at times of crisis. This applied to OT personnel in general, not just the OT's own specially designated armed Schutzkommando guard units. The practice was described by Körtgen, who took part in the operation by OT staff from the Rom firm to surround the ghetto in 1943 after the alarm was sounded at about 6 a.m.:

Because of the alarm, we all went out, with carbines in fact. We saw Jews fleeing, as well. All the people from the Rom firm opened fire. I shot, too, although

intentionally into the air. Most of us did that also. You had to take part in some form or other, otherwise you attracted unwelcome attention.

Frantzen said he and other armed OT staff surrounded the ghetto for some ninety minutes before an SS squad arrived, about thirty-strong. Frantzen was certain Schneider had tipped them off, although he could not say exactly how. ‘Schneider was at that time the leading man in Radoskowice. His alarm, which he triggered because of the twelve escaped Jews, brought about the execution of the Jews.’ Before the killings, the Jews had their valuables taken from them and were made to run the gauntlet between rows of SS men, who beat them with rods. The Jews were then made to enter the barn and lie face down on the ground before being shot in the back of the head. A German major headed the execution squad. As Frantzen recalled:

In this way, about 300 Jews – first the men, then the women and children – were killed on this Sunday between about 11.30 and 16.00. By the end, the victims lay heaped in the barn up to about a man’s height. The whole pile of bodies moved slightly up and down. One had the impression through this that not all the victims were quite dead. The heaped pile of bodies was doused with petrol and set alight immediately after the killings by the militia and the Lithuanian SS. In an instant, the whole barn was aflame. The neighbouring buildings were endangered by sparks flying. So Schneider deployed a fire-fighting detail with which [OT cook Karl] Ross and I helped, or were made to help ... I saw everything that happened from close up. Ross and I were directed by the German major who led the Lithuanian SS to stand right by the barn where the shootings were carried out ... This act of victimisation can only have originated from Winand Schneider, who must have told the major accordingly ... The whole shooting action was observed from start to finish by Winand Schneider and the German major from a distance of about 10 metres. Winand Schneider sat right next to the German major on a bench.

Witness testimony such as this about the massacres in 1942 and 1943 revealed a striking fact: the operations of the OT and the killing squads were highly coordinated. To a hard-line Nazi advocating genocide, it made no difference whether a Jew was worked to death or murdered in an extermination camp. So decisions on whether Jews, Slavs and other ‘inferior races’ should perform extreme hard labour under the OT or be killed in a mass shooting were subject to a terrifying logic: it was viewed as a question of timing. If they were not worked to death by the OT, they could be executed later and this was the mindset within which Schneider operated.

This deadly cooperation between the OT and the killing squads was described in testimony given by Jokob Abenstein, an OT foreman working under Schneider for the Rom firm, whose assignment to Radoskowice coincided with both the 1942 and 1943 mass shootings. Describing events surrounding the first massacre, he said Jewish men, women and children were rounded up and assembled in a gorge in the area between 10 and 20 March 1942.

I estimated at least 1,000 Jews had been rounded up. About 50 metres from the gorge was a barn. From a distance of about 100 metres, I could observe how four Jews at a time were led from the gorge into the barn, or they had to run in there. I couldn't see into the barn itself, but shortly afterwards shots were heard. By 11 or 12 o'clock, all the Jews had been shot dead.

After the shootings the barn was doused with petrol and set alight. Abenstein said Winand Schneider had picked out Jewish craftsmen from those assembled in the gorge because he wanted to keep them as workers on OT sites. Such selection of skilled workers, including Jews, was common before mass killings in occupied eastern territories during this period. Describing the scene, Abenstein said:

Before the shooting, the Jewish craftsmen were selected out, with their families. Winand Schneider was particularly interested in keeping the craftsmen. During the sorting of the craftsmen, which happened in the gorge shortly before the shooting, Winand Schneider was there. As I recall, about 100 Jews were picked out and not shot on that day.

At the time of the later mass killing in 1943, Körtgen said about thirty Jewish workers, 'essentially craftsmen', were selected as labourers before the mass shooting. This picking out of Jewish craftsmen, kept back to carry out tasks for the OT requiring trained labourers, was mentioned in testimony by several OT staff in Radoskowice. The Radoskowice ghetto provided an average of 500 to 600 Jews for the OT's almost exclusive use, but this resource was constantly depleted, not least by the two mass killings already described. The objective of keeping back Jewish workers before executions was always to fulfil immediate labour needs for the OT, the Wehrmacht or for other purposes, before they risked being gassed or shot when no longer needed. Abenstein stated that Jewish skilled workers spared at the time of the 1942 mass shooting near Radoskowice were shot during the mass killing in the town the following year.

The OT was one of the biggest employers in White Ruthenia, together with the German paper industry, the railways and the Wehrmacht. Prisoners of war and Jews were compelled to work, and hunger was a strong motivation for local civilians to register at labour offices since ration cards were only issued to labourers. The Germans' need for labour was so acute in this area that, unlike elsewhere, the murder campaigns all but ceased around the turn of the year from 1941 to 1942. The most likely explanation was that the civilian administration wanted to preserve specialist workers who were urgently needed. However, mass executions resumed in the spring of 1942 in Vileyka district, including the towns of Vileyka and Radoskowice. 'Almost all the murders of Byelorussian Jews followed a particular pattern up to autumn 1942. There was scarcely a massacre not preceded by a selection of the required labour force,' historian Christian Gerlach wrote. As the evidence presented here shows, the OT was deeply implicated in this collaboration with the death squads before massacres in the area.

The killing squads mentioned by the West German prosecutors investigating Schneider's case were units of four main task forces of the SS Security Service formed to operate in the east after the launch of Operation Barbarossa. From the beginning of the German invasion and while Schneider was in Radoskowice, these task forces, assisted by others, including the regular army, carried out mass shootings of Jews and political opponents identified by the Nazis in which hundreds of thousands perished. The murderous practices of similar task groups in Poland were being repeated on a far larger scale in occupied Soviet territory. Killings occurred in all larger towns like Radoskowice, where sub-units of the task-force death squads known as Einsatzkommando 7a, 7b, 8 and 9 had all been active. Einsatzkommando 1b also operated there briefly later. If victims were not shot, they were put in ghettos, which as a rule in 1942 were decimated by shootings and in 1943 totally emptied. In the region where Schneider operated, 2.2 million civilians and prisoners of war died between 1941 and 1944 out of a population of 10.6 million. Villages were torched and industry and agriculture crippled as part of what Hitler saw as a 'war of annihilation'.

At the time of the 'death marches' in the final stages of the war, the OT again collaborated with SS killing squads. A pattern of OT staff ordering prisoners to dig graves before SS troops murdered sick or exhausted inmates occurred at two Auschwitz subcamps, Blechhammer and Tschechowitz-Vacuum, in late January 1945. On the day of the evacuation of Blechhammer, survivors told how an armed OT unit arrived and ordered prisoners to dig a pit to burn the corpses of camp inmates. The OT personnel also shot several prisoners whom they caught red-handed with equipment or food. A

few days later, SS troops murdered weak prisoners left behind after the Blechhammer evacuation and the bodies were thrown into the pit and burned. At Tschechowitz-Vacuum a ten-member OT unit ordered prisoners to dig a burial pit and SS men then murdered about 100 sick prisoners left in the subcamp following the evacuation of inmates who had been judged fit enough to leave.

While Schneider's colleagues gave their testimony of his actions at the time of mass shootings by task-force squads, he gave prosecutors his own version of the various events. In a statement on 6 February 1961, he said he was on home leave at the time of the first mass shooting in 1942. At the time of the second in 1943, he took no part in the shootings, carried out by Latvian and German Security Service forces, and only assembled Jews who had escaped the ghetto and hidden in a nearby OT building. After the initial alarm, the police or members of his staff in the OT office had alerted the SS Security Service, not him. Regarding the shooting weeks later of the young Jewish man, who was an escapee, he said this was not carried out by him but by a German lieutenant after the youth had been judged to be a partisan. Schneider made no mention of the shooting of the Jewish boy in the marketplace in his post-war statements. However, an OT man called Peter Schmitz, who had been in Radoskowice and whom investigators viewed as a possible suspect himself, said Schneider's accuser, Elisabeth Gareis, had not been in the town at the relevant time. In 1967 the murder investigation was closed following Schneider's death.

Schneider had come close to living out his post-war life in peace until the North Rhine-Westphalia prosecutors caught up with him. Regardless of the result of any trial which might have been held if he had lived, the case uncovered a wealth of detail about Schneider. He was born on 2 October 1905 in Euskirchen, about 30 kilometres southwest of Cologne. Too young to have served in the First World War, he belonged to a generation susceptible to the appeal of Nazism. Like others, his passage into adulthood included the experiences of their nation's military defeat, rampant inflation and the mass unemployment of 1929–33. This was a 'lost' generation brought up in a culture of violence and subjected to a crescendo of racist propaganda by the government after 1933, when Hitler took power.

After finishing his education, Schneider worked in banking and the commercial sector until 1934, when he switched to train as a surveyor. He was employed by various state concerns, including Germany's motorway and railway networks. Schneider joined the Nazi Party in 1933 and became a member of the SS in February the same year. He rose to the rank of Unterscharführer, but was expelled from the SS on 18 October 1938 for embezzlement. He was also expelled from the Nazi Party. Schneider said he was

expelled from the party in 1938, but a document confirming this, issued by the Nazi Party in Köln-Aachen, was dated 30 January 1942. Schneider could not explain the discrepancy. In 1940 he started with the Rom firm as a land surveyor and construction supervisor. In November that year he was among twenty-five Rom employees who were kitted out with uniforms at the OT headquarters in Berlin. He received the rank of OT-Haupttruppführer before beginning the assignment in Radoskowice. An OT unit led by OT-Haupttruppführer Ruminski was already operating in the town, and after two months Schneider took over from him. His direct OT superior was building surveyor Kleinecke, and his own deputy was named Bungart. Schneider stayed for the most part in Radoskowice until the end of 1943, when he was deployed to southern France. After the war ended, he spent five months being interrogated in the custody of the Americans before returning to Cologne.

What is remarkable about Schneider's curriculum vitae compared to other OT staff of his rank is his expulsion from the Nazi Party and SS. Also noteworthy is his criminal record, which he extended after the war. He was convicted on several occasions between 1952 and 1954 for fraud and embezzlement, a fact he denied before West German investigators challenged him. Similarly, most of his colleagues said the extreme violence and brutality rooted in Schneider's racism set him apart. Other OT staff, both above and below his rank, singled him out as more radical than them in his anti-Semitism and resulting violence, which they alleged went as far as murder. Schneider shouted abuse at Jews, kicking them in the street, and carried a heavy whip with which to beat his victims. 'Whenever Schneider had been drinking, he went into the ghetto and struck Jews with a heavy dog whip,' said OT truck driver Josef Löhrer. 'Even though I was not there when he struck out, there should still be no doubt, because I heard the terrible cries and then saw Schneider come out of the ghetto with his whip. I myself witnessed this twice.' Peter Fröbus, a steamroller operator with Rom, was particularly pointed in his condemnation of Schneider, declaring him to be 'Satan in human form':

Schneider was a brutal man. He had no consideration for anyone. He was terribly heavy-handed and brutal with us and especially with the Jews. Whenever Jews had to approach, he kicked them. It didn't matter to him where he kicked. He simply kicked them in the stomach and other sensitive parts of the body.

Schneider's OT subordinates described him as having close contacts with officers of the SS Security Service, the SD, under whose leadership the main task-force killing squads were formed. Schneider himself told investigators he had been in frequent touch

with an SD-Führer named Grave, who was based in Vileyka but often made trips to the ghetto in Radoskowice with Latvian SS men.

Shortage of labour and attacks by partisans seriously affected OT work across the region and Schneider's close contacts with the SS Security Service at their Vileyka base ensured he and his subordinates became involved in armed paramilitary operations. Schneider himself took part in 'hunts' by armoured units, so-called Jagdkommandos, for Jewish and other local workers for OT jobs, or on actions against partisans. This close cooperation between the OT and the SS Security Service in Radoskowice was no doubt influenced by Schneider's character and choice of companions, but he was not the only OT member to take part.

OT man Johannes Horn said he was sent to Radoskowice in late 1941, where he was ordered to join an armed unit sent to Bolbow where five OT staff had been killed by partisans. He believed Schneider had instructed the SS Security Service in Vileyka to take him with them. About twenty or thirty people were in the truck sent to the small locality, including members of the SS Security Service and volunteer Eastern Europeans known as Hilfswillige, who worked for the Germans. Horn described the situation.

I remember very well that three people had been badly injured, including one who had had a swastika cut into his forehead with a knife. The Hilfswillige, or the SD members from the base in Wileyka, rounded up all the residents of the small locality and later drove them in front of a truck to Radowskowicze. There were about 50–70 people, women, men and children. They were then put in a cellar underneath the quarters of the Hilfswillige.

When the families were later taken to Vileyka, Horn was told to accompany them, because he had the papers of the dead OT members and was required to act as a witness. He described meeting Schneider's contact, Grave, in the SS Security Service's regional headquarters:

When we were led into a room by Herr Grave ... I could see into a neighbouring room. I saw a woman standing there naked and a Latvian was beating her. We were also in a garage, Russian men were standing there with hands raised. Their faces were smeared with blood and looked like mere lumps of flesh. Obviously, it was a matter of the interrogation methods of the time.

Horn said that before he returned to Radoskowice he heard shots, and was certain most of the prisoners were killed.

Horn's conviction that it was Schneider who had contacted the SS Security Service to ensure he was included in the reprisal sortie has echoes elsewhere in witness testimony. It seemed Schneider had a habit of putting his men close to the action, perhaps to involve them in the violence against Jews and the local population in which he chose to participate. This was reflected in accounts given by Abenstein, Frantzen and Gareis; the latter said she was very well aware that OT staff joined retaliatory raids against the local population after attacks by partisans.

Schneider's actions went far beyond the remit of an OT construction chief overseeing Jewish and other slave labourers requiring technical supervision. But although his behaviour attracted the attention of his superiors, they apparently took no effective action to stop him. Gareis stated that a senior OT manager in Minsk, a chief building surveyor named Hartwig, felt Schneider was acting well beyond his remit. Gareis said Hartwig told her he opposed the actions being taken against Jews and the local population. 'Hartwig told me at the time that our people, meaning Schneider above all, should confine themselves to our task of building roads. He couldn't stand it whenever OT people took part in the pursuit of partisans.'

In addition to Hartwig's reported concerns about Schneider's tendency to stray outside his duties as an OT construction chief, the head of the Rom firm seemed to have similar worries. Josef Peter Rom said he clashed with Schneider on many occasions over this issue, apparently to no avail. 'Of Wienand [sic] Schneider, I can only say that I often had arguments over his behaviour and his dealings, above all, with the Sicherheitsdienst [SS Security Service].' Rom said his firm was enlisted into the OT early in the war as an OT unit, and deployed to around ten sites at various locations in Europe. Because he only visited his firm's various sites across Europe for a few days now and then, he had limited time to influence the OT-Haupttruppführer. A total of 5,000 to 6,000 workers, mostly foreign labourers supplied by the OT, laboured on the various projects he oversaw.

Both Rom and OT managers, therefore, professed themselves powerless to hold Schneider in check. Among the OT's middle ranks, Haupttruppführer Schneider seems to have used to the full the extensive freedom of action he was afforded. His anti-Semitic views were extreme, but his enthusiasm for military adventure, taking part in missions in armoured vehicles to round up Jewish and other labourers, was another motive. He acknowledged that, on one such mission, the Jew he was alleged to have murdered had been tied to a tree. In descriptions of his actions, Schneider recounted how he, 'by chance', managed to lead his OT men to escape from an attack that wiped out the military escort of three 21-tonne tanks and four armoured cars provided to

protect the labour force. His entire OT squad emerged safely from the attack. On another occasion he brought back the mutilated bodies of German soldiers whose infantry unit, which he could not fully identify, had been wiped out.

Apart from pride in military forays, Schneider's propensity for violence, drunkenness and bullying is reflected in descriptions of him by just about all witnesses. These aspects of his character are important in trying to understand what motivated him. Frantzen says his OT superior's reputation was so bad that nothing could be put past him. He was a habitual drunkard and reputed to engage in heavy drinking sessions with SS Security Service officers. Körtgen viewed him as a braggart and a careerist. Since many of the OT staff came from the Rom firm, some knew each other before their deployment to occupied Soviet territory. Peter Rollmann, who worked for the company before the war, remembered Schneider as a boastful character. Ferdinand Wolf, a foreman for Rom, said Schneider was 'very unpopular' while in Radoskowice, with 'a strange way of dealing with his people' and spending a great deal of time with the Security Service. Erwin Jehlen, who did accounting work in the OT office, remembered Schneider as a 'very overbearing' man and a drunkard who was disliked by his staff and his fellow accountant, Gareis, considered Schneider had complete power over his subordinates.

It is clear from these descriptions of Schneider that he did not fit the profile of a Nazi perpetrator who simply 'followed orders'. On the contrary, all the evidence pointed to him defying regulations and breaching the limitations of his brief as a local OT construction chief. He took part in armed operations to round up workers and against partisans, seemingly able to act at will in the area where he commanded OT operations. His exposure to jingoistic home-front propaganda during the First World War, portraying the trenches as a gallant, masculine adventure, may explain why he participated so enthusiastically in military exploits involving his Security Service contacts. However, not only did he take part himself but he also included his OT subordinates in these activities, convincing some of them he was placing them on purpose at scenes of mass murder and acts of violence.

In seeking to discover other motives for Schneider's actions, it is worth looking at how his individual case fits into other categories chosen by researchers into Nazi perpetrators. One fact about Schneider was that he ranked far below the Nazi Party and SS elite who were most associated with war crimes of the Third Reich. Like so many SS men and some OT staff, action against Schneider was taken under the Third Reich's legal system and did not involve prosecution on charges relating to murder or war crimes. Allegations against him were not linked to his maltreatment of slave labourers

or accusations that he shot Jews and this skewed sense of morality and justice in the Nazi era was mirrored in the case already mentioned of OT foreman Meisslein in Ukraine.

Nazi perpetrators were portrayed in the initial post-war period as ‘monsters’, but more recent research has added to unsettling evidence that the extremes of Nazi-era violence did not spring simply from pathological personalities. Even in 1946, psychological examination of the major defendants at Nuremberg pointed to this conclusion. When Speer stood trial with Göring, Rudolf Hess and other leading Nazis before the tribunal, the accused had undergone careful psychiatric observation and completed intelligence and other tests. One of these was the Rorschach test, requiring interpretation of a series of symmetrical inkblots varying in shape and colour. Douglas Kelley, a psychiatrist appointed to the Nuremberg trials, said he wanted to arrive at ‘the clearest possible picture of these individuals, the greatest group of criminals the human race has ever known’. He suffered a remarkable setback when ten Rorschach experts, mindful of public expectations, failed to submit their evaluations of data collected from the Nazi defendants. It was left to Kelley to declare publicly what had actually been discovered about those accused at Nuremberg: ‘From our findings we must conclude not only that such personalities are not unique or insane but also that they could be duplicated in any country of the world today.’

Molly Harrower, one of the ten experts to whom the verbatim Rorschach records were sent in 1946, wrote thirty years later of her misgivings at the time. She said she and colleagues had implicitly believed in 1946 that the Rorschach tests on the Nazi defendants ‘would reveal … a uniform personality structure of a particularly repellent kind’. Her own follow-up tests, using some of the Nazi defendants’ Rorschach data, provided evidence in 1976 to show how misguided this view had been. Harrower concluded: ‘It is an over-simplified position to look for an underlying common denominator in the Rorschach records of the Nazi prisoners.’

The tendency to demonise the mass murderers of Hitler’s regime in the post-war years became less widespread in the 1960s after the Adolf Eichmann trial. Philosopher Hannah Arendt, in her reflections on the Eichmann proceedings, wrote of the ‘banality of evil’ to describe an amoral bureaucrat carrying out orders in a genocidal programme. Since then, historians have shifted their focus. In groundbreaking research from the 1990s, they moved away from the idea of individuals acting as automata to implement the commands of superiors, instead revealing a broad spectrum of perpetrators who, far from unthinkingly carrying out orders, acted independently and were motivated by their own convictions. As one research team pointed out: ‘For this reason, the true horror of

Eichmann and his ilk is not that they were unaware they were doing wrong. On the contrary, it is that they *really believed* that what they were doing was right.'

This attitude was prevalent among SS administrators, who were performing similar tasks to OT managers across Europe in organising slave labour. OT regional managers throughout Europe possessed considerable authority, as well as room for independent action within their spheres of operation. With the OT's partial withdrawal into the Reich in the final year of the war, the chiefs of the organisation's newly created administrative regions accrued still more powers. In the same way as the SS, these senior and lower-level managers were authorised to take significant decisions on their own initiative. There is much in OT documents to support the view that staff believed what they were doing was justified.

Schneider operated outside the German concentration-camp system, but about 900 km to the north of where he was deployed with the Rom firm, more German surveyors, engineers and mining specialists were working in a newly constructed concentration camp called Vaivara, situated in the Baltic territory of Estonia. They were looking for oil and the OT was at the heart of the operation.

## 14

# BALTIC OIL

In the autumn of 1943 the SS set up a concentration camp in Estonia, where one of the world's richest sources of shale oil had been tapped for the past three years by the OT and a German company, Baltische Öl GmbH (Baltöl). After the defeat at Stalingrad earlier in 1943, Germany was even more desperate for oil to maintain its war effort. The Nazis decided to use the mostly Jewish prisoners in the new Vaivara concentration camp, as well as Soviet prisoners of war, to extract vital fuel faster. Most of the prisoners sent in the summer and autumn of 1943 to Vaivara, which held about 9,000 prisoners by November and existed for about a year, were Jews from the Lithuanian ghettos of Wilna (Vilnius) and Kauen (Kaunas). The prisoners lived and worked in infernal conditions:

During the night our hair froze on to the walls ... I remember that the sick and weak who were unable to march out in the morning to work were no longer there in the evening. I suppose they had been killed.

This was Eta Weismann's description of how she and other prisoners endured the harsh winter in makeshift shelters after the Vaivara concentration camp was set up in September that year. Weismann, then aged eighteen, was being held in the Vaivara subcamp of Ereda, which was initially commanded by a member of the OT. She had been deported there from the ghetto in her birthplace of Wilna. Ereda had an upper and lower section, where Weismann was held, and conditions were especially primitive. Lower Ereda had been set up on swampy land and it was where children and those judged unfit to work were sent. The regime was characteristically cruel. Bernard Zalkindson, a prisoner sent to Ereda in September 1943, said: 'The camp leader was a Todt man who stole a lot while the Jews were starving. He divided a loaf of bread among six persons ... A tiny bit of fat and marmalade. All of them were very hungry.'

The shale oil in Nazi-occupied Estonia was especially valued by Hitler as he fretted about the vulnerability of Romanian oilfields to Allied air strikes and the failure to seize those in the Caucasus. Total reserves of Estonian shale oil were at that time estimated at about 5 billion tonnes. Since contemporary methods allowed for 20 per cent extraction of oil from excavated shale, that represented a potential source of 1 billion tonnes of oil. Baltöl had been set up for the exploitation of Estonian oil shale in 1941 and the OT was in charge of the technical side of the necessary construction work. Baltöl and the OT had initially used mostly Soviet prisoners of war as slave labour, but the Wehrmacht switched them increasingly to building fortifications, so Vaivara's Jewish inmates were exploited instead.

The OT supervised Vaivara's prisoners performing extreme hard labour, while the SS regularly carried out selections of the sick to be sent from the concentration camp for extermination and resorted to mass killings of even those deemed to be able-bodied in the final evacuation. One atrocity took place on 19 September 1944, when SS guards forced the inmates of another Vaivara satellite, Klooga camp – some 2,000 men and women – onto the roll-call square before taking them off in groups. Bursts of machine-gun fire were heard from the nearby forest. Most of the prisoners were slaughtered. Red Army soldiers reached Klooga days later and found little more than a hundred survivors. Deaths among prisoners in Vaivara from causes other than SS mass shootings were also high, with 1,506 overall between October 1943 and June 1944, meaning more than a sixth of inmates died of illness, individual maltreatment and targeted killing of the sick.

The OT and a special navy unit produced cement-clad mines at Klooga and this resulted in a tussle with the SS, who wanted land there for a training ground. The navy protested strongly over any such handover of land, stating in a letter on 8 August 1944 that the OT was producing vital equipment for the military and output should not be jeopardised. Other operations at the subcamp included construction projects and a senior OT construction leader named Wein oversaw 1,800 Jews among a 2,000-strong workforce. Wein himself said his operation, built up over two years, had involved an 'exceptionally large' investment in equipment and labour. Workers produced vital supplies for the army and navy, operating a cement works, sawmill, shoe factory and a big carpentry workshop.

Despite this example of squabbling between the various German occupying forces, ties between them, including the SS and OT, were necessarily tight-knit. This was illustrated in a highly unusual way as a result of a sex scandal involving an SS commandant at Ereda, whose OT friends tried to help him escape punishment. Heinz

Drosihn became involved in a love affair with a Jewish prisoner called Inge, who was among a group of Germans and Czechs transferred to the camp from Reval in mid-December 1943. The 35-year-old SS officer assigned Inge, a Czech of about sixteen or seventeen, to be a cleaner in his barracks and he fell in love with her. An employee of a German mining firm working for the OT in Ereda said that Drosihn's relationship with Inge had caused the Ereda commandant to change his outlook and treat Jews better. Other witnesses said Drosihn passed through the prisoners' barracks with Inge, toasting the inmates' health on New Year's Eve at the end of 1943 and providing them with extra food. He wished them Happy New Year and expressed the hope that they would be free. When Drosihn's relationship with Inge came to the attention of his SS superiors in early 1944, he asked OT staff to help him escape, for he must have known the penalty for his forbidden liaison with a Jew was death. His OT friends helped him flee, and managed to hide him for about three days initially before arranging for him to continue to make his getaway. About three weeks later, though, they heard that the pair were dead. Both Drosihn and Inge either committed suicide or were shot dead while trying to escape.

Desperate to avoid a repeat of the scandal, the camp SS leadership took steps such as ordering staff to be quartered outside the camp. Ereda's new commandant, Helmut Schnabel, was a brutal sadist whose post-war trial, resulting in a life sentence for murder, yielded some of the details from witnesses of his predecessor's demise. Schnabel routinely beat prisoners savagely and encouraged such violence. One camp inmate, Philipp Alwin, who was deported from Wilna ghetto to Ereda camp with his two sons, said:

During our work, we were often beaten by a member of the Org. Todt, called Zimmermann, with his belt, planks of wood or clubs. Since he had treated us well before, I asked him one day why he now beat us. Upon which he answered me that he himself was pained by it, but he was following an order of [SS camp commandant Helmut] Schnabel's.

Franz Leichter, an OT employee with a German firm based at Ereda who gave some of the details of OT assistance to Drosihn in his escape bid, said workers like himself were separated from the Jewish labour camp by barbed wire. He described the enclosure for those imprisoned before its evacuation:

The conditions in the camp were atrocious. There was neither clothing nor means of heating; the accommodation was also extraordinarily primitive; there were not even blankets. The clothes consisted merely of rags. Nevertheless, whether man or

woman, the people were woken every day at 4 a.m. and sent to work no matter what the weather.

Leichter said camp inmates laboured mainly either doing woodwork or in sawmills, with the OT and with staff of his mining firm, Dailmann. Severe punishment beatings by SS officers on the roll-call square were frequent. Two or three deaths from various causes occurred daily. ‘The food consisted basically of watery soups and was without doubt completely insufficient.’

SS and OT operations were closely interwoven in Vaivara, so SS barbarities were played out before OT staff at close quarters. Leichter saw SS men carrying out the mass killing of Jews in July 1944 before Ereda was closed. His firm’s main task at the camp had been to build shafts to mine the oil shale, and he described what he and his colleagues witnessed:

From the shaft tower we now saw from a distance of about 40–50 metres that the Jews were led up to the pits in groups, about 100–150 at a time. They thus stood in rows behind one another and the Jews finding themselves at the earth ridge had to kneel down and were killed by three SS people firing pistol shots to the neck, and pushed into the flames in the pit...

Describing another atrocity, Alwin, the Ereda camp inmate, told how Soviet prisoners were murdered in a nearby camp set ablaze in autumn 1944:

Petrol was poured around a prison camp near Ereda and it was burned down. The Russian prisoners staying there were prevented by machine-gun fire from leaving the burning camp to reach safety. The next day, prisoners from Ereda, including myself, were directed to bury the dead.

Apart from Ereda, OT staff acted as commandants in a few camps, but this was mostly for short periods. Vaivara’s Jõhvi subcamp was exceptional in that it was controlled throughout by an OT commandant, but it was relatively small. Jõhvi was an important centre for OT and Baltöl operations, and was not incorporated into the Vaivara complex when the first 201 prisoners arrived there in October 1943. The OT provided guards and Jõhvi never had an SS officer in charge; the OT also briefly controlled the subcamps of Auvere and Vivikonna and initially controlled Vaivara subcamp, in the area where the SS command for the entire Vaivara concentration camp network also had its separate quarters. A former inmate of the Vaivara subcamp, Zelik Gurwicz, recalls

that when he arrived there in summer 1943, the commandant was a member of the OT, ‘a fat man who wore a leather jacket’. Once the SS took over, the first commandant was Kurt Pannicke, followed by Helmut Schnabel, who, like several other SS officers, headed various subcamps in the Vaivara complex in turn, including Ereda. Gurwicz described an incident involving Pannicke which clearly revealed his fear not just of the SS, but also the OT:

I had to steal leather for Pannicke from the OT and make boots for his girlfriends and three pairs of boots for him. When I refused the task of stealing leather from the OT because I was afraid I would be shot, Pannicke said: ‘That doesn’t matter. Whether the OT shoots you now, or whether I shoot you later is of no importance.’

Baruch Goldstein, a Warsaw-born prisoner working in Jõhvi subcamp to build a military hospital, said he was overseen by various uniformed OT-Meister, mostly from Austria, who beat both Jews and Slavs:

One of the Hauptmeister was of small stature, crooked, rather hunchbacked figure. Some of them treated us fairly well. Most, however, beat the prisoners while they worked. They were brutal people and it must be emphasised here, too, that they not only hit [Jewish] prisoners but also Russian prisoners of war who worked together with us.

Goldstein said the OT engineer in charge was a ‘reasonable’ man. ‘The “hunchback”, on the other hand, was a very bad man.’

OT staff member Otto Schmid worked in Vaivara in summer 1943. The southern German construction firm of Trucksäss that he worked for, based in Neu-Ulm on the River Danube, had been contracted by the OT to work in Estonia. Schmid described OT duties as guards for slave labourers in Vaivara:

We had to build a large barracks camp there, near an oil shale works named Kiviöli. We were billeted in the camp for Jews in Vaivara, near the station. We of the OT were only assigned to guard the Jewish camp in Vaivara. The camp for Jews guarded by us in Vaivara held about 250 Jews. We had brought these Jews every day to the oil shale works at Kiviöli.

He said the distance from Vaivara to Kiviöli was three kilometres, and the Jews were marked with a Star of David. ‘The guarding of the Jews during the transport, or march,

from Vaivara to Kiviöli was only done by OT men, as well as the supervision at the work site. As soon as we had brought the Jews back to the camp, Estonian soldiers, who wore field-grey uniforms, took over custody.' Schmid was also assigned to Jõhvi camp, where OT personnel guarded a camp for Jews and Russians, whom they took to and from the work site and oversaw during construction of a big military hospital. Otto Hefele said he worked as a head guard when he was sent by the OT in early 1942 to Palemonas, near Kauen in Lithuania. There were about 300 Jewish men and women in the workforce and 'many ... used to run away from work'. Like Schmid, he then acted as a guard at Jõhvi.

When not on guard duty, OT personnel cooperated with the SS in their more usual role of work-site overseers of male and female Jewish workers at Vaivara. Paul Hanke was sent as an OT staff member to Vaivara's main oil-shale mining camp of Kiviöli in winter 1942. His quarters were in an OT camp across the road from a large camp for Jewish prisoners where men, women and children were all held together:

I had a work detail of Jews. This 'Kommando' consisted of 400 men and 200 women. During the work period they were led to work by ten OT foremen. They were guarded at work by twenty Estonian policemen, who were under the SS. The work detail was again also employed cutting wood.

This arrangement of the OT collecting prisoners from camps and supervising them at work sites while the SS stood guard was also in place at Palemonas camp. Hanke's Berlin engineering firm, Heinrich Köhler, had been contracted by the OT and he mostly oversaw Jewish and civilian workers felling trees and producing railway sleepers. When Hanke switched from Heinrich Köhler to Trucksäss, he supervised 200 Jewish women working under the OT in a gravel pit near Wilna.

Roma were also among the OT's slave labour workforce scattered across Europe. Konstantins Čubrevičs, the youngest of ten children in a Roma family from Latvia, was just sixteen when he was sent to Jõhvi, and remembers a life of hunger, cold and bare survival that led him to the point of planning to commit suicide by crushing himself between railway wagons. But a friend pulled him back. 'I just cried, he pulled me away from there, otherwise ... I would have killed myself.'

Before deployment in occupied Europe for the OT, firms like Trucksäss and Heinrich Köhler sent their employees to distribution points, such as Berlin or Munich, where they received OT uniforms, equipment and an OT rank. Employees included civil engineers, bricklayers, pitshaft specialists and excavator operators who were deployed in

Lithuania and in Estonia. Many Trucksäss employees were incorporated into the OT in 1941–2 under the contract their firm signed with the OT. They were summoned to Munich, where they were formally enrolled and issued with work clothes. They were joined there by staff from Austrian firms before travelling by train to their assignments in the German-occupied east.

By summer 1944 Vaivara was under threat of being overrun by the Red Army and evacuation was becoming urgent. Even so, Hitler considered the Baltic shale-oil project so important that he blocked the withdrawal of 450 Jews and other workers from Estonia in August of that year. A ship with the Jews aboard had been ready to depart from the port of Reval, which in fact did not fall to Soviet troops until later the following month.

After the Sixth Army's defeat at Stalingrad, in early 1943 Hitler ordered the OT to present plans for an 'East Wall' defensive line to block a Red Army advance. Speer asked Hitler to designate separate construction sections for the OT and army engineers, to avoid conflicts over areas of responsibility. Hitler hoped the East Wall could be built within the period of Russia's seven frost-free months. In October he ordered that the northern section of the wall as far down as Minsk be tackled, and the OT's Russia-North group under Professor Giesler be held ready to undertake the task. Taking account of the shale-oil deposits in Estonia being exploited by the OT and Baltöl, he directed that the northern section of the East Wall take advantage of natural defences in the region, so it ran west of the Narva river, down alongside Lake Peipus and on to Pleskau. Work was begun in autumn 1943 on the development of a defence line 15 kilometres wide and 400 kilometres long between Lake Peipus and the Gulf of Finland, the so-called 'Panther Position'. By late autumn, however, advancing Red Army troops were already holding bridgeheads on the west bank of the Dnieper.

When the German pull-out from the Baltics did come, a slave-labour project called 'Desert' (Wüste) was launched within Germany to extract shale oil on a site in Württemberg and the OT was again involved. Some of the prisoners in the Desert camp network, as well as the guards who had tormented them, came from Vaivara. Seven subcamps of Natzweiler concentration camp came under the scheme on the fringes of the Swabian Alps; Dautmergen was the largest of a network that also included Bisingen. But whereas the Estonian shale oil was of very high quality, the deposits in Württemberg were mediocre: production in Estonia reached 3,585 tonnes in May 1944, but output from the Desert camps in Württemberg was never significant. The head of the SS Economic and Administrative Head Office, Oswald Pohl, who visited the Desert

camps in late 1944 and established that no early flow of oil could be expected, blamed the OT for the failure.

An estimated 2,000 to 3,000 OT personnel worked on the Desert scheme. The SS commandant for its two biggest camps, Hauptsturmführer Franz Hofmann, explained that he ‘just wanted to get rid of the sick prisoners from Bisingen and Dautmergen’. One survivor, Jacek Zielińiewicz, described conditions in a block specially designated for the sick in Dautmergen camp, the largest in Desert:

People stayed there who couldn’t even go to work. They were the convalescents, some after a stay in the so-called hospital. In the middle, there was a stove. A big, cast-iron stove for heating. The people came down from the pallet-beds and gathered around the stove. They were convinced that it would get warmer round the stove. That it was not producing heat was unimportant. They didn’t have the strength to search for lice after taking their shirts off. They just took them off and shook out the bugs. The big things fell down there, believe me, I was there and I saw them. The floor was moving. The floor was really moving. Such conditions reigned there.

Jacek was a Polish former inmate of both Auschwitz and Dautmergen. Those working in winter possessed nothing more than summer clothes and he rated Dautmergen worse even than Auschwitz after being sent there aged eighteen; he said he made the comparison ‘in terms of the extent of evil’, describing having to go barefoot until he was able to acquire wooden clogs from an inmate who had died. Jacek described life for the vast majority in Dautmergen as ‘unadulterated horror’, but acknowledged he had ‘a hell of a lot of luck’. After arriving from Auschwitz in August 1944 he managed to get a job under a Polish prisoner doctor in the camp sick bay, where conditions were better. When an SS officer put him back on hard-labour duties, he once more gained access to privileges through being chosen to work in the SS quarters, where he said a middle-aged SS-Oberscharführer gave him extra food.

The main tasks for OT staff working in Dautmergen and other camps in the Desert complex included building prisoner accommodation, cooperating with the SS on site and organising firms and labour to do the work. In Bisingen the OT provided the inmates’ meagre rations, which were further reduced by the SS siphoning off food for their own use, and were also responsible for the prisoners’ inadequate accommodation. As for physical violence, beatings of prisoners at the hands of the SS, OT, firm employees and ‘Kapos’ – prisoners selected to act as supervisors of other inmates

under the command of their German masters – were routine. Kapos carried out functions such as supervising labour details.

For all the brutality displayed by OT and SS personnel, production of shale oil was insignificant at Bisingen, and it had to be extracted in a process far more laborious than was needed for the shale deposits with higher oil content in Estonia. The oil produced in the Desert programme was also useless for aircraft engines without further refining. Despite this, Bisingen survivor Alfred Korn told how thousands of prisoners under OT and SS overseers were driven mercilessly to the bitter end. He described how a pipe from the shale-oil plant to a cistern at the station would deliver just one drop of oil about every five minutes, underlining the pointlessness of the entire Desert project:

... In any case, thousands of prisoners had worked so that every five minutes a drop dripped, and then nothing for five minutes and then again, drip. The drop went into the cistern and that was the extent of production of the shale oil plant in Bisingen.

The wider problem of the lack of fuel meant huge German resources continued to be devoted to attempts to solve it. Up to 350,000 labourers worked overall on operations to repair or relocate fuel refineries underground under the so-called Geilenberg programme, named after a senior official in the Armaments Ministry. Because the OT had many more skilled workers than were available to SS engineer Hans Kammler's staff and had greater experience with comparable projects, the organisation was used for many of the Geilenberg schemes, of which Desert was one. Attitudes of the SS and OT towards their workers, though, appeared similar. 'In the end, the OT-Bauleiter (construction leaders), like the SS, showed scarcely any interest in keeping up the working strength of their forced labourers from the concentration camps,' historian Jens-Christian Wagner wrote.

In camps in the region of the subterranean Dora network run by Kammler in the Harz Mountains, prisoners worked under the OT on three projects outside the SS engineer's direct control. The Dachs IV project for an underground oil refinery near Osterode was part of the Geilenberg programme. A workforce was assembled of German civilian employees, several thousand foreign civilian workers and prisoners of war, and several hundred German and Czech 'half-Jews' and 'jüdisch Versippte' (Aryan partners married to Jews). Hundreds of concentration-camp prisoners from Buchenwald and Dora were also enlisted. Although it was clear the work could not be completed in time, the OT drove workers right to the end. When the SS withdrew its concentration-

camp prisoners, the OT persisted with plans to deploy a further 2,600 miners and skilled workers.

The two other projects run by the OT were called Turmalin and Porphy, and were sited near Blankenburg on the northern edge of the Harz Mountains. Turmalin produced instruments which may have been for A-4 rockets, but the project was never finished. Construction work at the start of February 1945 was performed by around 400 mostly Jewish concentration-camp prisoners held at a subcamp near the work site and 300 foreign workers, including 200 Italian convicts for some of the time. Labour shortages at Turmalin could only really be explained by rivalry between the OT and Kammler's staff. Porphy also suffered labour shortages; the project's purpose may have been the relocation underground of facilities to produce aircraft and tank parts, but it was never completed. Its subcamp held about 500 mostly Belgian inmates, while 400 German and foreign civilian workers, as well as some Jewish labourers, were also assigned to Porphy.

While Hitler gave top priority to obtaining oil from Estonia, he also set great store on finding fuel alternatives. One route to German self-sufficiency was synthetic substitutes for fuel and other key imported commodities such as rubber. If raw materials to drive the war economy were now more difficult to obtain abroad, they should be made at home. It was fitting that the Estonia scheme came within the sphere of Carl Krauch, Germany's chemical industry supremo and chief executive of the chemical company IG Farben. Scientists closely associated with this industrial giant had already managed a spectacular breakthrough enabling Germany to produce explosives during the First World War without the need for an otherwise vital import, saltpetre, rendering naval blockades of Germany to stop such supplies ineffective. The discovery of a process to transform abundant German coal into petrol followed. Investment in making synthetic rubber led to work starting at Auschwitz in 1941 on an IG Farben plant for its manufacture.

The OT was deeply involved in Krauch's projects, using slave labour from Auschwitz and other concentration camps. Fritz Todt took steps as early as August 1939 to supply 13,000 workers for 100 construction projects for what was called the 'Krauch Plan'. By March 1942, just after Speer succeeded Todt, the OT was planning its own building administration in Auschwitz in parallel with IG Farben management, cooperating with the firm on labour allocation and quotas for the supply of materials. The OT was to be assigned construction jobs, including the works' railway station, waterworks and parts of a Reich-owned armaments plant at Auschwitz. In an illustration of how closely the OT was integrated into operations at Auschwitz, Otto

Ambros, who managed IG Farben's Auschwitz operations, placed great importance on the need to maintain contact with the OT to ensure the supply of foreign workers. By July 1943 IG Farben managers needed 3,500 more workers, and Speer, in an initial response, promised 200 Czechs. The OT was integrated into the administrative and accounting system with IG Farben, whose eight compounds on its Auschwitz site included the Monowitz concentration camp. Monowitz was initially designed to produce synthetic rubber, but by October 1943 was producing methanol, vital for aircraft fuel and in the manufacture of explosives. Around 25,000 of the 35,000 concentration camp prisoners sent to Monowitz died.

Aviation fuel was a top priority to keep German warplanes in the skies and subterranean factories were required as well to manufacture the aircraft. It was an order by Hitler for the OT to build two such factories which drew Speer into a dangerous plot against him in 1944. This was a time when Speer's political future hung in the balance.

# **ENDGAME**

# 15

## SPEER ENSNARED

After a morale-boosting trip to OT units over Christmas 1943, Speer fell ill. Camping in freezing temperatures in Lapland had been part of his programme during a trip to entertain troops and OT staff, with renowned violinist Siegfried Borries and Kalanag the magician. But spending the night in a reindeer-skin sleeping bag had reactivated an old knee injury which put Speer in hospital. This made him easy prey to intrigues swirling around Berlin. Speer was vulnerable and Martin Bormann and Göring, once Hitler's unchallenged deputy, moved to undermine him, leading to one of Nazi Germany's most dramatic wartime political crises, in which Speer threatened to resign. The drama pivoted around the OT and Speer's deputy in the organisation, Xaver Dorsch: Hitler commissioned Dorsch directly to build six underground factories for jet-fighter planes, enraging the incapacitated Speer and nearly bringing about his downfall.

It was a dramatic illustration of how Nazi institutions jostled for power. Göring and Bormann's plotting also showed how Speer, formidable Armaments Minister that he was, could ill afford to drop his guard in matters regarding the OT. Both Göring and Bormann had become jealous that Speer had so obviously won Hitler's favour and seized their chance when their rival's illness physically removed him from the political action. Göring, in particular, was smarting not only from Speer's political victories over him but also from a more general loss of prestige due to a devastating Allied bombing campaign his Luftwaffe had failed to prevent. Both plotters hoped to exploit the weaknesses of a minister who depended so heavily on Hitler's patronage. Bormann had gathered information on Speer's long-standing collaborators, filing away details on their 'anti-party' attitudes that could be used to discredit him. This 'evidence' of Speer's closest confidants straying from the official Nazi line was fed to Bormann repeatedly by a very well-placed informant: Xaver Dorsch.

After he learned of their existence, Speer managed to have the documents extracted from a sealed filing cabinet by one of his supporters, who unscrewed the back panel. The documents were then sent to Speer at Hohenlychen hospital, about 100 kilometres north of Berlin, where he was being treated. When he discovered that Dorsch, at Bormann's instigation, had spoken to Hitler of 'worries' Speer's ministry was causing him and the OT, Speer wrote a rambling, agitated note to the Führer, telling him about the machinations of a 'camarilla', or group of scheming advisers, around him, and Dorsch's 'breach of trust'. Reflecting the depth of his anger and perhaps his own isolation and insecurity in hospital, Speer insisted it was necessary to impose his authority. One official in his ministry, Todt's former personal assistant Konrad Haasemann, should be sent to a concentration camp, he wrote, while Dorsch should be sacked.

Hitler delayed any response and Speer's health deteriorated. His doctor was Himmler's favourite SS physician, Professor Karl Gebhardt, who carried out experiments on inmates of Ravensbrück concentration camp. After the war, when he was anxious to distance himself from the SS, Speer claimed that he narrowly escaped being murdered in Hohenlychen because Himmler wanted him out of the way. Given the close cooperation between Himmler and Speer before and after the Armaments Minister's stay in Hohenlychen, as well as the ease with which Gebhardt could have dispatched his patient in a 'natural' death if Himmler had really desired it, this is highly implausible. In any event, Speer recovered and was moved to a castle near Merano to convalesce.

While Speer was recuperating, Göring used Dorsch in his plot, inviting the deputy head of the OT to accompany him to conferences with Hitler as an engineering expert. At such a conference in mid-April 1944, Hitler expressed enthusiasm for Dorsch's plan to construct 'bomb-proof' underground bunkers to manufacture fighter planes, and was assured by the OT engineer that it would be feasible to build them within six months. Hitler told Dorsch only the OT could build such installations, and he would direct that it should carry out large-scale building projects in the Reich in future. This was despite Speer's views that plans for such large bunkers for aeroplane factories would drain resources from other high-priority arms programmes.

As a result of this discussion, Hitler placed Dorsch directly under him and ordered him to construct six bunkers, handing a major victory to Göring. Speer responded with another letter, this time proposing a reorganisation to avoid friction between the OT and his ministry's construction department. Dorsch's responsibility would be restricted to the occupied territories, while two of Speer's closest collaborators, Willi Henne and

Walter Brugmann, would respectively oversee the underground bunkers and be in overall control of construction. If Hitler found this unacceptable, Speer would resign.

At first it seemed as if his gamble had backfired. Hitler reacted with fury, rejecting Speer's proposals and calling his resignation threat 'impertinent'. Reluctantly, though, he later sent a message via Erhard Milch of the Reich Air Ministry, who assured Speer that the Führer 'holds you dear'. Speer's initial reaction was to hold firm to his original demands, but after several hours he too relented. He insisted that Dorsch be placed under his authority, however, and drafted a letter ordering Dorsch to build the six 'mushroom bunkers'. Hitler signed it the following day. When Speer flew to see Hitler in person, the reconciliation appeared complete and Speer officially presented Dorsch to Hitler as the new head of the building sector under his authority. Göring did not conceal his fury, while Bormann assured Speer of his steadfast comradeship.

Speer's reimposition of control did not hide the fact that he had been weakened and forced to grant Dorsch greater authority. All the same, he soon managed to notch up another success against Göring. The Luftwaffe chief's fall from grace was deepening because of Germany's ineffective fighter response; then, in June, Hitler agreed to Speer's proposal that aerial armaments be absorbed into his ministry, thus securing a sector that had previously escaped the minister's empire. Since a bridgehead had been established with Hitler's order for the OT to build the bunkers, expanding control to the rest of the sector seemed a logical step.

As part of the agreement for the bunkers, construction in the Reich was reorganised to create the OT Construction Office (Amt Bau-OT), which meant merging OT operations with those of all construction in the Reich under Speer's ministry. Speer was in overall control, and took credit when fighter-plane production more than doubled as a result of wider efforts to increase Germany's output. Dorsch failed to complete the underground bunkers in the promised six months and rapidly diminished in Hitler's eyes.

Time and again, Speer managed to press his advantage as the SS strove to expand its business interests and armaments production. In April 1943 Speer complained to Himmler that the SS was wasting its resources. Himmler's own efforts to cooperate with the arms industry always remained of little significance, and SS efforts to gain control of production in concentration-camp factories were also largely in vain. Speer, who backed business in this tussle, explained to Himmler that industrialists were 'not keen to build up the SS as competition'. Despite these humiliations, the SS continued to pursue its goals in armaments production. Its biggest operation was an underground factory for V2 rockets in the Harz Mountains. In February 1944, when Sauckel was failing to round up enough foreign workers for the armaments industry, Speer wrote to

Himmler asking him ‘to help armaments to an even greater extent than before with the deployment of concentration camp prisoners in places where I view this as particularly urgent’. The SS Economic and Administrative Head Office therefore made every effort to increase prisoner numbers in the concentration camps, which spread throughout Germany by means of satellite camps to put prisoners close to factory sites.

By mid-1944, however, Speer had succeeded in persuading Hitler that he should have at his disposal all the labour force available for armaments production, so his Armaments Ministry not only controlled foreign workers rounded up by Sauckel but also determined where concentration-camp prisoners should be deployed. Speer’s appointment of Kammler to the Fighter Staff, created in March to focus on fighter production, greatly raised the profile of the SS in the armaments sector, and Kammler’s SS construction department became one of the biggest building concerns in Germany. In terms of operations to build subterranean factories, it was second only to the OT. The SS construction enterprise was drawn ever more under Speer’s Armaments Ministry and the OT Construction Office, which also came to control army, navy and air force building operations.

In the last year of the war, the OT Construction Office ran all construction for the war effort, including a large part of the two massive schemes to relocate armaments and fuel production underground: the Fighter Staff and Geilenberg. Despite the inevitable frictions, SS and OT cooperation remained extensive. To head off conflicts and ensure the SS could wield as much influence as possible in its dealings with the OT and other agencies, the SS leadership appointed officers to powerful posts enabling them to take wide-ranging decisions to protect SS interests. Martin Weiss, a former SS commandant of Neuengamme and Dachau, simultaneously represented the interests of the SS Economic and Administrative Head Office’s Office Group ‘D’ in dealings with the OT, ministries and Kammler’s staff concerning vital armaments projects. These included the top-priority Kaufering and Mühldorf projects within the Fighter Staff programme focusing on fighter production. Both these subcamp networks outstripped their main camp of Dachau in size, numbers of prisoners and economic importance, so Weiss focused his attention on them. When he arrived in Mühldorf in October 1944, he viewed his task as being the technical SS link man with the OT Construction Office. Unusually for an SS officer in the concentration-camp system, he had excellent professional credentials, being a qualified machinist and electrical engineer.

As defeat for Germany loomed, private firms, which played such a key role in OT operations, increasingly looked to protect their core staff and machinery. Renegotiation of contracts was frequent as problems with supplies and labour mounted. Oddly, this

even led to big firms criticising slave labour, which they themselves had massively exploited: the objective was to secure more lucrative terms under their contracts with the OT. The big firms, which employed large numbers of skilled German workers, argued that they should be rewarded more highly than smaller firms, whose more limited resources obliged them to resort to foreign slave labourers with lower productivity and relevant skills. The OT initially rejected the argument and favoured smaller enterprises for a deal in August 1944 on payment for workers on one of the Mühldorf sites, Weingut I. Just two months later, however, the OT decided to adopt a standard contract favouring the big firms, under which their many skilled German workers were factored into the contractual profit-sharing calculation. The swift reversal in OT policy reflected how much it depended on the big firms to press ahead with major armaments projects, whose urgency only heightened in the final stages of the war. It followed negotiations with firms carrying out work under the OT at the Valentin submarine-building works in Bremen-Farge and at a fighter-plane factory in Bedburg, similar to the one at Mühldorf.

As late as February 1945, Speer was calling for all-out efforts to finish the Valentin works and another submarine-building bunker called Hornisse. These were two of Germany's most prestigious naval projects which came under OT control after Speer acquired the resources of the construction departments of both the navy and the air force in May–June 1944. Speer declared that 'the soon to be completed submarine building works Valentin and Hornisse must be speeded up by all means'. His appeal would have applied still more pressure on the Bremen shipyard construction teams under Edo Meiners, who had run the Valentin project for the navy and remained in charge after the OT takeover. Meiners became head of the OT Oberbauleitung (Area Construction Management) Unterweser and had responsibility for both Valentin and Hornisse. Up to 10,000 labourers worked daily at the huge Valentin site, including prisoners of war, civilian forced or slave labourers and concentration-camp prisoners. The last category comprised around 2,000 prisoners from the Neuengamme subcamp of Bremen-Farge. Just after the OT took control, in July 1944, the organisation's records showed that a workforce of 6,462 from a variety of OT and other camps laboured under the 'OT-Oberbauleitung Unterweser, Bremen-Farge'.

When Speer took office, it was his ambition and determination to pursue his own agenda that caused his sparring with Bormann, who scored his own victories against Speer. As head of the Nazi Party Chancellery, Bormann triumphed when Hitler rejected Speer's nomination of Karl Hanke, Nazi Party Gauleiter of Lower Silesia, as general plenipotentiary for labour mobilisation in 1942. This was a vital area for the OT, which

depended so heavily on slave labour, but Bormann's favourite, Fritz Sauckel, was chosen instead. Then, in October 1943, Speer clashed again with the top echelons of the Nazi Party, including Bormann: he incensed the various Gauleiter at an armaments conference in Posen by calling for curbs on consumer goods, so that resources could be diverted to armaments production. Delivering an open challenge, Speer threatened the Gauleiter that he would close down civilian industry and deal accordingly with offenders if useless consumer production was maintained. The Gauleiter saw this as not only a thinly veiled personal threat, but also an attack on favoured businesses in their regions. Their complaints to Hitler and Bormann damaged Speer and his relationship with the Führer distinctly cooled. When Speer addressed the Gauleiter in Essen in June the following year, just after the crisis involving Dorsch, Hitler demanded to see the text of Speer's speech to ensure there was no repeat of Posen.

The following month, OT foreign labourers carrying out major works at Rastenburg initially came under suspicion after the 20 July 1944 assassination attempt against Hitler, with potential implications for Speer. Even more seriously, it transpired that the plotters, including Claus von Stauffenberg, who placed the bomb at Hitler's headquarters in East Prussia, had put Speer on a list of 'ministers' for their planned government. Fortunately for Speer, though, a question mark was placed against his name with a note reading 'to be won over'. In fact, Speer played no part in the conspiracy, despite insinuating in his post-war writings that he sympathised with the plotters.

While Speer all too often clashed head-on with Bormann and the Gauleiter, the OT project to build Me-262 aircraft in underground factories in Bavaria provided an example of a powerful Gauleiter proving a highly important contact for the OT. Hermann Giesler was the regional head of the OT whose area included the factories. His contacts with Hitler as an architect already placed him among the Führer's favourites, but he also had a powerful sibling: Paul Giesler was the Gauleiter for Upper Bavaria, whose district happened to overlap with the OT's Deutschland VI sector headed by his younger brother. This connection with the party's top regional chief considerably strengthened Hermann Giesler's position and added to his authority in conducting OT operations in the area. Any raising of Giesler's profile only intensified his rivalry with Speer, which continued even after the war when they displayed their disdain for one another in their respective memoirs. Giesler wrote scathingly of Speer, who showed his own contempt by misspelling Giesler's name at every mention.

In one clash with a Nazi Party organisation, it was Speer who came out the victor. The National Socialist Motor Corps had built strong ties with the OT and Speer during construction of the Westwall and the rebuilding of Berlin. It then forged even closer

links by delivering materials and equipment for the OT in occupied Europe; they became so interlinked that Speer decided to break the group's ties with the Nazi Party altogether. After Speer took over from Todt, two entities called the National Socialist Motor Corps-Transport Group Todt and the Legion Speer were set up, comprising around 70,000 men and almost 50,000 vehicles, under the leadership of Brigadeführer Willi Nagel. This split was necessary because a party organisation like the National Socialist Motor Corps could only employ Germans. The Legion Speer, by contrast, was made up of foreigners, largely Russian prisoners of war, with Germans commanding them.

By early 1944, however, the overall chief of the National Socialist Motor Corps, Reichsleiter Kraus, was convinced the OT was manoeuvring to swallow up his organisation and thus tear it from its party roots. His fears were justified, for Speer, Dorsch and Nagel were indeed determined to cut links with the National Socialist Motor Corps and hive off what by then had been renamed Transport Group Todt. In an attempt to forestall this, Kraus wrote to Speer signalling his intention to remove Nagel from his post over accusations of drunkenness and other failings. Speer replied with a robust defence of Nagel and copied his letter to Bormann, explaining that the Transport Group Todt, just like the Organisation Todt itself, 'cannot be a party-related formation, since it must start from quite different fundamental principles, namely the current conditions for labour deployment'. Kraus lost the battle, and a new formation called the Transport Corps Speer was formed and transferred under the Wehrmacht, with no links to the National Socialist Motor Corps.

Rivalries and squabbles over sharing out workers often soured relations between the various power centres of the Third Reich, but the OT, SS, Wehrmacht and industry cooperated in the slave-labour economy because they each possessed resources and skills the others valued. As for the Nazi Party, whose powerful representatives led civilian administrations in many areas of German-occupied Europe, its interaction with the OT was a similar mixture of tense competition interspersed with active support. Areas of responsibility in the Nazi system frequently overlapped or were left intentionally vague. The OT was able to withstand its formidable competitors through a combination of strengths: its skilled core workforce of engineers and construction experts, its flexibility and its strong ties to German industry. The OT had a further trump card: Hitler's enduring support. He expressed admiration for Todt and his organisation from the outset, subsequently choosing the OT above its rivals to carry out a series of vast construction projects he saw as vital to the war effort. With Todt and Speer

enjoying unlimited access to Hitler, the OT was at least as well placed as its slave-labour partners to gain the Führer's support to achieve its aims.

The OT was also most successful in cooperating with all its other partners simultaneously because slave labour became increasingly vital to the huge building projects which justified its very existence. By contrast, its other partners had quite different primary functions: the SS were the 'political soldiers' of the regime, the Wehrmacht was a fighting force, German industry was in business to make a profit and the Nazi Party was a political grouping. The OT was therefore free to concentrate on its main purpose, acting as a facilitator to combine the resources of its partners to obtain and manage slave labourers to carry out its tasks.

These strengths illustrate how essential it is to revise early understanding of Nazi power centres and include the OT among them. A landmark study published in 1942 restricted the cartel of Nazi power blocs chiefly to the army, big business, the civil service and the Nazi Party but, since then, researchers have begun to accept that the OT should take its place among them. All the Nazi power centres involved in the slave-labour system needed each other. The OT depended on the SS for slave labourers from the concentration camps, as well as SS officers to guard them. From the military, the OT required prisoners of war as slave labourers, while it looked to German industry for a highly skilled workforce and huge resources of machinery and equipment. Finally, it benefited from access to powerful Nazi Party figures around German-occupied Europe.

In return, the OT offered various advantages and services to its partners. The SS generally relied on OT technical expertise to oversee slave labourers at work sites. The Wehrmacht benefited from the OT's role as an armed forces auxiliary, since it worked closely with the military securing road and rail communications and assisting army engineers behind the front line. German industry viewed the OT largely as a source of lucrative contracts to carry out gargantuan construction projects across occupied Europe. Finally, Nazi Party figures in German-occupied countries used the OT to carry out construction projects useful to their administrations. Nevertheless, each one of these actors on the Nazi political stage did battle among themselves.

The OT's powerful position in the Third Reich was underlined by its prime role in carrying out the very same projects at the centre of the plot mounted by Bormann and Göring against Speer: the subterranean factories to produce jet fighter planes at Kaufering and Mühldorf.

## 16

# FACTORIES UNDERGROUND

Organisation Todt staff in khaki uniforms went to Auschwitz in the summer of 1944 to select workers. Among the ragged ranks of prisoners at the concentration camp, Arie Pinsker feared he would be rejected as too small for the labour transport. Standing as tall as his thirteen-year-old frame would allow, Arie thought that if he was not chosen, that would be the end of him. Arie's brother, Itzhak, was chosen and went forward to have his name recorded. Arie – standing just a row behind Itzhak – was forlorn and anxious. But his brother, so admired by his younger sibling as a 'survivor', was silently concocting a plan. In the confusion of so many milling prisoners, Itzhak managed to present himself for selection a second time. No one recognised the Jew from Oradea, in today's Romania, whose name had already been listed for the transport. This time Itzhak gave his younger brother's name, so both were scheduled for it.

Prisoners were dismissed and those chosen had to come forward later, at the appointed time, when their names were called. The brothers feared discovery at any moment. When prisoners duly assembled once more, the brothers stepped forward when ordered to do so, their hearts racing. First it was Itzhak and then Arie, who went on tiptoe, still trying to appear taller. All went to plan. They obeyed orders, as preparations went ahead for the coming journey, to go for disinfection, wash and receive new clothes. They were given food. They boarded a train with the other prisoners deemed fit to work and left Auschwitz. Arie did not know how long they travelled before they reached Kaufering, in Bavaria.

The Kaufering complex – part of the Dachau concentration camp system – was where Arie and his brother toiled until the end of the war. It held slave labourers building subterranean aircraft factories designed to be safe from Allied bombs, but this ill-conceived plan was never completed. The reality for the 30,000 mostly Jewish slave labourers who passed through the Kaufering camps was extreme hard labour and

misery; for about half of them, it meant death. Arie's story is important because it describes conditions in one of the most brutal camps where the OT exercised a high degree of control and helps illustrate how the OT operated in the final throes of the war.

Hitler and his military planners fervently hoped that advanced weaponry like Me-262 jet fighters due to have been produced at Kaufering and Mühldorf would turn the tide of war. They looked to Germany's engineers and scientists to create 'wonder weapons' like the A-4 rocket, later known as the V2. This rocket was the brainchild of Dr Wernher von Braun, a young SS engineer who was recruited by the United States after the war and became the father of the American NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) space programme. A British air raid in August 1943 on the village of Peenemünde on the Baltic coast, site of the central German military testing facility for missiles, had prompted a scramble to relocate A-4 rocket production to 'bombproof' facilities underground. The SS Economic and Administrative Head Office set up the satellite camp of Dora, in the Harz Mountains in central Germany, during the autumn in an existing tunnel system, where slave labourers worked in infernal conditions building facilities for rocket production. Hans Kammler, the engineer heading the SS Economic and Administrative Head Office's construction corps, was put in charge.

Kaufering was one of many complexes where conditions for prisoners during this period were catastrophic. Another camp network where the OT was to a large extent in charge was Mühldorf, which was also in the Dachau system and where inmates worked on a subterranean aircraft factory. Other camp complexes were the Desert project, described in [Chapter 14](#), and the 'Giant' (Riese) underground network, which was part of the Gross-Rosen concentration-camp system. All these major operations where the OT was deeply involved were running at a time when violence in the camps was reaching new heights. Death rates among prisoners increased dramatically in the final year of the war.

As Allied armies forced the Wehrmacht to retreat further in 1944, the OT withdrew part of its labour force into the Greater Reich and acquired more powers than ever, gaining control of all military construction. The changes included unprecedented OT control over some of the Third Reich's biggest projects, spiralling death tolls among its foreign workers, an even larger deployment into the Greater Reich and the restructuring of the organisation there into eight administrative regions. From 1943 to 1944, wrote German historian Rolf-Dieter Müller, it became 'more and more obvious that the OT were not just "soldier-workers", but part of the Nazi system of terror and annihilation'. These developments represented a watershed for the OT, and the horrors of the last year of the Second World War formed a distinct phase in the development of the

organisation, much as it did for the SS-run concentration camps before the ‘death marches’ as camps were evacuated.

The Kaufering complex consisted of eleven subcamps and its prisoner population totalled about 10,000 around the time Arie was sent there. Violence in the camps by SS guards, OT overseers and employees of construction firms was part of a daily routine, and some executions were also carried out. In Kaufering Camp I six prisoners were hanged in November 1944 for ‘sabotage’, because they had taken scraps of material to wrap round their feet for protection.

Kaufering was situated west of its infamous parent camp of Dachau, near the Bavarian city of Munich and just to the north of Landsberg am Lech, where Hitler was imprisoned in 1924 and dictated *Mein Kampf* following his failed putsch the previous year. It was chosen because of the availability of gravel and other necessary resources for construction. When Arie, the fourth of nine children in his Orthodox Jewish family, first arrived from Auschwitz-Birkenau, he was allocated to Kaufering Camp VII, in a wood about one kilometre from Landsberg. Barrack huts, each taking about thirty prisoners, were sunk into the ground with only the roof showing above the surface. For two or three weeks Arie carried bricks, sand and cement sacks, which normally weighed 50 kilograms, for construction work at an airfield, before being picked again by the OT to help harvest the potato crop. Soviet prisoners of war worked alongside Jews like Arie, taking charge of horse-drawn, plough-like farm implements that unearthed the potatoes for collection before they froze in the ground as winter closed in. Their 100-strong labour detail was guarded by just two or three army soldiers – these were older men ‘who were not so strict with us’.

Camp guards beat prisoners with rubber-coated metal batons, and on one occasion Arie received blows to the head. As he writhed in pain on the ground, he feared his skull was cracked. He did not identify the guard, but the beating left him with long-term deafness in one ear and affected his sight in one eye. Despite his injuries, he still went to work the next day. Such beatings were also delivered by Kapos, but Arie said some acted humanely. During his time on the construction site, a Hungarian Jewish doctor named Winkler was an example. Arie said he was a ‘nice man’ who would shout and curse prisoners loudly so as to be heard by German guards, but would rarely beat camp inmates, only making a show of doing so.

After some weeks in Camp VII, Arie was told to join a line-up for selection and remove his shirt. He was picked to go to Landsberg Camp 1, also known as Kaufering I, where he worked for a firm contracted by the OT, Leonhard Moll AG. Arie received the

Dachau camp number 112273 and learned to say the number as quickly as he could in German to avoid a blow with a rifle butt from a guard.

Arie's fourteenth birthday passed on 2 December 1944 amid the unremitting toil of camp life. Work included unloading equipment from railcars in the snow and bitter wind, their clothes often sodden. Arie learned artful techniques to stave off exhaustion:

Sometimes I played tricks because I already had no strength left. I took an empty [cement] sack, filled it with other sacks and put it on my back and went along like that several times to give myself a rest. I pretended to be lugging a sack because the guards were not too close to us. They were about 100 metres or so away from us. That was in winter. Snow. He had a camp fire and watched from there, or didn't watch. In brief, it worked. And so I could still preserve my last remaining strength. But not always. Every ten or fifteen sacks, I went round twice with it, so that everyone saw that. It became dangerous because everyone tried to do it too. And we had to deliver cement there. Also, there were, no, not SS people, but people from the Organisation Todt and they were harsher than the SS people. They dealt fatal blows. They were Hitler's faithful, but right to the end. Volunteers, older men. So the cement had to arrive.

Arie's description clearly explains the rules of survival. OT overseers drove prisoners mercilessly, even in the final phase of the war. Other work he was required to do was just as demanding. As an existing railway line stopped three to four kilometres from the underground factory, an extension was needed. About a dozen prisoners were required to bear the heavy weight of railway track and Arie tried to stand tall for his shoulder to reach the metal at least, so as not to arouse the suspicions of guards sitting round fires to keep warm. German prisoners – skilled workers, with some privileges – then took the tracks, positioning and securing them under supervision of older OT professionals.

We worked like this for about a month. It was hard. It was already about the beginning of March. We didn't wash ourselves, we didn't change our clothes. On Sundays, whenever there was a chance, when it was sunny, but also when it snowed, our occupation was to sit outside, in order to be able to see well when we took our shirts off, to kill lice. Lice were everywhere. Like apes, we checked each other for lice. The lice devoured us and troubled us greatly.

Having toiled and survived, Arie and other remaining prisoners were eventually forced on a death march from Landsberg to Dachau, which was finally liberated on 29 April

1945 by American troops.

Kaufering and Mühldorf were examples of projects where the OT was responsible for the prisoners to an unprecedented extent within the Third Reich's concentration-camp system. The satellite camps in these complexes represented a new type operating in Germany's core in which the SS, while still performing guard duties, largely withdrew from administration. The OT was thus substantially in charge of networks of subcamps where thousands of prisoners died. The OT's most notorious female physician was Dr Erika Flocken (see Introduction). She 'selected' prisoners she deemed unfit to work, hundreds of whom were sent to Auschwitz to be murdered. Such 'selections' of sick or exhausted labourers were normally carried out by the SS, but Flocken performed this function at Mühldorf, where the OT oversaw mostly Jewish slave labourers. OT staff also practised an indirect form of selection in which they responded to firms' complaints about exhausted workers' performance by alerting the SS, who then dispatched those 'unfit for work' to death camps.

Although many prisoners were murdered by guards or after 'selections', still more died of disease or were worked to death. Murders by SS guards were not uppermost in every survivor's mind. For Abram Grünstein, hunger, exhaustion and illness took the heaviest toll. Grünstein arrived in Kaufering Camp XI from Auschwitz in autumn 1944 and was forced to do construction work under OT supervision. He recalled the bodies of prisoners who had died overnight being found in the morning:

I don't remember murders being committed in Kaufering Camp XI. But I know that many prisoners died in the camp. We lived in inhuman conditions, many of the prisoners had already experienced several camps and were completely run down. We received scarcely anything to eat and we had to perform very hard labour. The prisoners died of malnutrition, cold and there were also very many who became ill from potato peelings (dysentery) and were not medically treated. We lived in bunkers and when I woke early in the morning I saw a few times that prisoners had died during the night. The corpses remained in our bedroom when we went to roll-call and when we came back from work in the evening we found they were no longer there. I suppose that those prisoners who stayed in the camp for cleaning work must have cleared away the bodies.

Abraham Katz, a prisoner in Kaufering X, witnessed no killings through physical violence, but described how inmates died of sickness and the effects of appalling camp conditions:

We buried four to five of my fellow sufferers outside the camp. But they died as a result of inhuman conditions, sickness etc. It was winter when we all had to hand in all our clothes for de-lousing. We had to stand completely naked for some hours until we got our clothes back from the disinfection. One of my fellow sufferers, who came from Lithuania, I don't remember his name anymore, fell sick as a result of the freezing weather and died after one or two days.

Kaufering IV, the camp hospital, was known as the death camp because of its high daily mortality rates. Kaufering VII was normally reserved for those too weak to work, and was where Arie Pinsker was held before being transferred to Kaufering I. Arie recalled a daily routine of toil in the open, exposed to bitter winter weather without sufficiently warm clothing. His description of lice infestation among the prisoners reflected pitifully unhygienic camp conditions and, with other ravenous prisoners, he ate raw potatoes while working in the fields. Workers shod only in wooden clogs used cement sacks to protect their feet in winter. The sacks were also used to wrap around themselves and to cover planks on which they slept, to provide a little extra insulation and warmth.

Apart from physical degradation due to work and camp conditions, guards and supervisors constantly employed brute force in the Kaufering complex. Arie Pinsker was a victim, like virtually all prisoners, suffering blows from rifle butts, shovels or other implements which SS guards and OT and Wehrmacht overseers dealt out to camp inmates. He described OT personnel, specifically, as harsher than the SS. Elsewhere in the Kaufering complex, Hungarian Ervin Deutsch saw OT staff hit two inmates of Camp III with spades in separate incidents, resulting in their deaths. In one incident, he told post-war investigators, an OT foreman struck a prisoner in the face with a spade after an argument over a 'trifling matter', causing him to fall down a slope and be crushed in the jaws of a mechanical digger. In the second, an OT guard hit a prisoner's head with the sharp edge of a shovel so that he fell unconscious, his skull split and bleeding. The prisoner died a few days later in the camp.

Reflecting the level of sickness and abuse of prisoners in Kaufering as a whole in December 1944, an OT overseer, Stabsfrontführer Gerhard Buschmann, stated: 'The prisoners have been subjected to such abuse over the past period that today 17,600 prisoners are being fed, but of these only 8,319 are fit to work. Those prisoners only capable of light work are even supposed to be included in this total.' He said almost every OT staff member on the Moll firm's sites carried sticks to beat prisoners and so 'train' them to work better, yet some of the main reasons for labourers' poor productivity were lice infestation and poor management by OT staff themselves. He

supported using force to cure prisoners' 'lethargy', but believed beatings should not replace proper leadership.

Buschmann's criticism of OT behaviour was motivated by a desire to raise productivity rather than concern for prisoners' welfare, and the OT could act ruthlessly to achieve its goals. Firms would complain to the OT about having to pay for a given number of prisoners, even though they failed to turn up for work or were unable to work if they did. As a result, the OT had told the SS in the main Dachau camp as early as the autumn of 1944 to take away prisoners representing a 'burden' for Kaufering and Mühldorf. A total of 1,322 were selected as incapable of work in September–October 1944 and sent from Kaufering to Auschwitz, where they were murdered.

Conditions in the Mühldorf complex were similarly catastrophic. A German survivor, Elois Eisenhändler, described a site where prefabricated concrete tunnels, used in the construction of Mühldorf's underground factory to produce fighter planes, were built in the locality of Ampfing:

As medical orderly for this building site, I can say here, in particular, that a string of young prisoners – it involved 14- to 16-year-old Hungarian Jews – died while working on the building site. As the entire population of Ampfing can confirm, we returned in the winter months daily to the camp with several dead, and often up to 20 utterly exhausted prisoners, who were incapable of walking on their own.

Near-starvation racked prisoners in the Mühldorf camp complex. Zoltan Benedek, an electrician from a Jewish family in Romania, said prisoners were forced to eat leaves, acorns and beech nuts. His weight dropped by almost half, from 60 to 32 kilograms, from the time he went there to the time of his liberation. He said fellow inmates were so driven by hunger they would risk death for just a few wheat grains scavenged from the rubble of a ruined mill. As the column marched by on the way to work, some would dash to scoop a handful of debris from the site in the hope of finding something edible. The SS guard would shoot at them every time, not always with fatal results:

On occasion, it was just a handful of rubble, but at other times a few grains were there and for that they ran the risk, for life had no worth. And we had to take the dead with us to the work site and bring them back afterwards, because the tally had to be right at the entrance. However many had gone out had to return.

Benedek's story illustrates how interconnected the various types of violence – both direct and indirect – became in the camps. SS guards not only shot prisoners crazed by

hunger, but murdered camp inmates in mass shootings to prevent epidemics caused by lack of medical care. In the inhumane environment of the camps, the distinctions between different types of violence tended to blur. Hunger and death, whether through hard labour, disease or homicide, were so widespread that any particular category of violence as a cause of death frequently appeared arbitrary.

Hitler ordered the OT to carry out the two Fighter Staff schemes at Kaufering and Mühldorf to mass-produce Me-262 Messerschmitt jet fighters. Kaufering was Dachau's largest subcamp network and, like Mühldorf, came under the OT's Task Group VI, headed by Hermann Giesler. Six semi-underground bunkers were originally to be built under plans presented to Hitler by Dorsch, protected by concrete up to five metres thick and containing factories to manufacture the jet fighters. In fact, just four bunkers were started and two were abandoned, so that only Kaufering and Mühldorf remained. The Kaufering installation was 300 metres long, 90 metres wide and had six storeys. The bunkers used a technique in which prefabricated concrete tunnel sections were made with railway tracks running through them. Gravel was thickly heaped on top of the sections, and then came layers of reinforced concrete. Once this concrete had set, the gravel was extracted through trapdoors in the tunnel and poured into railway wagons to be reused. The 'bomb-proof' roof could be extended section by section and the bunker's interior deepened and fitted out after extraction of all the gravel.

Both Kaufering and Mühldorf were only two-thirds completed by the end of the war. The prisoners' hard labour mostly involved construction, building sections of railway, and loading and unloading cement and other supplies

To acquire prisoners to work in Kaufering, Speer's Fighter Staff issued its requirements for labour and Jewish men and women were supplied from Auschwitz. From mid-1944, survivors of Polish and Lithuanian ghettos such as Łódź, Kauen, Kowno and Schaulen, as well as Hungarian Jews and small numbers of Jews from countries including the Netherlands, France, Italy and Czechoslovakia, were sent to Kaufering. The bigger camps in the complex contained 3,000 to 4,000 prisoners at times, while the smaller ones held a few hundred. According to lists drawn up by prisoner number 50272, a Luxembourg priest named Jules Jost, 28,838 Jewish prisoners arrived in Kaufering between 18 June 1944 and 9 March 1945. As more transports arrived after that date, it's estimated that between mid-June 1944 and the end of April 1945 around 30,000 prisoners went through Kaufering. Some 850 children and 4,200 women, mostly Hungarian Jews, were among these inmates.

In the Mühldorf camp complex most of the slave labourers were Hungarian Jews. Four subcamps were set up near Mühldorf, of which two had 2,000 to 3,000 inmates

and two were smaller. From 24 July 1944 the Mühldorf camp complex held 8,300 prisoners, of whom 7,500 were men and about 800 women. Mühldorf's SS commandant from late 1944 until the end of the war was Sturmbannführer Walter Adolf Langleist, who moved there after being in charge of Kaufering. Commandants of the Kaufering complex also included SS-Hauptsturmführer Hans Aumeier, who was in charge from December 1944 to January 1945.

The painstakingly slow task of identifying the victims of Kaufering came after the liberation. But more than four years after the end of the war, the names of only six of them had been officially determined: four Lithuanian Jews, one Frenchman and a woman of unknown nationality. SS destruction of virtually all files relating to Kaufering made the task especially hard, but H. Cleve-Olsen of the International Tracing Service (ITS) was clear about some details of the camp complex in November 1949:

There were about 1,500 guardsmen, most of whom (70 per cent) were SS men and the others from the Wehrmacht. The guardsmen have guarded the camps and brought the prisoners to the working-places and back. At the work the prisoners have been guarded and supervised by the OT men.

Both Kaufering and Mühldorf exploited large numbers of Jews after Hitler ordered in early 1944 that Jews should return as labourers to the Reich, which had previously been declared 'Jew-free'. Before then, German Jewish men and women compelled to work in the Reich reached a peak of 51,000 to 53,000 in the summer of 1941, but they were subsequently deported to ghettos and extermination camps and the last expulsions were in spring 1943. The policy reversal and renewed use of Jewish labour had a particular impact on the OT, which had previously operated almost exclusively in German-occupied Europe, as it partially retreated with the Wehrmacht into the Greater Reich in the final year of the war.

Hitler explained his change of heart to a meeting of Nazi Party Reichsleiter and Gauleiter, saying that Hungarian Jews were 'to supply useful work for our war aims'. The OT played a significant role in 1944–5 in the brutal and murderous treatment of tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews exploited as slave labourers. The men, women and children, among more than 400,000 deported from Hungary within eight weeks in the largest such operation in the Nazi persecution of the Jews, toiled on huge subterranean projects such as the jet-fighter factories and a vast complex, appropriately named Giant.

Zoltan Benedek, who described in this chapter being a prisoner in Mühldorf, had previously been in one of the camps in Giant. The OT ran this major subterranean

complex in the Owl Mountains in Lower Silesia and was responsible for overseeing prisoners at work and providing them with rations, accommodation and clothing. Giant involved ‘bomb-proof’ headquarters for Hitler and living quarters for 20,000 government personnel, military and SS. It was begun in November 1943, but was transferred from the original building company to the OT in April 1944 because of the slow pace of work.

After the OT took over, it ran the complex of up to twelve subcamps under a construction management unit known as Oberbauleitung Riese, based in Jedlina-Zdrój (Bad Charlottenbrunn). Giant had a total of 853 SS guards and the camp commandant was SS-Hauptsturmführer Albert Lütkemeyer. Building works covered an area of around 35 square kilometres, involving seven tunnel complexes. Each had between three and six tunnel entrances and were from 500 metres to three kilometres long. The OT assigned various building firms to carry out the project, including Sager & Woerner. Speer told post-war interrogators how he had argued against big underground projects like Giant, telling Hitler: ‘Bombers cannot be fought with concrete, only with fighter planes.’ In the face of the advancing Allied front, construction of Giant was halted in January–February 1945 and a number of tunnels were blown up.

Construction of Giant had originally been started using exclusively prisoners of war and slave labourers in four labour camps. When the OT took over, however, most of the 13,300 Jewish workers on the project were prisoners supplied by the SS from Gross-Rosen concentration camp. Between May and October 1944, the SS sent regular transports of Jewish prisoners from Auschwitz to Giant. About 70 per cent came from Hungary and the Hungarian region of Transylvania, and 25 per cent were Polish Jews from the Łódź ghetto and Krakau-Plaszów concentration camp. Smaller prisoner groups came from Greece, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Austria, Yugoslavia, Italy, France, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands.

Describing the constantly mounting death toll at a Giant camp called Fürstenstein, Benedek said one prisoner died every day in small huts where workers slept closely packed on the ground. Corpses were stacked in the washroom, and a dead inmate’s place would be taken almost at once by another fit enough to work. In such desperate conditions, Benedek said survival depended on being able to work, since those judged unfit received less food and risked ‘selection’ for transport to a death camp. Sheer luck saved him from this fate. Benedek had been ‘selected’ because he became too weak, but a worksite foreman rescued him because he needed an electrician. ‘It was chance. If he hadn’t come, if no electrician had been needed at that moment, I would have been

transported the next morning to the gas chamber and to the crematorium and it would have been over.'

Selections of pitifully weak workers in satellite camps usually signified a death sentence and transportation back to the main concentration camp, to a specially designated camp for the sick within a big complex, or to an extermination camp.

Seeking maximum worker output with minimum outlay for their care, the concentration-camp SS followed no set pattern, conducting both mass and individual selections to maintain what they saw as the required work rate. Benedek's physical condition stemmed from OT abuses causing hunger and exhaustion for many of his fellow inmates also in danger of 'selection'. However, instead of being listed for immediate transportation to Auschwitz, prisoners unable to work were sent to designated camps for the sick in large networks such as Giant. Dutchman Hartog Polak, a Jewish slave labourer in the Giant complex, told how he was earmarked to be sent to Dörnhau subcamp after contracting typhus. At first he hid under a pile of potato peelings to avoid being sent to the camp, but then changed his mind, fearing that prisoners would be counted and he would be missed. He ran after his fellow prisoners and joined them just in time:

And then we had to line up and then they counted and two men were missing. They went into the camp with dogs. Two men were hiding in the toilet, down below, so that they stood that high in filth, and then they had to come out. They came running towards us and they were beaten as they ran until they reached the station. There, they were beaten for so long that they died.

Hartog survived Dörnhau, but the very existence of such camps reflected not only the fear of all camp staff of succumbing to typhus epidemics themselves, but also the ruthlessness with which they weeded out those unable to work.

In October 1944, Himmler took a decision resulting in so-called 'half-Jews', one of whose parents was a Jew, being sent to work for the OT. The SS chief initiated an operation to transfer all Mischlinge, offspring of mixed Jewish and non-Jewish parentage, to OT construction work and manual labour. Although Mischlinge were classed as 'free' workers, they were in effect forced labourers, guarded at all times and prohibited from leaving the camps. Peter Demetz, classified as a half-Jew under the Nazi racist system, described being a slave labourer under the OT in 1944–5 when he was twenty-two. Demetz's Catholic father had worked as a drama adviser at the German theatre in Prague and his Jewish mother designed costumes for the actors. Born

in Prague, Demetz himself went to a German school in Brno before switching back to a Czech education.

Demetz was clear about how he viewed the work he was compelled to do after the Labour Office shipped him off to Germany. ‘That’s where the slave labour starts,’ he said. Demetz described work under the sole supervision of the OT in the Breslau area as chaotically disorganised. He worked in two different camps run by the OT for half-Jews, one helping to construct an airfield near Breslau and one at Kálek in the Erzgebirge (Ore Mountains). About 200 to 300 half-Jews were put on a train to be transported to the first camp, where he said organisation was non-existent:

Organisation: zilch. The train arrived in an open field. We were unloaded and somebody, I don’t know, probably from Organisation Todt, a technical organisation running these camps, explaining that we had to build the camp. And they gave us the materials, the wood, nails and the hammers, and we built sort of very primitive barracks, prefabricated walls.

On the way to the camp, Demetz and the others had been afraid they were being transported to Auschwitz. When their fears proved unfounded on arrival at the site near Breslau, Demetz judged it reasonable that what he called the ‘unofficial’ camp leadership, mostly composed of engineers, advised caution. ‘They said, I believe wisely: “It’s better to survive here than organise a revolt and end in Auschwitz.”’

The half-Jewish labourers broke stones in a quarry for ballast for a nearby airfield. Soviet Kyrgyz Hilfswillige, so-called HiWi employed by the Germans, worked with them, living in nomad tents with their families and looking after their sheep. Demetz saw no SS or Wehrmacht guards:

In the morning we were fed bread and some kind of coffee and in the evening, a kind of potato soup. And the important thing was ... not to line up too early because when you take the soup, the early portions are really watery, because the potatoes have a tendency to sink to the bottom, and when you come late, you have a chance to get ... the stiff parts of the soup. That I learned the third day.

Demetz was arrested after a short time working there and taken to Prague in late 1944 for interrogation by the Gestapo about an organisation supposedly printing communist material. He was released and sent early in 1945 to the second camp run by the OT, where he cut timber with other half-Jewish labourers. The site of the camp in the mostly flat, snow-covered landscape was so remote that escape seemed impossible and work

was carried out with minimal supervision. In March 1945 OT personnel ordered Demetz and the rest of the labour force to line up, because police were investigating an allegation of rape by a local woman. After the woman, accompanied by a police officer, went down the line-up without identifying a perpetrator, the labourers were dismissed. The following month, when Demetz and his fellow workers heard that OT camp overseers had abruptly left, he began an arduous journey back to Prague. After the war he settled in the United States and became professor of German and Comparative Literature at Yale University.

The OT supervised Mischlinge and Jüdisch Versippte (Aryans married to Jews) from early October 1944 at Holzen, in the core of the Reich. By the end of 1944 a total of 532 inmates were held in Camp Lenne at Holzen, among them 334 Jews, half-Jews and Jüdisch Versippte from all over the Reich. The others included inmates ‘of German blood’, French, Italians, Flemish and Lithuanians, mostly men, as well as Ostarbeiter. The camp leader was OT-Obertruppführer August Biel and those held were aged between fourteen and seventy-five. The camp came under the local OT building administration in nearby Eschershausen.

Camp Lenne documents include an unusually explicit reference to cooperation between the OT and SS to get rid of the long-term sick. OT staff were told to alert the SS about inmates who were chronically sick, so they could be returned to where they were transported from. This could amount to a death sentence if they were sent to an extermination camp like Auschwitz. A note by the OT-Oberfrontführer at Eschershausen, entitled ‘Exclusion of Jews, Mischlinge, Versippte unfit to work’, said the OT should alert the senior SS officer, Obersturmbannführer Busch, who would arrange for inmates to be examined by a police doctor. The OT would then organise a return transport for sick inmates as necessary. Camp Lenne inmates included Jews in so-called ‘privileged mixed marriages’, half-Jews and Jüdisch Versippte, but such distinctions of Nazi racist classification were sometimes ignored. In February 1945 a Gestapo report said that ‘the Jews’ in Camp Lenne had been transported to Theresienstadt on the nineteenth of that month; five of them escaped during preparations for the transfer and two were recaptured.

Some Polish Jews faced anti-Semitism from their own compatriots in camps such as the Flossenbürg subcamp of Leitmeritz (Litoměřice). The OT shared responsibility with the SS for construction there and hunger drove prisoners to extreme lengths at the camp: they would eat flowers or gnaw on lumps of soft brown coal in their desperation. More than 17,000 prisoners worked in terrible conditions in Leitmeritz, and about 4,500 died between March 1944 and May 1945. Zecharja Shagrin, who described in [Chapter 4](#)

how he fled from his home in Kraków with his father at the outbreak of war, was recaptured and sent to Leitmeritz in March 1945 and said he suffered anti-Semitism from other Polish prisoners. He and fellow Jews were pushed to the end of food queues and compelled to sleep on the floor rather than in bunks.

Some historians have argued that Nazi racist ideology remained pure and uncompromised at the heart of the system to the end. However, the Nazi ideal of a fatherland for a pure German race could not do without those lowest-ranked in the racial hierarchy within the Reich. Hitler approved the deportation of female Ostarbeiter to Germany in September 1942 so that Slavic Russian women could work in German households. Jews and Slavs were among the more than 7.6 million foreign civilian labourers and prisoners of war working in Germany in mid-1944.

These foreign workers included Italians, who received merciless treatment since they were citizens of a former German ally which switched sides. After the fall of Mussolini and Italy's armistice with the Allies in September 1943, captured Italian soldiers were used as slave labourers and viciously targeted. Italians were normally ranked relatively highly on the Nazi racial scale, but German authorities reacted differently towards them when they saw them as traitors. More than 600,000 Italian soldiers were designated as military internees and transferred to work in the Reich and occupied Europe to alleviate acute labour shortages. Within months, the health of many of these men, who ranked below Anglo-Saxons but above Slavs or Jews on the Nazi racial scale, had been destroyed by appalling living and working conditions. Brutality against these 'traitors' was widespread and included, for example, severe punishment beatings by OT supervisors. They suffered some of the harshest treatment of any slave labourers; around 50,000 of them died and roughly half the deaths occurred when they were disarmed in 1943, and the rest while they were subsequently prisoners and forced labourers.

What they endured was typical for prisoners among the lowest in the Third Reich's racist political hierarchy. Conditions for them were worse in mining, construction, some sectors of heavy industry and under the OT. Lino Monchieri described in his diary how residents showed contempt for him and other Italian military internees on arrival in the bomb-shattered central German city of Hanover in 1943 to carry out clearance work for the OT:

We alight at Hannover's bomb- and fire-destroyed main station. The time is 14:30. We have to march in rank and file through the city streets. The people pay us no compliments, but curse and swear at us, calling us traitors and Badoglios ... An

old woman bares her teeth at the window and sticks her tongue out. Some youths spit at us. The children mock us.

Calling Italians ‘badoglios’ was intended as an insulting reference to Italy’s Marshal Pietro Badoglio, who concluded the armistice. Monchieri recorded in his diary that he was woken at 5.30 a.m. on the first Sunday of October that year and allocated to OT supervisors with some of his fellow countrymen: ‘Kilometre after kilometre by foot through the terribly destroyed city. My section, like many others, is assigned to clearing the rubble. The last bombing was two days ago but the ruins are still smoking.’ Five days later, he writes that ‘our hangman’s helpers don’t let us out of their sight for a second; if you pause, punches and kicks hail down, if you work, they drive you on so that you slave yourself to death’.

Another Italian military internee, Giovanni Bonotto, was sent to various labour camps and forced to work during the harsh winter of 1944–5, at one point digging military defensive positions under the OT near the Vistula River. Before that he had been in a coalmine near Dortmund, where he said they always worked under close German supervision because their overseers feared sabotage in the mine, where a flame or spark could cause an explosion, killing miners and shutting down production. German miners had protective leather helmets and masks, Bonotto said, whereas ‘we had nothing’.

Not all Italian slave labourers were former servicemen. In Italy itself, the Wehrmacht carried out what it called ‘slave hunts’ in September 1943 and some 50,000 Italians were thus rounded up to work for the OT digging trenches and constructing defence lines. These sweeps were conducted in villages in southern and central Italy as German troops were forced to withdraw northwards. Many Italians, including partisans, volunteered for work with the OT to try to avoid deportation to the Reich. By autumn 1944 between 120,000 and 130,000 labourers were working on defensive lines and military bases in Italy. By the end of March 1945 around 240,000 men and women were working in northern Italy on fortification projects under the OT and Wehrmacht.

The vast majority of foreign workers labouring in construction for the OT worked in a sector where conditions were generally atrocious. Their tasks often included carrying 50-kilogram cement sacks or railway tracks and digging trenches with primitive pickaxes in frozen or flooded ground. Work was also carried out underground, when tunnel blasting, drilling and rubble clearing were deafening, filthy, choking and potentially deadly because of falling rocks. Road-building, such as on Transit Road IV, involved collecting and carrying sand, gravel and stones, which had to be broken up by

hand or with rudimentary tools. Labourers had to build embankments, dig drainage ditches, shovel snow, hack ice or construct protective walls against snowdrifts. The same exhausting stone-breaking and unloading of heavy materials and equipment was required for all construction, whether building airport hangars and runways, factories, hydroelectric plants, bridges, cable railways or dams. Other tasks performed by prisoners included forestry and agriculture. As Monchieri, the Italian military internee, said, OT staff also oversaw slave labourers clearing debris and repairing damage after Allied air raids on German cities. Unexploded bombs and unstable buildings put prisoners' lives in peril, and they were also locked in barracks whenever the warning sirens sounded while their overseers sought the safety of air-raid shelters.

Slave labourers were confronted with a seemingly endless list of dangerous, exhausting tasks, but there were some jobs under the OT that did not require extreme physical exertion outdoors and such jobs could improve survival chances dramatically. Skilled labour for the OT within the broad category of construction could also offer improved conditions for prisoners.

For Martin K., working for the OT saved him from a worse fate in the large Dachau subcamp of München-Allach, where the OT supervised construction to protect the Allach BMW works from Allied air raids. Martin, a Jew from Transylvanian territory handed to Hungary during the war, was sent to Auschwitz when he was seventeen and then a month later, in the middle of 1943, was dispatched to Allach. At first, as a German-speaking youth, he was chosen to clean the commandant's rooms, avoiding being sent to the BMW machine works like most of Allach's more than 4,700 inmates. Then, having 'won' a potato-peeling contest, he was sent with nine others to work in the camp kitchen, where his task was to serve food to members of the OT:

And my life was really good, for in the kitchen I worked as a sort of piccolo [apprentice]. I prepared food for the Germans. Did I know at all how to do that? But as it turned out, I did know. And what was really interesting, for example ... I don't understand this, even today, whenever I cooked soup, there were bones and the Germans didn't eat the bone marrow ... and I ate that and that gave me quite a bit of strength.

Martin's access to the kitchen enabled him to obtain extra food for both himself and his father, with whom he was sent to Allach. Reflecting after the war about a trip he made with his granddaughter to Poland, where his mother and sister were presumed to have

died in Hochweiler, a subcamp of Gross-Rosen concentration camp, Martin was struck by how his own fate had turned out:

And only there did I grasp the extent of the catastrophe which the Nazis brought upon the Jews. For actually, it could have been worse in the camp, apart from them having killed my family – I say, apart from that. I, personally, had no problems. I was young, I worked, I had no ... I actually only suffered from hunger in Auschwitz. Later not. I had something to eat and somehow coped.

Dutchman Ellis Hertzberger, a Jewish bacteriologist, had a similar story. Ellis's qualification as a scientist enabled him to work in clinics and laboratories in various camps, avoiding hard labour in all but one of them. Although he was forced to build bunkers in a Sachsenhausen subcamp, Ellis survived Westerbork, Theresienstadt, Auschwitz and Dachau, working in either clinics or laboratories. It was thanks to incompetence by OT staff guarding the labourers that Ellis and fellow prisoners managed to give their overseers the slip. When he was transported south from Dachau in January 1945, the train made an overnight stop in the south Bavarian village of Mittenwald. Shooting broke out and, in the confusion, German troops accompanying the prisoners disappeared:

Then we went off to sleep overnight in a pile of hay, we were rounded up again in the morning, but where were we headed? Then we were formed into columns, and the military who had to assemble us, they were not professionals, they came from the Organisation Todt ... They didn't walk along beside the column but behind the columns, and if you then come into woods, you can get away really quickly, and we did just that, the four of us, two Czechs and two Dutch, Ludwig Geels and I.

Eventually, they reached territory controlled by US troops.

Another example of the type of work affecting a survivor's fate is recounted by Leszek Zablocki, a Warsaw-born prisoner aged twenty when he was sent to Leitmeritz in February 1945. He said he had the 'luck' to be ordered to do building above ground, rather than in the underground factory, although Allied air raids meant he feared being killed by bombs. The OT, plus an SS team under Hans Kammler, was responsible for the construction of Leitmeritz, about 70 kilometres north of Prague.

Large numbers of foreign slave labourers worked to defend the borders of the Reich as Allied forces advanced to threaten Germany itself. In what became the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, residents were drafted into OT labour gangs digging trenches

and constructing fortifications. Some civilians contacted by labour offices managed to avoid the summons. Czechoslovak-born Jaroslav Sankot was one of four men in a village about 100 kilometres south-east of Prague who were summoned by the local labour office in late 1944 to dig anti-tank ditches for the OT on the Austria–Hungary frontier. Unluckily for him, he was the only one who had to go, as the families of the other three pulled strings to avoid conscription. One had the support of the Catholic Church, another ran a large farm and the third used political contacts.

On the Austria–Hungary border, Jaroslav worked among slave labourers under OT supervisors who were assisted by pro-Nazi Czech personnel. This limited sharing of control with local sympathisers contrasted with the OT's usual practice of cooperating with the SS or Wehrmacht. While German OT staff were in charge of overseeing the work, the pro-Hitler Czechs, who wore white linen uniforms and a belt with a swastika, helped organise the labour force under the direction of the OT. Jaroslav said the Czech assistant supervisors belonged to an institution in Prague called the Curatorship for Youth Education. His group was among 2,000 to 3,000 Czech labourers in the town of Mönchhof, all from the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. In the severe winter conditions in 1944–5 Jaroslav was compelled to dig anti-tank ditches; the ground was frozen, blunting the workers' pickaxes. Jaroslav and fellow workers slept in a barn with a damaged roof and would sometimes wake up to find their thin blankets covered in snow:

The German Organisation Todt supervised our work, a German organisation. They were veteran German soldiers from the front, predominantly the wounded, some of them invalids who were no longer fit for front-line service ... so they oversaw us in these uniforms, khaki uniforms with a swastika on the sleeve, they had machine-pistols and ... we had to keep moving, yes? ... we weren't allowed to stay still.

The ditches had to be seven metres wide and five metres deep, sloping diagonally inwards and downwards from the sides. The OT supervisors checked workers' daily performance and, although they swore and shouted if they deemed work insufficient, Jaroslav said he saw no shootings or punishment beatings. He said two young prisoners committed suicide, though, because 'their nerves simply couldn't bear it any more'. One drowned himself in a well and Jaroslav helped pull out his body, while the other hanged himself. Prisoners had to assemble at 5 a.m., when they were given black 'coffee', butter substitute and about 200 grams of bread, which had to last until after work stopped at 5 or 6 p.m. The evening meal was soup made with root vegetables and no

meat. When Jaroslav suffered frostbite in his toes, he and a couple of friends persuaded the farmer's wife to let them sleep in the animal stall, which reeked of dung but was warmer and 'like paradise'.

Huge efforts to build defences to stave off the Red Army advance were also being made in the east of the Greater Reich in areas south of Danzig. The OT oversaw thousands of Jewish women performing extreme hard labour to carry out this task.

# 17

## WOMEN ENSLAVED

In late January 1945, during the period of the ‘death marches’ from concentration camps before Germany’s final defeat, OT staff were among 150 guards and escorts overseeing mostly female Jewish prisoners from a group of Stutthof subcamps in the Königsberg area of East Prussia. About 4,500 prisoners were forced to trek from Königsberg towards the Baltic coast. One of these prisoners, Dora Hauptman, recalled: ‘We were marched in heavy snow. The cold was fierce, and a freezing wind blew ... we weren’t allowed to rest at all; every moment shots were fired. Also, we weren’t allowed to walk, we had to run. En route a large number of people were shot to death.’

Some 1,500 of the prisoners died on the 50-kilometre route. The remaining 3,000 were held in a factory in the small town of Palmnicken, mentioned in the introduction to this book, while the guards and local officials argued about what to do. The guards and OT personnel, with the head of the local branch of the Nazi Party, finally reached an agreement which sealed the fate of those in their charge. The guards’ desire to save themselves from the advancing Red Army led to the largest massacre of prisoners during this ‘death march’ period. After being told they were going to be evacuated by boat, men of the SS, Hitler Youth, OT staff and Ukrainian auxiliaries lined up the 3,000 prisoners from Palmnicken along the shore, herding them onto thin ice covering the sea, before guards opened fire on them with machine guns. Fryda Gabrylewicz described the terrifying scene:

And the cannonade began anew, during which my friend got a bullet in the back, which went through the front of her body and wounded me in the belly. After a minute I got another bullet in the leg ... My friend whispered ‘Oh Fryda’ and she died. I lie in excruciating pain and wait for death ... Silence fell all around. I hear a crack, but cannot tell what it is. It was the ice cracking. I raise my head and see the ice break up and the corpses fall into the sea.

Gabrylewicz was among the few to survive. Her horrifying account, as well as other records of these events, show the OT's role in this massacre during the 'death marches'.

In a vain attempt to halt the Red Army's westward thrust, the OT oversaw construction of major defence installations such as bunkers and anti-tank ditches on Germany's eastern front in 1944. These included some major camp complexes along the Vistula River, in former Polish territory conquered by Germany in 1939, as well as in areas further west. Like those massacred at Palmnicken, a high proportion of prisoners in these camps were Jewish women.

These female prisoners were dispatched to subcamps on the Vistula from Stutthof, which exploited many Hungarian Jews as slave labour following Germany's invasion of their country on 19 March 1944. The invasion was to prevent Germany's wartime ally switching sides, as Italy had done previously, and to harness Hungary more effectively to the German war effort. Adolf Eichmann was an SS officer in Budapest overseeing the mass deportation of Jews from Hungary to Auschwitz, where the majority were murdered. Out of some 765,000 Jews who fell into German hands in Hungary, about 458,000 were deported to Auschwitz, where around 350,000 were gassed. The remaining 108,000 who were deemed fit were compelled to work for Nazi Germany. A total of 26,251 Jews, of whom 23,649 were women, were sent to nineteen Stutthof subcamps between June and November 1944.

Apart from Stutthof, thousands of women worked under the OT in many of the big camp complexes. About 4,200 women and 850 children were held in Kaufering camps, out of a total of around 30,000 inmates. In the Mühldorf complex about 800 of the 8,300 inmates were women. Women prisoners were forced into hard labour in Vaivara, many of them under OT supervision, and in the Gross-Rosen subcamp network known as the Bartold Operation (Unternehmen Bartold), set up to build defences in Lower Silesia. Jewish women also laboured on Transit Road IV in occupied Soviet territory, on which Arnold Daghani and his wife Anishoara worked.

When the first transports of Hungarian Jews arrived in 1944, and about half those fit to work were women, Oswald Pohl, the head of the SS Economic and Administrative Head Office, asked Himmler for advice. Pohl sought approval for them to be used as labourers on OT construction projects, since the OT was ready to take them. Himmler's reply in May 1944 was uncompromising: 'Of course Jewish women are to be put to work.'

In the early years of the war, improvement works along the Vistula River requiring tens of thousands of slave labourers had been a vital component of German settlement plans in the region. This had been to promote agriculture and transport for ethnic

German settlers on land from which the Polish population was to be largely removed. By 1944, however, these German imperial dreams had been shattered. The task at this stage was to bolster defences against the Russian advance. Even as late as March 1945, Speer proposed to Hitler that the region between the Rhine and the Vistula, where the Red Army was halted at that point, was worth fighting for. He believed ‘a dogged defence of the current front line for a few weeks may yet demand respect from the enemy and influence the end of the war in a positive direction’.

Some six months before Speer wrote these words, thousands of Jewish women were labouring under the OT to shore up German positions in the region. Two of Stutthof’s biggest subcamps held female Jewish prisoners in two OT construction detachments working on defence installations in the Vistula region. One of the OT units was called ‘Ostland’, based in Elbing; the other, ‘Weichsel’ (Vistula), was based in Thorn (Toruń). The Elbing complex, which was guarded by the SS, was formed in August 1944 as part of the Stutthof network and, in response to a request from the OT, the Thorn complex was formed on 24 August 1944 under the overall supervision of the OT. The SS in Stutthof sent 10,000 Jewish women in August 1944 to be divided equally between Ostland and Weichsel.

Prisoners suffered exceptionally high death rates in these two satellite camp complexes. In OT Elbing, the female prisoners came from countries including Hungary, Lithuania and Poland. Prisoners dug ditches and built bunkers and other military fortifications. In early October 1944 the camp population was 6,440 women; by 24 January 1945 it had dropped to 5,036.

Gutowo was among a number of Stutthof satellite camps set up along the Vistula and Drewenz (Drwęca) rivers in late 1944. Andrasne Takacs, a Hungarian Jew, said she was held in another camp in the network and forced to toil from dawn to dusk: ‘We got very little food and what was there was so bad even animals would not eat it. Very many women fell ill, with typhus, dysentery, we were crawling with lice.’

One Jewish woman deported to Auschwitz from Hungary in early summer 1944 eventually arrived in Gutowo, having first been sent to Elbing to dig trenches. She said she undertook the same work under the OT in Gutowo, but prisoners were provided with totally inadequate shelter as winter took hold: ‘We were housed in tents which offered not the slightest protection against the rigours of the weather, and above all the cold. It was so cold that the water in the drinking vessels froze.’ Typhus and dysentery, as well as lack of food and exhaustion from the hard labour, caused many deaths among the prisoners. The Gutowo camp was closed on 17 January 1945.

Miriam Ejszyszok, who described her plight in the Stutthof complex at the start of this book, was, with her mother Fryda, among 500 women forced on an exhausting three-week march from Jajkowo camp, in the OT Elbing network, when it was evacuated in mid-January 1945. Many inmates died along the route:

We were herded forward, hungry and in rags. The clothing that we had received when leaving Stutthof began to fall apart. Strong frosts predominated at that time. Anyone along the route who tried to sit down and rest never got up again. Cold and exhaustion took their effect.

Finally, they reached Praust camp, where frostbite and diarrhoea took their toll among the prisoners and ‘... people began to drop like flies. Every day large sledges, laden with corpses, were taken out of the camp.’

Miriam said her mother died there on 10 March 1945. German forces fled the camp and Red Army soldiers reached it some two weeks later. Miriam survived.

Thousands of Jewish women held in the Thorn complex did exhausting work like digging anti-tank ditches and laboured five and a half days a week, being woken as early as 3 a.m. and working until dusk. Around 40,000 slave labourers and prisoners of war also worked on the Vistula River scheme. Conditions at all camps in the Jewish women’s Thorn complex were extraordinarily harsh, and hundreds died as a result of hard labour, inadequate clothing, shelter and food, and sickness. Violent SS guards also killed prisoners. Ludwig Denzler, head of the construction section for military defences in the River Drewenz and Thorn areas, said conditions defied description in two of three Stutthof subcamps for Jewish women that he visited:

The medical care ... was not enough, because under those conditions the number of the sick was a large one. Besides I noticed that in the stable where about 50 inmates tried to peel potatoes with spoon handles there were, at a distance of about 15 metres from them three sparingly clothed Jewesses lying on the floor who had died the day before ... About the numbers of deaths I can state only the following: According to the stories I heard, 6 to 10 died every 3 or 4 days. They were buried together. This was an extremely higher percentage than that at the other camps at the Drewenz fortifications.

The OT also oversaw female Jewish slave labourers in subcamps of Gross-Rosen concentration camp. The purpose of these Bartold Operation camps was to fortify the eastern border of the Reich with anti-tank ditches, trenches and defensive walls.

Conditions were harsh in the camps holding these women, which were set up in Silesia from October 1944. They included Hochweiler, Kurzbach, Birnbäumel and Schlesiersee I and II. Five thousand Jewish women were sent from Auschwitz and divided between the camps.

Research into the fate of concentration-camp prisoners in satellite camps in the wider slave-labour economy under the Third Reich has shown that women generally had greater chances of survival than men. There is evidence that the same was true for women working under the OT. Available figures for the five SS-guarded women's subcamps of the Bartold Operation appear to be in line with this overall trend and show fewer deaths among women than men.

All the same, there is perhaps a more remarkable point to be drawn from the comparative figures among the Gross-Rosen subcamps. Women working under the OT, whose staff forced them to undertake extreme hard labour, suffered generally higher death rates than other women's subcamps of Gross-Rosen. Death rates among female prisoners under the OT were at least three times as high as the average of under 1 per cent for all women's camps in Gross-Rosen. This indicated that the physical toll of working for the OT contributed to the higher number of deaths.

Punishments were harsh in the Bartold Operation subcamps and 44-year-old Irene Scheer, who tried to escape from Birnbäumel, was returned to Gross-Rosen and executed there in November 1944. All women in Bartold Operation camps typically had to have their clothes marked with red crosses on their backs to make escape more difficult. Another inmate of Birnbäumel, Isabella Leitner, a Hungarian Jew then aged twenty-three, wrote in a post-war memoir of her emotional turmoil as an SS officer surveyed assembled prisoners there to pick out one of them for a grim task:

My heart is beating. Faster and faster. It will be me. The Oberscharführer will choose me. I know he will. Along with several others. To carry the dead girl to her grave. I can dig the grave, but please, please don't choose me to carry the body. Have mercy. I cannot carry the dead body. Inside, deep in my being, I am just a child. The dead, cold body I cannot touch. It makes me shiver. Please. Please. There is no crematorium in which to burn the dead in Birnbäumel. The dead actually have to be buried, out some distance from the camp. It is done at night, in the ominous night, and I am frightened. So terribly frightened. Don't choose me. But he does.

Leitner had been deported to Auschwitz in May 1944 before being sent to Birnbäumel. She escaped and survived the war, but her mother and youngest sister were murdered in Auschwitz. Another sister died in Bergen-Belsen.

Selection of prisoners to carry out particular duties in the camps often depended on the whim of guards. After the war two women, Rozsi and Helen F., described how inmates of Schlesiersee I had to assemble for roll-call until late in the evening. ‘The SS man picked out the women for different positions. If the woman prisoner made a friendly face, she got a better position.’

In Schlesiersee I, female Jewish prisoners worked in all weathers with primitive shovels to dig four-metre-deep trenches, overseen by OT staff who would beat them mercilessly. Punishments included latrine cleaning. The women’s accommodation included a barn and animal stalls, and their food and winter clothing were grossly inadequate. Inmates had to sleep crammed together on straw in the farm stable. From November 1944, rain and snow meant clothes remained wet for days, work in trenches had to be carried out knee-deep in water and, when the temperature was below freezing, pickaxes and shovels bounced uselessly off the frozen ground. OT staff resorted to using dynamite to break up the rock-hard soil.

Conditions were similarly abysmal in Schlesiersee II. Aniko K., a Hungarian Jewish inmate, described how the ‘block elders’, prisoners who were granted special privileges, could be seen enjoying the warmth of the farmhouse living room. ‘They were laughing, they had warm clothes on and they felt themselves very good and we, outside, were freezing cold,’ she recalled after the war. ‘Block elders’ were part of the ‘Kapo’ system in the camps and kept order where inmates were quartered, whether in barracks, barns, stables or tents. Their privileged position was constantly under threat, however, and Isabella Leitner’s time as Kapo in Birnbäumel only lasted two days after she was caught pretending to beat prisoners with a stick, but striking the walls instead to make a noise to fool SS guards. Her privileges were withdrawn and she was ordered to perform arduous trench-digging every day in the forest as punishment.

As for women deported via Auschwitz to other Bartold Operation camps, inmates of Hochweiler spoke of similar hard labour and inhuman conditions. ‘I arrived in Hochweiler with a 1,000-strong transport. I did trench work there. Work was hard with little to eat,’ said one woman deported from a ghetto in Hungary in June 1944.

Some women gave birth while held in Bartold Operation and other exclusively female camp networks. Pregnant women were originally forbidden to be transferred to concentration camps, but mass deportations made this ruling impractical. Although visibly pregnant women sent to Auschwitz were selected on arrival and gassed, others

whose condition was less obvious survived. Births in the camps, where women had been sent as slave labourers, became nothing unusual, particularly towards the end of the war. However, pregnancy rendered a prisoner's situation highly precarious and female slave labourers risked being sent to an extermination camp, either before or after giving birth, because they were no longer viewed as fit to work. Trapped in hellish conditions, some pregnant women found themselves forced to take other options. Susan Budlovsky, an inmate of Birnbäumel, said abortions were carried out in the camp's sick bay. Given the unhygienic conditions in all the camps, such operations were often judged too risky and doctors appointed from among the prisoners refused to carry them out. Emmi Wiesener, an Austrian Jew held in Gutowo, died on the same day as her newborn child. In Michailowka camp in Ukraine, where not only women, but men and children were held, Arnold Daghani recorded in his diary the birth of a baby to one prisoner, Mrs Lebel. Her husband looked on while her thirteen-month-old daughter played at her side. Daily routine for other inmates crammed into the same pitiful camp quarters continued as usual and Daghani observed: 'In all the chaos, the child was born completely unnoticed.'

In concentration camps and their satellite camp networks, guards practised forms of abuse, including rape, and inmates also engaged in intimate relationships with guards in exchange for food and other privileges. It was far from safe: the affair already mentioned between the SS commandant and the Jewish inmate, at Ereda camp in the Vaivara network in Estonia, ended in their deaths. Sex between camp inmates – enforced or otherwise – also occurred. Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi described how Kapos and other privileged inmates sexually exploited an Italian woman sent from her home country to work for the OT in the camp. Flora, who was small, dark and aged about twenty-five, was sweeping floors in the cellars of Auschwitz-Monowitz, where Levi and his friend Alberto were held. When the two men saw her, Levi, a Jewish chemist, explained his feelings and reactions in *The Truce*, which together with *If This Is a Man* and his other post-war works made him known around the world:

She was the only woman we had seen for months, and she spoke our language, but we *Häftlinge* [prisoners] were forbidden to talk to her. To Alberto and me she seemed beautiful, mysterious, ethereal. In spite of the prohibition, which in some way increased the enchantment of our encounters, adding to them the sharp taste of the illicit, we exchanged some furtive words with Flora; we made ourselves known as Italians and asked her for bread. We asked her a little reluctantly, conscious of debasing ourselves and the quality of that delicate human contact; but

hunger, with which it's difficult to compromise, impelled us not to waste the opportunity.

Flora did give bread to her fellow Italians because she pitied them, Levi said. He told how Alberto found a comb on the ground in the camp and they gave it to her. Levi then described how he and Alberto discovered that Flora 'had meetings with other men':

Where and how, and with whom? In the least elaborate place and in the least elaborate ways: nearby, in the hay, in a secret rabbit hutch organized in a closet under the stairs by a cooperative of German and Polish Kapos. It took almost nothing: a wink of the eye, an imperious nod of the head, and Flora put down the broom and obediently followed the man of the moment. She returned alone, after a few minutes; she readjusted her clothes and began sweeping again without looking at us. After that squalid discovery, Flora's bread tasted to us like salt; but not for that reason did we stop accepting it and eating it.

In the final year of the war, one Jewish woman compelled to work as a slave labourer in the Reich on both construction and production provided a graphic account. Judith Altmann experienced cruelly unusual twists of fate that do not fit easily into the normal categories of Nazi terror. She worked at Gelsenkirchen-Horst, a subcamp of Buchenwald, when she was nineteen years old and was forced to perform both hard labour, building bunkers and roads, and producing munitions in a factory. Judith spoke favourably of the OT compared to the SS:

But in addition to the SS men there was the 'Organ. Todt' ... And, they were not the worst to us. They treated us like humans sometimes. They made some very vulgar remarks and ... vulgar words to the girls, but ... they didn't beat us ... The SS would, if you did something wrong, they would beat us. But not the Organ. Todt. They had a yellow uniform. And we worked very hard ... At night, when we came to the camp, we had our own dish, we got a spoon, we got ... a potato, a bowl of soup and sometimes everyday a slice of bread and sometimes every other day, a slice of bread. But enough ... not to die of hunger. Hungry by all means, at all times. So when we walked to work, if we found a little cabbage on the floor, or potato peels, we picked it up and we ate it because we were still very hungry but not enough to die of the hunger. But very hard work. We worked only day shift in Gelsenkirchen, but the bombs were coming down and one night the camp was

bombed and many of our girls from my group were killed and many of them lost legs and arms and it was terrible ...

Judith said none of the women wounded in the air raid at Gelsenkirchen-Horst were treated for their injuries. In a labour camp where such lethal neglect was shown to bomb casualties, she recalled some small kindnesses. She said that, occasionally, a member of the OT ‘would throw us a little piece of bread ... They had pity on us.’

Judith later worked in a Krupp factory, within the OT’s Task Group III region known as Hansa, where her survival chances could be expected to be comparatively high. She was a prisoner at a satellite camp in Essen, where inmates were sent to work at the factory producing munitions and tank parts. Although this task was far less physically demanding than construction work, any sickness or serious injury could still be an effective death sentence: a prisoner who could no longer work was liable to be sent to an extermination camp. Judith, the youngest of six children in a Jewish family from Czechoslovakia, suffered an injury resulting in her being listed for deportation to Auschwitz. A piece of iron had fallen and broken her wrist. Help came from an unexpected quarter, however, when a female SS officer took her to hospital. The SS woman, Erika, drove Judith to be treated in Essen, where a cast was put on the broken wrist, and then arranged for Judith to work back at the factory as a translator. Lice crawled in and ate her skin under the cast, so when it was taken off after six weeks the wound was open and raw to the bone. Nevertheless, she survived the war.

In Vaivara concentration camp, many women worked on manual tasks connected to the principal goal of extracting oil from shale. Nora Lewin, a Jewish woman prisoner in Ereda camp, said: ‘I myself was detailed to do hard labour – always outside the camp – while I was in Ereda camp. My work group of about 100 men and women were hustled every morning to the work site.’ She described prisoners’ clothing as ‘completely inadequate’ for winter, adding that workers who collapsed through exhaustion or hunger were shot by the SS.

Eta Weismann, who told of her ordeal in the lower part of Ereda in [Chapter 14](#), recounted how an OT member had been involved in a ‘selection’ of children. Weismann said:

I ... remember a selection in the upper camp. This involved a selection of children. These children were loaded onto railway wagons and taken away. A German named Schneider accompanied this transport. He belonged to the Organisation Todt and his hand had been amputated. He wore a black glove ...

In connection with a murder case against camp commandant Helmut Schnabel, former Ereda inmate Philipp Alwin told post-war investigators that his eleven-year-old younger son ‘was taken away from me by force in 1944 and brought from Ereda to Auschwitz with 80 other children. Schnabel was not present on this occasion.’

Molly Ingster, another survivor of Ereda, recalled a selection in which her daughter was picked to go to Auschwitz. Molly had previously escaped with her four-year-old daughter when they arrived by train in Estonia from Wilna ghetto in the summer of 1943. Hungry and thirsty after three days hiding in woods, Molly slipped into the ranks of an OT-guarded column of labourers, her daughter concealed under a coat, as they marched back to camp in the dark and thus entered Vivikonna subcamp. In January 1944, Molly and her daughter, having survived a typhus epidemic, were taken to Ereda, where 200 children were selected to go to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Molly’s daughter died in the gas chamber. Molly, who was also deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, survived a year there before being taken to Bergen-Belsen, from where she was liberated.

These accounts by Jewish women tell of their suffering under the OT’s ruthless and often murderous supervision in the final stages of the war. OT engineers, for their part, also recorded their efforts to carry out projects in this period, expressing with chilling clarity what they viewed as justifiable explanations of their treatment of slave labourers.

# 18

## WORKED TO DEATH

An extraordinary OT report on Hitler's doomed Arctic railway presented some startling conclusions. Firstly, Russian prisoners of war could be made to work in tunnels as fast as machines. Secondly, the reason the railway in Norway was far behind schedule was not because slave labourers were being worked to death in infernal conditions, but because there were never enough of them. Written in March 1945, just two months before Germany's surrender, OT building surveyor Merkle provided ample evidence as to why his section of the railway was certain to fail. At the same time, he provided data to show that orders had been followed to work at full capacity for the last several months with all available labour and resources. He knew his task was hopeless. The Arctic railway never came anywhere near completion.

Merkle's report provides a powerful insight into the way senior OT managers viewed their jobs and how they responded to Speer's campaign for efficiency. In documents held in OT records and in the files of post-war investigations, they describe their experiences of working to deadlines, against seemingly impossible odds. A senior member of the OT in Norway, civil engineer Walter Beck, spoke of having to build barrack huts in Karasjok on arrival, with little equipment: 'We were very poorly equipped with tools. For example, the construction company only had a hammer and a saw. My geologist's hammer was for a time the OT people's only hammer.' Hundreds of Serb prisoners gradually arrived to help build the Reichsstrasse 50 highway further into the Arctic Circle: 'Work output was relatively low. The reason was the bad food, bad equipment and unfavourable weather conditions.'

These problems were prominent in Merkle's report on the Arctic railway, too, where ambition far exceeded achievement. Merkle was in charge of a central section based in Fauske and, in May 1942, was among geologists and engineers who made an aerial survey of the entire route of more than 1,000 kilometres. Just one 80-kilometre section

from Fauske towards Narvik involved construction of thirty-three tunnels, with a total length of 27 kilometres, and twenty bridges. Six hydroelectric and three steam-power plants were to be built to help provide power for drilling and other equipment, as well as lighting for tunnel building and labour camps. Workers and equipment were in lamentably short supply. Merkle's report appeared largely aimed at exonerating himself and his team, who had not only missed successive deadlines but also completed little of their allotted task:

As in the field of equipment supply, the workforce fell far short of fulfilling requirements. This fact is one of the main reasons for the failure from the very first day to keep to the construction programme. Available statistics show clearly that only half the necessary total workforce was available at any one time.

By May 1944 the labour force based at Fauske was 7,741-strong, comprising 795 Germans, 208 Norwegians, 402 foreign civilian workers and 6,336 Soviet and other prisoners of war. Merkle reported that this compared with a forecast drawn up the previous year envisaging a total workforce of around 14,000. Having complained about insufficient numbers of workers, Merkle criticised the prisoners of war for their quality of labour, without acknowledging how pitiful work and living conditions ravaged their health:

The majority of the workforce were made up of Russian prisoners of war, whose average work output equalled about half that of a German worker. The German and foreign employees and workers were accommodated throughout in barrack huts, the prisoners of war predominantly in OT tents. Twenty big camps were set up in total.

After the Soviet prisoners of war had spent their first Arctic winter in tents, the first railway tunnels were begun in the spring and summer of 1943. Ships bringing equipment were unloaded day and night, seven days a week, to ensure rapid turnarounds and continuation of supplies by sea. During 1944 work picked up significantly:

Since German or foreign miners were not, or scarcely, available, the prisoners of war had to be trained in the handling of equipment for tunnel construction, especially in the use and operation of hammer drills and serrated drills. Weeks and months often went by until the individual columns had worked themselves in sufficiently for satisfactory performances to be achieved.

Employees of specialist firms could also train German workers in how to use explosives for tunnel blasting. Merkle praised the Hamburg construction firm Heinrich Butzer for its success using Russian prisoners of war as manual labourers instead of rubble-clearing machines, which were out of action because supplies of compressed air and spare parts were lacking. ‘By means of skilful handling and instruction of the Russians,’ he wrote, the firm achieved the same performance with workers clearing waste rock by hand as with machines.

Fuel shortages curtailed the use of machinery from September 1944, then all construction work north of Torkeleng, about 25 kilometres north-east of Fauske, had to be abandoned. Equipment was to be transferred to another OT rail construction administration or prepared for shipment back to the Reich. However, in November the order was issued to return all machines destined for the Reich back to the construction sites and resume work to the full, using whatever equipment and fuel was to hand. At the time of his report on 8 March 1945, Merkle declared:

The vast majority of the construction sites are today set up again and works are going ahead. The rest of the work sites should be completely started up by the end of March. Calculated all together, the suspension of construction caused delays to deadlines of four to five months.

Giving performance totals for 1944, according to which tunnel construction amounted to only 10 per cent of the target figure, Merkle commented that the results reflected the ‘completely insufficient’ supply of labour and equipment during the two and a half years since the start of the project.

Merkle’s report accurately describes what motivated OT engineers. As they saw it, they did the best they could with the equipment and labour available. Skilled managers like Merkle followed their superiors’ directives to boost performance as far as possible. If that involved teaching Soviet prisoners of war to work in tunnels as efficiently as machines, it would be done. If work had to proceed at maximum pace in March 1945, with the Red Army advancing ever closer, that target was met.

Merkle’s struggle to meet impossible deadlines was replicated elsewhere on the Arctic railway project, which was originally planned to reach Kirkenes in Norway’s far north. Dr Ing. Renner, who headed the OT’s Nordlandbahn rail construction operation based in Mo i Rana, told the OT’s deputy chief, Xaver Dorsch, in March 1944 that more workers and equipment were desperately needed. Even his initial goal of turning the port of Rognan, south of Fauske, into a rail–ship transfer hub could not be achieved until

the end of 1945 without reinforcements. Overall, the OT's Wiking group foresaw the need for 38,000 more workers, including 17,500 convicts and prisoners of war, to reach a total target of 100,000 for its various projects in 1944. Railway building alone, including the Nordlandbahn, was projected to require nearly 30,000 prisoners of war in that year.

The determination of OT staff to achieve their organisation's goals was founded in large measure on their professionalism. Another spur for OT staff was knowing that many of their projects had been accorded the highest priority. The Norway rail link had been ordered by Hitler himself and the Führer followed its progress closely, rejecting all opposition.

Willi Henne, Merkle's overall boss in Norway, conducted OT projects in his sphere of operations with ruthless determination. Other examples among mid- to high-level managers in the organisation include Arnold Adam, who was in charge of Transit Road IV leading to the Caucasus, on which Arnold and Anishoara Daghani and other slave labourers toiled in terrible conditions, and Walter Brugmann, who headed the OT's Russia-South sector. This was an area deep in occupied Soviet territory where desperate operations in a combat zone resulted in lethal conditions for slave labourers under the OT. Under Hermann Giesler, who ran the OT's Russia-North sector before returning to the Reich to head Deutschland VI, about half the more than 38,000 mostly Jewish slave labourers in the Mühldorf and Kaufering complexes died.

So, was it professionalism and the urgency of their work that made senior OT managers drive their prisoners with such merciless zeal? All these OT managers, as well as others, were encouraged in their actions by a sense of common purpose. They were engaged in a whole series of top-priority projects, often in the final year of the war, and made every effort to achieve what was required of them. Whether it was road and railway links in Norway, shale-oil works in Estonia and later in the Desert programme, or the vast underground armaments and fuel projects in the Reich, all the evidence points to the fact that OT personnel drove slave labourers right up to Germany's final defeat.

Analysis of OT operations shows how Hitler repeatedly chose the OT to carry out projects he considered of the utmost priority. At the same time, it reveals that while the dictator often pointed to the OT's early success with the Westwall, he continued to rely on the organisation late in the war when it suffered disastrous failures. Nazi Germany's hopes were pinned on OT engineers to help deliver 'wonder weapons', subterranean plants to produce jet fighters and desperately needed fuel to turn the tide of war. However, Germany headed instead to defeat, and the programmes to relocate German

industry underground proved less able to produce high-tech aircraft and rockets than to create hellish places of death for slave labourers.

Catastrophic conditions in the Dachau subcamps for the OT's underground plane factories caused huge loss of life. When viewed purely in terms of delivering what their designers intended, Kaufering and Mühldorf also represented significant failures for the OT. They were not the only examples of the OT disappointing Hitler, and this raises the question of why he kept faith in the organisation. Among other major projects principally managed by the OT, the Atlantikwall proved ineffective as a bulwark against the D-Day Allied landings. This might be seen as a successfully completed but critically flawed German military scheme, but a string of other projects existed where the OT fell far short. Dorsch broke his promise to finish the jet-fighter factories in six months, and they were still not ready by the end of the war; in Norway, the Arctic railway on which Hitler set so much store progressed at a snail's pace and never came anywhere near completion; and the Desert shale-oil scheme in the Reich never produced any significant amount of fuel.

Why did Hitler persist in turning to the OT to carry out all these tasks? As Allied victory neared, Hitler's options narrowed. Increasingly unrealistic hopes were placed on the shoulders of the nation's scientists and OT engineers to win the war with the power of technology. Failures had to be balanced against what appeared to Nazi leaders as the tantalising promise of a military turnaround. In the OT's favour, it had earned a considerable store of credit with its Nazi paymasters through past successes. Hitler had repeatedly praised the organisation to the detriment of the Wehrmacht, notably when comparing OT and army engineers' efforts in building the Westwall and Atlantikwall. He congratulated OT workers for their swift repair of strategic dams in the Ruhr after the British 'Dambuster' raid in May 1943 and for building transport links in 1943 over the Kerch Strait, supplying troops heading to the Caucasus. Putting Dorsch in charge of building underground factories for fighter planes in 1944, he said the OT's performance as a construction agency was unsurpassed.

Viewed as a whole, the OT's balance sheet remained positive in Hitler's eyes for most of the war and only tipped seriously into the red in the final stages of the conflict. At this stage, military setbacks and diminishing resources enforced the need for compromise. Hitler still entrusted the OT with his most cherished projects virtually to the end and this would have devastating consequences for slave labourers. As survivor accounts have shown, the OT practised its most extreme violence against prisoners when it had most control over them and took no effective action to reduce the violence when it possessed most authority to do so. On the contrary, all types of violence became

exceptionally intense, causing high death rates among prisoners: in circumstances in which the influence of brutal SS practices was reduced or absent, prisoners were still beaten to death, or ‘selected’ for extermination, by OT personnel. The accounts also illustrate how exhaustion, hunger, sickness and exposure, rather than physical violence, took so many lives. At the same time, they reveal the interconnected nature of physical and other forms of violence.

About 25,000 Jews and tens of thousands of Soviet prisoners of war died on Transit Road IV in Ukraine. Out of 8,300 inmates of the Mühldorf camps, around half perished, while the same proportion died out of the 30,000 prisoners sent to the Kaufering complex. In the Giant camp complex in Lower Silesia, conditions were similarly catastrophic, and all types of violence were endemic. After the OT took over, there were 13,300 Jewish inmates. Around 5,000 died. In the camps of the Desert shale-oil project in Württemberg the pattern was similar: 1,716 out of 4,714 inmates in Dautmergen died in the camp itself and about 1,200 died in Bisingen out of a total of 4,163 by the end of the war.

Accounts of the camps in Norway, from both former inmates and German and British investigations into war crimes, paint a consistent picture of violence across the spectrum by OT personnel. This emerges from the many statements by former prisoners, but also from the report by SS-Sturmbannführer Dr Bauer. Out of 110,000 Soviet workers deported to Norway, about 15,400 prisoners of war died of hunger, sickness or harsh working conditions, or all three; many more were killed by their guards and the possibility of undiscovered graves means the overall death toll could be higher. Death rates among more than 5,000 Yugoslav prisoners shipped to Norway were especially high and 2,900 perished. Of 1,600 Polish prisoners there, 165 died.

OT maltreatment of foreign workers stemmed from racism deeply ingrained among the organisation’s employees. An example of extreme anti-Semitism was displayed by the OT’s Professor von Gottstein, one of the OT Linienchefs (line managers) managing the major transport routes in occupied Europe. An Austrian-born engineer, von Gottstein was responsible for the Reichsstrasse 50 north–south highway in Norway. Just before the war, Todt praised him highly for his engineering skills in building motorways, as well as for being an ‘exemplary National Socialist’. Especially grim evidence emerged of the racist beliefs of von Gottstein when he was captured after the war. His virulently anti-Semitic views were revealed in a secret tape-recording made in November 1945 while he was at a British army-run detention centre. Reacting to a man who had been on guard detail at Auschwitz, who said he was unable to bear the screams of victims for too long and that the smell of the crematorium ‘used to remain in your nostrils for days’,

von Gottstein replied: ‘The only really good thing about the whole affair is that a few million Jews no longer exist.’

Belief in the superior nature of German labour was also deeply rooted in the organisation. Working in often remote sites in foreign territory heightened a German OT man’s sense of the ‘alien’ and ‘otherness’ of the enemy, but also his self-sufficiency. Such convictions were clearly held by men such as Merkle, working to overcome huge obstacles blocking the Arctic railway project in Norway. For German workers, the concept of ‘German quality work’ was equated with Germanness and excluded foreigners. It was a belief in their own superior technical skills that could endure despite the harsh realities of operations on the ground, whose failures OT staff blamed on insufficient labour and equipment. Hardships merely fuelled a German worker’s stubborn self-reliance. Just as German soldiers, in their letters home, came to regard exterminating ‘others’ as work, so OT staff applied themselves to the task of exploiting foreign slave labour in murderous conditions.

The ‘ordinary men’ of the OT shot, beat or worked prisoners to death while employed by a state organisation authorising the use of force. At the Nuremberg trials the prosecution designated Nazi forces like the SS and Gestapo as criminal organisations, while the OT and most other German institutions fell outside that category. Yet extensive research has shown that it was not just the ‘illegal’ organisations which carried out mass killings of Jews and other victims; state forces including the army, the police and the OT did so, too. So, in examining Nazi war crimes, is the idea of ‘criminal’ or ‘abnormal’ organisations as flawed as that of viewing all perpetrators as pathological monsters?

In a comprehensive study of organisations in the context of the Holocaust, sociologist Stefan Kühl concluded:

The organisations which specialise in torture and killing do not fundamentally function differently to organisations which care for the sick, advertise ice cream, teach schoolchildren or produce cars. The worrying discovery is that, not only are the members of organisations specialising in mass killing often completely normal people, but also the organisations by which the mass killings are planned and carried out display characteristics of perfectly normal organisations.

Kühl conducted his analysis using the German Reserve Police Battalion 101, whose members carried out mass shootings of Jews in Poland in 1942–3, as an illustration. His purpose was not to present new facts about events, but to look at this example and draw

general insights into the involvement of members of organisations in mass killings. He found that the Nazis could rely on organisations whose central structures, such as hiring, firing and redeploying personnel, developing programmes and creating communication channels, were perfectly normal: they could ‘bring their members to do things which they would not do outside their organisation’.

Among organisations classed as ‘criminal’ at Nuremberg, therefore, a lawyer in the Reich Security Head Office could be redeployed as the head of an execution squad, or a finance official at the SS Economic and Administrative Head Office could work in a death camp. Among organisations not deemed illegal, soldiers in the army and reserve policemen could be ‘redeployed’ in the same way and their roles switched to take part in the Holocaust. As Kühl states: ‘[The regime] required – and that is one of the frightening lessons of the Holocaust – no completely novel programmes to carry out the killing operations, no new communication channels and no specially selected personnel.’

There is evidence that OT personnel participated in the mass shootings of Jews in German-occupied Eastern territories, but OT staff, considered to belong to a ‘normal organisation’, mostly caused exceptionally high death rates among prisoners by different means. As in the case of members of the Ordnungspolizei (Order Police), who switched tasks to form killing squads to carry out mass murder of Jews, so the same personnel in the OT were assigned different programmes and roles. The OT’s Dr Erika Flocken (see Introduction and [Chapter 16](#)) was sent to Bavaria where she carried out ‘selections’ of sick slave labourers in the Mühldorf camp complex so they could be sent to Auschwitz to be murdered. Similarly Hermann Giesler, originally an architect, became the ruthless OT task-group leader in Russia-North and later for the region including Kaufering and Mühldorf. Winand Schneider went from his job as a surveyor in a German road-building firm to command an OT unit overseeing Jews performing slave labour near Minsk. There he coordinated with execution squads led by the SS Security Service to decide the prisoners’ fates. Members of ‘criminal’ organisations, like the SS, also worked for the OT. SS-Standartenführer Willi Henne had supervised predominantly German labourers during pre-war building of the Westwall before Todt redeployed him to lead OT operations in Norway. He worked there until the end of the war, overseeing foreign slave labourers toiling in appalling Arctic conditions.

While driving its foreign labourers mercilessly, the OT also had formal expectations about the performance of its core German skilled workers. It made efforts to motivate them by persuasion or punishment, but in the end cared only to a limited extent about the real motives of its personnel. As Kühl states: ‘What counts for the organisation in the

end is solely that the action it expects is carried out.' To motivate staff and outline OT objectives, Speer issued a number of directives: using both carrot and stick, he not only strove to ensure the advancement of his favourites, but also issued dire warnings to anyone who stepped out of line. Addressing what he perceived to be failings among senior OT staff in 1943, Speer threatened to punish offenders severely, since failing to be a good role model for the rank and file in the OT undermined discipline:

To be a Führer means first and foremost not to give orders, but to lead by example!  
... My responsibility for tasks vital to the war, as given to me as head of the OT by the Führer, compels me to intervene ruthlessly in future against offences ... without regard to the identity and position of the person concerned.

Speer's warnings on discipline were drummed home at a more routine level by regular bulletins issued by OT headquarters. The *Information Bulletin* of Organisation Todt Headquarters, which issued practical instructions, and *Der Frontarbeiter*, an illustrated publication with a high propaganda content, were both vehicles for the organisation's leadership to project its message and give direction to staff. *Der Frontarbeiter* first appeared on 22 June 1940 and was initially printed in Belgium, being distributed to OT units in Nazi-occupied Europe. The man in charge of culture, press and propaganda at OT headquarters, Rudolf Wolters, also arranged propaganda films and press coverage, and employed artists to record its achievements 'for posterity' in sketches or paintings. All these activities informed its own members and the public at large.

Articles by 'OT war correspondents' in *Der Frontarbeiter* portrayed a career in the organisation as a tough but adventurous foray into far-flung regions of foreign territory, providing close support to German soldiers. Photographs of armed, well-equipped OT front workers braving the challenge of working in Arctic conditions were designed to appeal to Germans who valued what they saw as manly virtues of physical fitness, resilience, military expertise and courage, whereas pictures of vast OT building sites suggested German technical prowess. Ten months after the Wehrmacht's invasion of the Soviet Union, *Der Frontarbeiter*'s cover photograph was of two OT members in a snow-shrouded village in the occupied east. The March 1942 issue contained an article headlined 'With shovel and gun', describing armed OT staff supporting the Wehrmacht in hostile territory. Members of the OT front-worker unit had been overseeing a column of local Ukrainian-led 'civilian workers' engaged in road clearing, but had to fight alongside German soldiers to repel a night-time Soviet assault. 'So the men in brown uniform, who bear the name of their brilliant and never-to-be-forgotten Dr Todt, are not

only tirelessly working at their assigned tasks, but also constantly ready to take action, whenever necessary, and exchange the shovel with the gun.'

Such articles created an image of the OT which the organisation wanted to project, emphasising that its engineers and other trained staff stood shoulder to shoulder with Germany's troops. Speer made frequent trips to raise the OT's profile and boost morale among its units posted around Europe. His visit to Seefeld in June 1943 included an award ceremony at which OT front worker Josef Hinkerohe received the Knight's Cross with Swords for services clearly regarded as representing a model career in the organisation. Hinkerohe, in his early forties at the time, had worked on the Westwall from 1938 before supporting the Wehrmacht in 1940 in an OT unit closely following victorious German troops into Western Europe. A potted biography issued at the time of the award depicted Hinkerohe as an example of how OT front-line workers were now definitively taking their place beside front-line soldiers. Hinkerohe worked in France on oil depots and submarine bunkers before switching to Romania and then to Ukraine, building roads towards the Caucasus. He had set a 'stirring example' by keeping roads clear despite snowstorms and 'constant Soviet attacks', performing worthy labours on transport links in the Crimea. Speer lauded him as a front worker 'with an exemplary readiness for sacrifice' and a standard-bearer for OT men across Europe.

This portrait of a 'model' OT man depicted him criss-crossing the Third Reich's (at that time) vastly enlarged empire. He was an instrument of conquest and occupation. Speer wanted OT personnel to see themselves as being a vital part of forces battling to extend and secure those new frontiers against what the regime called the 'Jewish-Bolshevik' enemy. As well as ramping up Germany's colonial pretensions and extolling the OT's potential after an imagined 'final victory', *Der Frontarbeiter* did not shrink from publishing articles on the 'Jewish question'. One stated in May 1943 that there existed:

clarity in the world that the decisive epoch had begun with this war which, as the Führer has already repeatedly said, will end with the destruction of Jewry. Precisely in the course of this war, the Jewish question has been demonstrated more and more to have become not solely one of race, but in the meantime also an eminent political question.

Such articles clearly represented the views of the OT leadership, and the organisation expected its members to support them.

The OT used various means to instruct, influence and inform members on many issues, including racist ideology. The organisation sharpened its own self-image by these means, and sought to guide and inspire its members. The clarion call to OT front workers to go into battle alongside the Wehrmacht drew attention to their role as armed auxiliaries. The barrage of instructions to increase efficiency in top-priority tasks ordered, in many cases, by Hitler racked up pressure on OT personnel. This was a powerful factor in driving them to beat and work labour-camp inmates to death. The OT management's official publications also reinforced Nazi racism, telling staff their prisoners were subhuman and that Jews should be exterminated.

The fact that so many of the OT's mammoth projects in the final stages of the war were ill-considered, unviable and ultimately futile did not slacken the pace of work. On the contrary, the organisation's engineers appeared intent on slamming their train powered by slave labour at full tilt into the buffers. Speer exhorted them to greater efficiency and they responded to the very end.

Why did all available workers continue to build a railway in Norway when the project was hopelessly off course? Even the OT professionals building it at the time produced cogent reports proving the futility, yet the work and the unremitting misery and loss of life among the prisoners kept grinding on. If the railway had been an exception, it could be argued that it was an aberration. But other giant OT projects with similar fatal flaws were ruthlessly pursued by managers who appeared intent on taking the same flight from reality. The underground factories for jet fighters in Bavaria were never completed. The shale-oil plants in the Württemberg subcamps of the Desert scheme produced precious little low-grade oil in the final weeks of the war. Other OT-run projects in the Geilenberg programme to repair or relocate fuel refineries underground remained unfinished. The extensive Giant subterranean network housing Hitler's headquarters and military facilities proved redundant, washed up like flotsam on the tide of war.

Where the OT worked alongside SS engineers similarly hell-bent on rocket and other military programmes, whatever the cost in prisoners' lives, their methods broadly coincided. At the Dora subterranean complex producing V2 missiles under SS engineer Hans Kammler, OT and SS staff displayed the same indifference to the fate of concentration-camp inmates and even competed to secure their labour. Former OT engineers worked on Kammler's specialist staff, whose leader Speer judged to be a man of extraordinary talent.

More than seventy-five years after the Second World War, the role of 'ordinary' OT men and women in the Nazi slave-labour programme has been largely obscured.

Wehrmacht participation in mass murder of Jews in the German-occupied east has been well researched. ‘Ordinary men’ in the German Ordnungspolizei also carried out mass shootings of Jews in Poland. It has been established, too, that the SS involved soldiers and policemen in genocide and made them partners in crime. But the OT was also drawn into the concentration-camp system to perform duties that were normally the exclusive preserve of the SS. As they strove to perform German ‘quality work’, blaming poor-quality labour and resources for failures in practice, OT engineers and managers pursued their various projects late in the war, whatever the cost to camp inmates. They reacted to a multitude of forces, including urgent deadlines, directives on efficiency and wartime chaos. OT staff contributed, through either passive acceptance or active participation, to a murderous system delivering wretchedness and death to prisoners on their construction sites.

# **JUDGMENT**

# 19

## ON TRIAL

Albert Speer was the OT's most prominent war criminal. Scarcely more than a dozen other members of the organisation came to trial after the Second World War. Despite Soviet demands that he should hang, Speer was sentenced to twenty years in Spandau prison for war crimes and crimes against humanity at the 1945–6 Nuremberg trial of major Nazi figures. US judge Francis Biddle initially favoured the death sentence for Speer, but he changed his mind after British and French judges argued against it. Hermann Göring, Joachim von Ribbentrop and Fritz Sauckel were among those who received death sentences. Göring committed suicide before he could be hanged.

Speer's role as leader of the OT was weighed in evidence at the trial. This assessment of OT operations was unusual for Allied military tribunals and other post-war courts, which brought few OT members to trial in the first place. In its judgment of Speer, the military tribunal explicitly mentioned his role as head of the OT:

Speer was also directly involved in the utilization of forced labour as Chief of the Organization Todt. The Organization Todt functioned principally in the occupied areas on such projects as the Atlantic Wall and the construction of military highways, and Speer has admitted that he relied on compulsory service to keep it adequately staffed. He also used concentration camp labour in the industries under his control.

During his trial, Speer's defence strategy was skilfully evasive on matters like concentration-camp labourers. He told the tribunal about his visit on 30 March 1943 to Mauthausen concentration camp, set up as a result of his pre-war agreement with Himmler for prisoners there to quarry granite for him. This visit had become publicly known and this was why Speer had to explain it at his trial. He said his short visit – it lasted about forty-five minutes – showed that the camp was a model of cleanliness and

he saw ‘no workers’. A very different picture of the camp was portrayed after the war by a former inmate, Spaniard Sebastián Mena. Around 7,500 ‘Red Spaniards’ who fled after Franco’s victory in the Spanish Civil War were interned in Germany between 1940 and 1942 at Mauthausen, where Speer and Himmler’s accord meant they and other prisoners toiled in stone quarries. They were forced to perform the most punishing tasks and many died. Mena described how prisoners had to carry stones about one kilometre from the quarry to the camp ten to twelve times a day, each time climbing or descending 186 steps. ‘For the Nazis, a block of granite had more value than a human life,’ he said.

When the question of underground factories was raised during the trial, Speer stated that the best possible conditions were required for workers to produce the most up-to-date weapons. This was very far from the truth. In court, Speer’s overall approach was to portray himself as focused on ‘technical’ matters and to distance himself as far as possible from his Nazi co-defendants. He sought to shift the blame for the fate of slave workers onto Sauckel, claiming Germany’s labour supremo was responsible for their supply and working conditions. He acknowledged broad responsibility for Nazi crimes, although not his own, while attacking Hitler, Goebbels and Himmler – who were all dead – for what they did. As he told the tribunal: ‘I naturally did not know anything of what I have heard here at this trial.’

Some crucial evidence to debunk such claims by Speer was not available to Nuremberg prosecutors, such as documents proving that Speer’s evictions of tens of thousands of Jews from Berlin resulted in them being murdered. Rudolf Wolters, Speer’s loyal aide in the Nazi era, had buried incriminating documents in his garden and their contents only emerged after the war. The way this happened is wrapped up in the extraordinary story of the friendship between the pair, which turned into bitter estrangement after Speer emerged from Spandau prison and published his memoir, *Inside the Third Reich*.

These had been two young men, both sons of architects, whose careers had mirrored each other closely before Speer’s meteoric rise. They had studied architecture together, having first met at Munich Technical College, and went on to study under the renowned architect Heinrich Tessenow. Both men were talented and ambitious, but Speer always seemed to be one step ahead. Speer was well off, whereas Wolters came from a less affluent background; Speer, despite being two years younger, gained his architect’s licence in 1927 at the same time as Wolters; and it was Speer who won the plum post that Wolters coveted, being appointed Tessenow’s assistant. Despite this, Wolters remained intensely loyal as he followed in Speer’s slipstream, taking lower-level jobs in the various institutions over which Speer presided: ‘Germania’, the OT and the

Armaments Ministry. He even edited Speer's notes for his memoirs, written partly on toilet paper and cigarette papers and smuggled out of Spandau, fulfilling a painstaking task which Speer never publicly acknowledged. Because of Speer's repeated public criticism of Hitler, though, and around the time of the publication of *Inside the Third Reich*, Wolters eventually snapped and revealed damning evidence against his long-time friend.

Whereas Wolters considered Speer to have committed an act of betrayal, Speer, the convicted war criminal and former inmate of Spandau, persisted in his attempts to deceive the world and cover his tracks. Regarding his involvement in Auschwitz, up to his death in 1981 he denied this outright. Yet historians have discovered documents confirming Speer not only knew about Auschwitz but approved its extension and asked Himmler for slave labourers from it. In his trial testimony, Speer recounted how he planned to assassinate Hitler in mid-February 1945; the impractical plan involved putting poison gas into the ventilation system for the bunker under Hitler's Chancellery. Speer said he had intended to use the poison gas Tabun, but the scheme proved unworkable because the gas was only deadly if there was an explosion, so it was abandoned. Historians have since dismissed his entire story as a fabrication.

Apart from Speer, thirteen other OT personnel were convicted of wartime crimes at various post-war trials. Three of them were executed and the rest served custodial sentences. Speer was the only one to be tried at Nuremberg, while three OT staff were convicted in Dachau, three by French courts, five in Belgrade and one in East Berlin. Only one trial – held in Munich – took place in a West German court.

The Dachau trial involved the most high-profile OT manager after Speer, Hermann Giesler. Like Speer, Giesler's senior position in the OT and its use of slave labour were significant factors at his trial for crimes at the Mühldorf complex. Giesler's life sentence was reduced and he was released in 1952.

Dr Erika Flocken was sentenced to death at Dachau, but this was commuted to life imprisonment before being later reduced. Aged thirty-four at the time of the trial, she was the youngest OT staff member to be convicted of crimes not involving physical violence. She belonged neither to the Nazi Party nor to the SS and had studied medicine in Cologne, Königsberg and Marburg. Her husband, Erich, had also been an OT physician but had died in a plane crash in Soviet territory in May 1944. The Dachau court found that the evidence against Erika Flocken:

established ... that she knew the sick inmates selected by her on the several occasions were in fact shipped to Auschwitz; that, under these circumstances and

with full knowledge that some would die en route and at least the great bulk of them were to be shipped to their death, she selected additional hundreds for such shipments ...

For a long time the SS had no doctor of its own in Mühldorf, and so entrusted Dr Flocken with selecting sick prisoners there. The third OT staff member in the dock at Dachau, Wilhelm Griesinger, was the organisation's 'principal technical supervisor' at the camp's main construction site. 'The evidence established that the accused assumed an important role in the common design; that he had no regard for the health and lives of the inmates; and that he beat and ordered the beating of inmates.' He was sentenced to twenty years' imprisonment.

Employees of the Polensky and Zöllner firm contracted by the OT to work on the site were also indicted, and two were convicted and sentenced. They were Karl Gickeleiter, who received twenty years, and Otto Sperling, who was condemned to death.

At a trial in 1949 in France concerning events on the Channel Island of Alderney, OT-Haupttruppführer Adam Adler, a former commander of Norderney camp, and OT-Meister Heinrich Evers, his deputy, became the only two OT personnel to be convicted for war crimes there. Accused of subjecting French Jews to 'superhuman work' and 'systematic ill-treatment', Adler was sentenced to ten years and Evers to seven. A French military court also sentenced Kabus, a man who worked at a forge on the building site in Bisingen, to death. He was executed for severely maltreating prisoners.

Other OT personnel were sentenced for maltreating slave labourers in Norway. OT-Meister Oskar Lindner was executed, having been convicted of beating around ten prisoners to death and ordering the torture or poisoning of others, some of whom died. Max Leopold, another defendant listed in the Belgrade court judgment, was also condemned to death and executed after being convicted of throttling a sick prisoner on a ship sailing to Norway. Leopold was a medical orderly based near Trondheim and held an OT rank.

Three other OT staff who worked at Ørlandet were sentenced in Belgrade. In 1946, Christian Schrade, an OT engineer working at Ørlandet, was given ten years' hard labour; he worked at the camp from July 1942 to March 1943. OT-Meister Josef Starkens, who worked at Ørlandet from September 1942 until the end of the war, was sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment with hard labour. He died in a Yugoslav prison on 29 December 1947. OT-Meister Bruno Wendtland, based there from August 1942 until the end of the war, was sentenced to six years in prison with hard labour and released in October 1950.

Another OT engineer, imprisoned for his actions in Norway where he headed the OT administrative region including such infamous camps as Karasjok, was Fritz Autenrieth. He was born in 1908 in the south German city of Ulm and worked as a civil engineer before the war. After being assigned to work for the OT he was based in Pleskau, in occupied Soviet territory east of the Estonian border, before being sent to Alta in Norway's far north. He said in a statement in 1977 to West German prosecutors investigating wartime events in Karasjok that he had been taken prisoner in 1945 and held by British forces before being handed over into Russian custody. In 1950 he was sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment in East Berlin by a Russian military court for taking part in the aggressive war against Russia.

The Munich trial of Diederich Scholz in 1962 was significant because it showed in unusual detail how an OT man acted amid SS brutality in German-occupied Norway. OT staff were capable of murdering prisoners without an SS presence, which occurred in both Alderney and Ørlandet, but the legal judgment regarding Scholz was revealing.

Scholz was twenty-two years old in June 1942 when he was transferred to the SS-run Karasjok camp, in the far north of Norway, as part of a National Socialist Motor Corps transport unit assigned to the OT. He took the job after being released from the army as unfit for service because of an eye condition. His unit's task was to transport OT supplies for mainly road- and bridge-building operations, as well as delivering food to a camp for Serb slave labourers. Its commandant was SS-Obersturmführer Franz de Martin, a 'brutal man, given to drink' who had shot many Serb prisoners for trifling reasons. Around 300 of these Serb labourers were engaged in building a section of a highway stretching the length of Norway, for which von Gottstein was responsible. One day in August 1942 Scholz heard shots fired from a barracks hut where he and de Martin were quartered. The bullets had come from de Martin's gun and a Yugoslav prisoner lay dead outside. When Scholz learned that another Yugoslav was to be 'executed', he asked the SS officer whether he 'couldn't also finish off a Serb'. De Martin replied that he didn't care who shot the man, so both went to the edge of a wood where two graves were dug, one already containing the first victim. When the second Yugoslav prisoner was led up, de Martin fired three shots at his head and he fell into the prepared grave. Scholz, who had obtained a colleague's pistol, then fired two shots, aiming for the man's heart. Scholz's superiors said he told them he had fired because the man was not yet dead. An OT letter to the National Socialist Motor Corps-Transport Group Todt in Berlin advised Scholz should be dismissed for 'insufficient aptitude' and because he had 'shown himself ... as a sadist'.

Scholz sought to explain his action in a pre-trial statement in 1961, saying that de Martin was present when his OT superiors interviewed him at the time about the incident and that ‘he did not want to appear to the SS as a weakling and had therefore played the 100 per cent National Socialist, who was ready without further ado to liquidate a prisoner-of-war’. The court rejected this, finding Scholz’s contemporaneous version of events more credible, and reasoning that any attempt to impress de Martin, who knew the facts, would have been futile. It emphasised that Scholz’s actions ‘could not be explained solely by an education under National Socialism and also cannot be mitigated by the fact that SS-Führer de Martin’s bad example might have influenced his decision to act’. The court found he acted out of ‘unnatural pleasure at the extinction of a human life’. Since de Martin’s may have been the fatal bullets, Scholz was convicted of attempted murder. The ruling was therefore that it was Scholz’s murderous intent, rather than the effects of de Martin’s brutal SS practices and Nazi ideology, which drove him to fire his gun at the Serb prisoner.

Researchers have also analysed prosecutions in post-war trials for OT staff in communist Eastern Europe. No statistics are available on such trials in Yugoslavia, where the five OT members were convicted in Belgrade, capital of the post-war communist state under Tito, but in other communist states, such as the Soviet Union under Stalin, some information has been collected. Communist regimes sought to show their own populations that fascist crimes, like those perpetrated in the Nazi era, were punished. Mass trials of thousands of German soldiers were conducted in the Soviet Union by military tribunals that were entirely lacking in any judicial rigour. Elsewhere, 5,400 Germans and 13,000 Polish citizens were convicted in Poland in post-war trials, including the Auschwitz war-crimes case. Although hatred of the occupier meant the accused were maltreated during interrogations, prosecutions were conducted in roughly similar fashion to the presentation of cases by German lawyers in Western occupation zones.

Some post-war investigations involving OT personnel in Norway did not end in convictions though both a 1946 British war-crimes investigation and one drawn up in 1978 by West German prosecutors held the OT leadership to account. The British report spoke of the OT’s ‘inhuman use of slave labour’, while the report by Nuremberg prosecutors on killings of Yugoslav prisoners in various camps also spoke of the OT leadership’s large share of responsibility for the ‘inhuman living and working conditions of the prisoners’. The West German prosecutors’ closing investigations into the relevant camps found, however, that the OT leadership could not be directly blamed for premeditated killing. Their assessment was published in 1978, a year after the death

of the OT's chief in Norway, Willi Henne. They said their investigation into the Prison Camp North camp network in Norway, run by the German Justice Ministry with the help of the OT, was halted because suspects had died or could not be identified, or for lack of evidence. In one case, insufficient evidence was found for any charge of murder or abetting murder against Dr Karl Thurn, described in a Czechoslovak report as having been responsible for the camps' intolerable medical conditions because of his position as chief medical officer. Former Czechoslovak inmates of Prison Camp North described catastrophic conditions in the camps in a report submitted to the United Nations War Crimes Commission.

It is clear from this list of prosecutions of OT personnel either convicted or suspected of war crimes that there were astonishingly few and they came from a variety of backgrounds. The number of crimes involving direct physical violence was relatively high, meaning that Speer was the most prominent figure who could be classified as a 'deskbound perpetrator'.

Post-war trials have contributed very little to public understanding of the vast scope and brutal nature of OT activities. By contrast, prosecutions brought against members of the SS, captains of German industry and prominent Nazis have been far more revealing. Overall, prosecutions of SS offenders in the aftermath of the Second World War were generally seen as having been pursued as successfully as possible in the circumstances, despite serious shortcomings caused by the chaos in occupied Germany and pressures such as the need for quick sentences. While the great majority of concentration-camp offenders went unpunished, the Allied courts nevertheless sentenced most surviving commandants of the camps and most top officials of the SS Economic and Administrative Head Office. German and Austrian courts also handed down some severe punishments, even if early post-war proceedings flashed warning signals, including superficial investigations and lenient sentences.

The OT, by contrast, appears to have largely escaped the attention of war-crimes prosecutors. As an institution it has not been the subject of any trial, unlike German industrial giants such as IG Farben and Krupp who were called to account at Nuremberg. IG Farben's chief executive, Carl Krauch, was among company executives who appeared before the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal in 1947–8 on charges including plunder, slavery and mass murder. Like the other defendants, he received a relatively mild sentence, being imprisoned for six years. The judgment was based on evidence of Krauch's wide wartime powers to oversee programmes using slave labour to produce explosives, chemical warfare agents, synthetic oil, synthetic rubber and light

metals. The harshest penalty of eight years' imprisonment was handed to Otto Ambros, the manager of IG Farben's Auschwitz operations and other plants.

Comparison with the post-war fate of Krauch and other industrialists is noteworthy because OT operations were at least as extensive as those of the big German companies. The OT's overall sphere of responsibility for its mammoth projects, many ordered personally by Hitler, ranged across all occupied Europe and the Reich itself. An example of a leading OT engineer who avoided prosecution was Speer's deputy, Xaver Dorsch, who set up his own firm of consulting engineers in 1950. The Dorsch Gruppe continued to bear his name after his death in 1986 and grew to employ more than 7,000 staff with projects in more than fifty countries. The shock waves of Germany's surrender in 1945 had less impact on the country's engineers than on comparable professions. The author of one study wrote that, as 'Victor of the Defeat', the German engineer 'could almost carry on life in his profession as if the 8th May 1945 had never been'.

With the exception of Speer, most of the convictions of OT staff were for direct physical violence. Legal notions of individual culpability fit more successfully with such cases, rather than deaths caused indirectly. Similar issues are encountered when assessing the roles of 'ordinary Nazis' in the German civil administration, who became Hitler's 'facilitators' in helping to pave the way to genocide. A civil servant who helped organise the ghettoisation of Jews, who were subsequently deported and exterminated, practised what one historian termed 'systemic violence'. Such functionaries typically viewed themselves as 'mere administrators', and might be likened to engineers who saw their tasks as 'merely technical'.

Speer, who took pains to present himself as an apolitical technocrat, was convicted of war crimes, but as early as 1944 German journalist Sebastian Haffner, who had long since fled to England from where he became a noted commentator on the Reich, saw Speer as symbolising a type of single-minded organiser in an age of technicians who would endure. 'The Hitlers and Himmlers we may get rid of, but the Speers ... will long be with us.'

The Nuremberg trials formed part of judicial proceedings vigorously pursued by victorious powers, together with diplomacy, after the Second World War to prevent such a catastrophe ever being repeated. Similar efforts were made after the First World War, but it took only two decades for global conflict to return. Following the devastation of 1939–45, the nagging question remains: could such terrible events happen again? One Auschwitz survivor, Primo Levi, thought so. Presenting his own conclusion and speaking for other survivors, he wrote: 'It happened once and it can

happen again. This is the heart of what we have to say.' Other former camp inmates who lived to tell their harrowing stories supported this view. David Rousset, the French writer and concentration-camp survivor, believed the crimes of the Nazi camps could be repeated 'in another form'. Historians have been more circumspect, but leading researchers pose the question time after time. While emphasising that history does not repeat itself, they point out the enduring relevance of the period of Hitler's rule: the Third Reich represents not only an extreme example of the dangers of racism and militarism, but also of the potential for hatred and destruction existing, however slightly, in all humanity. This study of the OT analyses the actions of 'ordinary' people, in this case German engineers and construction experts serving under Hitler's regime, and concentrates on part of the sinister and fateful mosaic of the Nazi slave-labour system. Each interlocking institution assisted the others in making the horror of Nazi genocide and murderous slave labour possible, showing how evil can spread, insidiously and inexorably, among those living under a dictatorship.

The OT counted as one of Hitler's major paramilitary forces causing mass murder among Jewish, Slavic and other prisoners in camps across Europe. Apart from the physical violence by OT staff and their denial of basic needs to prisoners, the task of picking out prisoners considered unfit to work was routine and represented death sentences. Since OT personnel oversaw prisoners at work sites, they were well placed to relay to the SS which workers had been 'used up' by unremitting toil. OT staff also cooperated closely with the SS at the time of the 'death marches', as well as with killing squads in Eastern Europe. This last collaboration was either to hand over prisoners directly, or to sift out skilled labourers, including Jews, from those to be murdered, so that they could either be worked to death or killed when their labour was no longer needed.

Speer paid for his crimes, although, in the light of research highlighted in this book, not all of them. Neither his involvement in Auschwitz, nor his eviction of Berlin Jews and their subsequent murder, figured at Nuremberg. As for Todt, he has mostly attracted the attention of historians for his initiatives on armaments and the economic impact of his Autobahn network, but his energetic exploitation of slave labourers has demanded greater scrutiny of his record: his use of foreign workers, including Jews and Soviet prisoners of war, for his motorways across Eastern Europe and for Hitler's 'Werewolf' field headquarters in Ukraine reveals a far darker side to him. His actions betray a ruthless, murderous determination and he viewed Jews, Slavs and other prisoners as expendable to achieve his goals. The OT and Todt substantially contributed to the Holocaust and the appalling death toll of the Nazi slave-labour programme and both the

man and the organisation he founded deserve a prominent place in the hall of infamy of Hitler's henchmen.

# OT RANKS, WITH ARMY EQUIVALENTS

OT-Einsatzgruppenleiter	General
OT-Einsatzleiter	Major general
OT-Hauptbauleiter	Colonel
OT-Oberbauleiter	Lieutenant colonel
OT-Bauleiter	Major
OT-Hauptbauführer	Captain
OT-Oberbauführer	First lieutenant
OT-Bauführer	Lieutenant
OT-Haupttruppführer	Sergeant major
OT-Obertruppführer	Technical sergeant
OT-Truppführer	Sergeant
OT-Obermeister	n/a
OT-Meister	Corporal
OT-Vorarbeiter	Private first class
OT-Mann	Private

Source: RAFA 2188/1/E/E5/E5a/L0059/0004 Dr Schmelter Front-OT pay scales 12 December 1944, Grundsätze für die Einstufung der Angestellten der Front-OT in die OT-Dienstränge und OT-Soldgruppen; TNA WO 208/5042, Table IV, OT ranks and equivalent assignments, uniforms and insignia.

# NOTES

## Abbreviations

BArchB	Bundesarchiv Berlin
BArchL	Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg
BA/MA	Bundesarchiv/Militärarchiv, Freiburg
CSA	Central State Archive, Kiev
DEGOB	National Committee for Attending Deportees: Hungarian Jewish relief organisation database
HLSL	Harvard Law School Library, Nuremberg Trials Project
IfZ	Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Munich
IMT	Trial of the Major War Criminals Before the International Military Tribunal
ITS	International Tracing Service
IWM	Imperial War Museum
NMT	Trials of War Criminals Before the Nuernberg Military Tribunals
RAFA	Riksarkivet, The National Archives in Norway
TNA	The National Archives in Britain
UNWCC	United Nations War Crimes Commission
USHMM	United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Notes contain references to [www.zwangarbeit-archiv.de](http://www.zwangarbeit-archiv.de) which is the online archive Zwangarbeit 1939–1945: Erinnerungen und Geschichte. It contains accounts by nearly 600 former forced or slave labourers from twenty-six countries who were interviewed as part of a project linked to an initiative by Germany's government and industry to pay compensation to victims of National Socialism.

## Introduction

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## Chapter 1: Autobahnen

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## Chapter 5: ‘Garden of Eden’

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- 40** ‘Hitler later described’: Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction*, pp. 491–2.
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- 40** ‘He described how 100,000’: Ernst Klee and Willi Dreßen, ‘*Gott mit uns*’: *Der deutsche Vernichtungskrieg im Osten 1939–1945* (Frankfurt am Main, 1989), p. 138.
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- 41** ‘It wasn’t enough’: Wendy Lower, *Nazi Empire-building and the Holocaust in Ukraine* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2005), pp. 62–4; Spoerer, *Zwangarbeit*, p. 72.
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- 41** ‘An initial German OT force’: Singer, *Quellen*, p. 33.
- 42** ‘In the extreme environment’: TNA WO 208/5042, p. 51; Gerlach, *Extermination*, pp. 195, 209.
- 42** ‘As a result, the SS’: Schulte, *Zwangarbeit und Vernichtung*, pp. 332–78.
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- 43** ‘Prestigious projects’: Schulte, *Zwangarbeit und Vernichtung*, p. 180.
- 43** ‘In the early summer’: Sereny, *Albert Speer*, pp. 265–6.
- 44** ‘By this time’: Jaskot, *Architecture*, p. 97.
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## Chapter 6: After Todt

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## Chapter 7: Speer Reforms

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- 54** ‘Speer reorganised’: BArchB R 3/1736, Rudolf Wolters Chronik, 14 February 1942; BArchB R 50 I/3a Neugliederung der OT, 18 February 1942; see also IfZ MA 251, Umorganisation der Aufgaben innerhalb des Reichsministeriums Dr. Todt, 23 February 1942.
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<sup>65</sup> ‘The task group leaders’: TNA WO 208/5042, Table IV, pp. 1–7; see also TNA WO 208/3224.

<sup>66</sup> ‘Todt’s second-in-command’: BArchB 3100/F0022, Xaver Dorsch file.

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<sup>69</sup> ‘The construction corps’: Schulte, *Zwangarbeit und Vernichtung*, p. 154.

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## Chapter 8: OT, SS, SA

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## Chapter 9: Road to Ruin

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- <sup>93</sup> ‘There was no time’: Ibid., p. 27.
- <sup>93</sup> ‘Arnold recorded’: Ibid., pp. 50–1, 53, 55, 91.
- <sup>94</sup> ‘Born into a German-Jewish family’: Ibid., pp. 28–9, 74, 102.
- <sup>94</sup> ‘While Arnold was in Gaisin’: Org. Todt., received from Zentrale Stelle Ludwigsburg, 2.2.3.0/82362040-82362089, ITS Digital Archive, London.
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- <sup>100</sup> ‘The OT and SS collaborated’: IfZ MA 328 Prützmann to Brandt, 15 June 1943; Longerich, *Holocaust*, p. 353.
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- <sup>100</sup> ‘Because the German occupiers had limited’: Lower, *Nazi Empire-building*, pp. 142–4.
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## Chapter 10: SS-Standartenführer Henne

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- 105** ‘Plans also included grandly redesigning’: Thies, ‘Hitler’s European Building Programme,’ pp. 416–18; Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, p. 181.
- 105** ‘It was Todt who put Henne’: BArchB SS 0085 A; BArchB 3100/H0113.
- 106** ‘If you only knew what hardships’: TNA WO 208/3225, War Crimes in Norway, Appendix A.
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- 107** ‘We have arrived in the new place’: TNA WO 208/3225, War Crimes in Norway, Appendix A.
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- 109** ‘When Hitler listed his top priorities’: Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction*, p. 219.
- 110** ‘More than 18,400’: Ottosen, ‘Arbeits- und Konzentrations lager’, p. 359.
- 110** ‘After the war a British investigation’: TNA WO 208/3225 para. 183.
- 110** ‘The British even found evidence’: TNA WO 331/13, Appendix D(ii).
- 110** ‘The names of thousands of Russian survivors’: RA/S-1681/D/Db/L0014, Displaced Persons, Repatrieringskontoret.
- 110** ‘but thousands more’: Ottosen, ‘Arbeits- und Konzentrationslager’, p. 359; Benz and Distel, *Ort des Terrors*, vol. 9, pp. 440–2.
- 110** ‘Uroš Majstorovič’: Uroš Majstorović; interview on 7 July 2005, translated into German from Croatian (Archiv-ID ZA 137), in ‘Zwangarbeit 1939–1945, Erinnerungen und Geschichte, ein digitales Archiv für Bildung und Wissenschaft’, [www.zwangarbeit-archiv.de](http://www.zwangarbeit-archiv.de) (accessed 8 December 2013).
- 111** ‘Where the OT had sole’: See, for instance, [Chapters 12 and 16](#).
- 111** ‘These consisted of a turret’: BArchL B 162/9066, Christian Schrade statement.
- 111** ‘160 of these inmates had died’: Ibid., p. 371. The document cites Yugoslav sources for the total.
- 111** ‘Among the victims were three hanged’: TNA WO 208/3225, para. 82.
- 111** ‘They were hanged and we had to march by them’: Majstorović; (Archiv-ID ZA 137).
- 112** ‘During Majstorović’s stay’: BArchL B 162/42181, UNWCC case R/N/206, charges list dated 27 September 1946.
- 112** ‘All this proves’: See [Chapter 16](#) on OT Dr Erika Flocken at Mühldorf. OT personnel also made lists of sick prisoners to give to the SS, who then sent these camp inmates for extermination; see, for example, Benz and Distel, *Ort des Terrors*, vol. 2, p. 366; see also Ausscheiden nicht einsatzfähiger Juden, Mischlinge, Versippte, 2.2.3.0/82362261, ITS Digital Archive, London,
- 112** ‘He was probably a sadist’: Majstorović; (Archiv-ID ZA 137).
- 112** ‘However, this did not mean’: BArchL B 162/9066, p. 371.
- 113** ‘In a notorious camp’: BArchL B 162/9066, p. 366; see also Max Kraft statement, 29 October 1974.
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- 114** ‘Out of 400 prisoners originally sent’: BArchL B 162/9066, pp. 323–4, 335.
- 114** ‘Stjepan Pištignjat, then eighteen’: Stjepan Pištignjat (Archiv-ID ZA359).
- 115** ‘The commandant of Beisfjord’: Riedel, *Ordnungshüter*, p. 306.
- 115** ‘At night, but it wasn’t proper nighttime’: Stjepan Pištignjat (Archiv-ID ZA359).
- 115** ‘Terzic Hilmo, another Yugoslav’: BArchL B 162/9063, Hilmo statement, 12 March 1947.
- 116** ‘The extent to which OT personnel’: RAFA 2188/1/E2b/4, Bauer report, 17 August 1942.
- 116** ‘There can be no talk of a camp here’: RAFA 2188/1/E2b/4, Bauer report, 17 August 1942.
- 117** ‘Beck, interviewed during a post-war’: BArchL B 162/9066, Beck statement, 28 October 1974.
- 117** ‘After his time in Beisfjord’: Stanko Diklic, ITS questionnaire on Korgen, 17 May 1950, 1.1.0.7./87769492, ITS Digital Archive, London.
- 117** ‘Brutality by guards’: Stjepan Pištignjat (Archiv-ID ZA359).
- 117** ‘Cakic Avdo, another Yugoslav’: BArchL B 162/9063, Avdo statement in 11 March 1947 police report.
- 118** ‘Every day about 10 people’: Stjepan Pištignjat (Archiv-ID ZA359); B 162/9063.
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## Chapter 11: Arctic Railway

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- 124** ‘The iron ore was shipped’: Dorsch, in Singer, *Quellen*, p. 495; Boelcke, *Deutschlands Rüstung*, p. 104; Bohn, *Reichskommissariat Norwegen*, p. 361.
- 124** ‘As for the railway, this enormously costly’: Bohn, *Reichskommissariat Norwegen*, pp. 355, 363–70.
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- 130 ‘While Henne defied all reason’: Ibid., p. 1.

## Chapter 12: Island Fortress

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- 131 ‘In October 1941 he ordered’: BA/MA RW 4/625 D, Ausbau und Verteidigung der englischen Kanalinseln, 20 October 1941.
- 132 ‘We arrived at night and disembarked’: Interview with Albert Eblagon, a survivor of Norderney camp, in Solomon Steckoll, *Alderney Death Camp*

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- 134 ‘It turned out, however, that one’: Steckoll, *Alderney*, p. 81; Fings, *Krieg, Gesellschaft und KZ*, p. 203.
- 134 ‘So Ackermann faced a counterclaim’: Pantcheff, *Alderney Fortress Island*, pp. 31–2.
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- 134 ‘Overall, an estimated 600,000’: Lemmes, *Arbeiten in Hitlers Europa*, p. 663.
- 135 ‘By mid-1944, the OT had at its disposal’: TNA WO 208/5042, Table VIId, Manpower Data and p. 180.

- 135 ‘The OT had deployed about 11,000’: Lemmes, *Arbeiten in Hitlers Europa*, p. 278.
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- 136 ‘In spring 1943, the OT developed’: Boelcke, *Deutschlands Rüstung*, p. 240.
- 137 ‘The army’s V2 rockets weighed’: Kaufmann, *The Atlantic Wall*, pp. 239–41.
- 137 ‘The OT was also heavily involved in building’: IfZ MA 265, Hitler directive regarding weapons, including the Tausendfüßler programme, 1 November 1943.
- 137 ‘The OT had around 5,000 workers’: Kaufmann, *The Atlantic Wall*, pp. 247–8; Boelcke, *Deutschlands Rüstung*, pp. 290–1, 366; Dorsch, in Singer, *Quellen*, p. 490.
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- 137 ‘Its new “bomb-proof” subterranean site’: Mommsen and Grieger, *Das Volkswagenwerk*, pp. 27–49, 803–29, 859–69.
- 138 ‘At this time, in the desperate last stages’: See Wagner, *Produktion des Todes*, p. 578; Buggeln, *Arbeit und Gewalt*, pp. 238–334.
- 138 ‘Frenchman Maurice Villemoz was an example’: Maurice Villemoz, interviewed in French on 4 August 2006 (Archiv-ID ZA091), [www.zwangssarbeit-archiv.de](http://www.zwangssarbeit-archiv.de) (accessed 9 December 2013)
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- 141 ‘Stefan Kulesza described desperate scenes’: Stefan Kulesza, interviewed on 18–19 June 2005 (Archiv-ID ZA211), translated into German from Polish,

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- 144** ‘I’m no enemy of Schneider’s’: BArchL B 162/3571, Gareis statement, 4 January 1962.
- 144** ‘It was in the afternoon’: Ibid.
- 145** ‘One day, I saw that a young man’: BArchL B 162/3571, Körtgen statement, 24 April 1960.
- 146** ‘OT staff agree that Latvian’: For background on the participation of Lithuanians and Latvians in German-organised killings see Gerlach, *Extermination*, pp. 69–71; Mazower, *Hitler’s Empire*, pp. 174–6; Ruth Bettina Birn and Volker Riess, ‘Revising the Holocaust’, *Historical Journal*, vol. 40, no. 1 (1997), pp. 207–8.
- 146** ‘Because of the alarm, we all went out’: BArchL B 162/3571, Körtgen statement, 24 April 1960.
- 147** ‘In this way, about 300 Jews’: BArchL B 162/3571, Frantzen statement, 20 April 1960.
- 147** ‘To a hard-line Nazi advocating genocide’: For background on ‘annihilation through labour’, see Wagner, *Produktion des Todes*, pp. 499–500; Blatman, *Death Marches*, pp. 45–50; Gruner, *Jewish Forced Labor*, pp. 289–93; Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction*, pp. 531–4; Ulrich Herbert, ‘Labour and Extermination: Economic Interest and the Primacy of Weltanschauung in National Socialism’, *Past and Present*, no. 138 (1993), pp. 144–95.
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- 148** ‘Such selection of skilled workers’: Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde: die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrussland 1941 bis 1944* (Hamburg, 1999), p. 1,136.
- 148** ‘Before the shooting, the Jewish craftsmen’: BArchL B 162/3571, Abenstein statement, 26 April 1960.
- 149** ‘At the time of the later mass killing’: BArchL B 162/3571, Körtgen statement, 24 April 1960.
- 149** ‘This picking out of Jewish craftsmen’: BArchL B 162/3571, see statements by Körtgen, Abenstein, Peter Fröbus (15 April 1962).

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- 149** ‘Almost all the murders of Byelorussian’: Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde*, p. 1,139; see also Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction*, p. 525.
- 150** ‘The killing squads mentioned’: Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, pp. 170–8.
- 150** ‘Killings occurred in all larger towns’: BArchL B 162/3571, Anzeigesache gegen Winand Schneider, 28 April 1960.
- 150** ‘In the region where Schneider operated’: Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde*, p. 11; Kershaw, *Nemesis*, p. 356.
- 150** ‘At the time of the “death marches”’: Blatman, *Death Marches*, pp. 92–5.
- 151** ‘While Schneider’s colleagues gave’: BArchL B 162/3571, Schneider statement, 6 February 1961.
- 151** ‘However, an OT man called Peter Schmitz’: BArchL B 162/3571, Schmitz statement, 16 March 1962.
- 151** ‘In 1967 the murder investigation’: BArchL B 162/3571, Letter from Dortmund to Ludwigsburg Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen, 21 February 1967.
- 151** ‘Too young to have served’: Evans, *Rereading German History*, pp. 159–60; Christopher Dillon, *Dachau and the SS: A Schooling in Violence* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 13–14.
- 151** ‘After finishing his education’: BArchL B 162/3571, Schneider statement, 6 February 1961.
- 152** ‘Schneider shouted abuse at Jews’: BArchL B 162/3571, Löhrer statement, 13 February 1962.
- 153** ‘Peter Fröbus, a steamroller operator’: BArchL B 162/3571, Fröbus statement, 15 March 1962.
- 153** ‘Shortage of labour’: BArchL B 162/3571, see statements by Frantzen, Abenstein.
- 154** ‘I remember very well that three people’: BArchL B 162/3571, Horn statement, 16 March 1962.
- 155** ‘Josef Peter Rom said he clashed’: BArchL B 162/3571, Rom statement, 28 April 1960.
- 155** ‘His anti-Semitic views were extreme’: BArchL B 162/3571, Schneider statement, 6 February 1961.
- 156** ‘Peter Rollmann, who worked for the company’: BArchL B 162/3571, Rollmann statement, 5 April 1960.

- 156** ‘Ferdinand Wolf, a foreman’: BArchL B 162/3571, Wolf statement, 12 April 1960.
- 156** ‘Erwin Jehlen, who did accounting’: BArchL B 162/3571, Jehlen statement, 12 May 1960.
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- 158** ‘Molly Harrower, one of the ten experts’: Molly Harrower, ‘Rorschach Records of the Nazi War Criminals: An Experimental Study after Thirty Years’, *Journal of Personality Assessment*, vol. 40, no. 4 (1976), pp. 341–51; see also Harald Welzer, *Täter: Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden* (Frankfurt am Main, 2005), pp. 7–17.
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## Chapter 14: Baltic Oil

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(Munich, 2005–2009), pp. 131–83; Megargee, *Encyclopedia*, pp. 1,492–5; Boelcke, *Deutschlands Rüstung*, p. 286.

- 161** ‘During the night our hair froze’: BArchL B 162/30816, Weismann statement, 20 May 1974.
- 162** ‘Ereda had an upper and lower section’: Birn, ‘Vaivara – Stammlager’, p. 138.
- 162** ‘Bernard Zalkindson, a prisoner’: Bernard Zalkindson, cited in Herman Kruk and Benjamin Harshav (eds), *The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania: Chronicles from the Vilna Ghetto and the Camps, 1939–1944*, trans. Barbara Harshav (London, 2002), p. 665.
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## Chapter 15: Speer Ensnared

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## Chapter 17: Women Enslaved

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## Chapter 19: On Trial

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- 246 ‘Around 7,500 “Red Spaniards”’: Jaskot, *Architecture*, p. 137.
- 247 ‘Rudolf Wolters, Speer’s loyal aide’: Sereny, *Albert Speer*, pp. 11–36.
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- 248 ‘Dr Erika Flocken was sentenced to death’: Raim, *KZ-Außenkommandos*, pp. 231, 284–5.
- 249 ‘The third OT staff member’: UNWCC, United States v. Franz Auer et al., Review and Recommendations, 1 February 1948, accessed via UNWCC website <https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/173b55/> on 4 February 2014.
- 249 ‘Employees of the Polensky and Zöllner’: Raim, *KZ-Außenkommandos*, pp. 284–5.
- 249 ‘At a trial in 1949 in France’: For the trial of Adler and Evers, see Bunting, *The Model Occupation*, p. 294; for Kabus, see Glauning, *Entgrenzung*, p. 210.
- 249 ‘Other OT personnel were sentenced for maltreating’: BArchL B 162/9063, Die Jugoslawische Kriegsverbrechens-Kommission. Leopold was listed as having the OT rank of Haupttruppenführer (*sic*), working at a camp dispensary near Trondheim from 1942 to 1945. OT records listing Trondheim staff in March 1943 include Truppführer Leopold in the medical section; see RAFA 2188/1/G/G3/G3a/L0037/0001, Geschäftsverteilungsplan der Oberbauleitung Drontheim vom 1.3.1943. OT Truppführer Max Leopold also featured in British military lists of German suspects held as part of investigations into ill-treatment of prisoners at Ørlandet-Østraat; see TNA WO 331/25, HQ BLFN Casesheet, Case No. D/884.
- 249 ‘Leopold was a medical orderly’: BArchL B 162/9066, Fälle von vorsätzlicher Häftlingstötung, p. 53; Max Leopold was listed in the German Federal Archive in Ludwigsburg as belonging to Prisoner-of-War Labour Battalion 180.

- 249** ‘In 1946, Christian Schrade’: BArchL B 162/9066, OT-Angehörige, p. 53.
- 250** ‘OT Meister Josef Starkens’: Ibid., pp. 53–4.
- 250** ‘Another OT engineer, imprisoned for his actions in Norway was Fritz Autenrieth’: BArchB R 50 I/88a, Dienststellen verzeichnis der OT-Einsatzgruppe Wiking, March 1944; RAFA 2188/1/E/E5/E5a/L0059/0004, Henne letter to OT EGWiking, OBL Alta, 24 February 1943; BArchL B 162/9066, Autenrieth statement, 25 August 1977.
- 250** ‘The Munich trial of Diederich Scholz’: BArchL B 162/14312, Munich district court judgment in case of Diederich Scholz, sentenced on 10 April 1962 to four years’ penitentiary for attempted murder. Details in this section are taken from the judgment; see also RAFA 3182.
- 252** ‘Researchers have also analysed’: Pohl, ‘Sowjetische und polnische Strafverfahren’, pp. 132–41. For background on tensions between Stalin and the Western Allies see Nicholas Bethell, *The Last Secret: Forceable Repatriation to Russia 1944–7* (London, 1976).
- 252** ‘The West German prosecutors’ closing investigations’: BArchL B 162/9066, Ermittlungsverfahren gegen Ernst Heindl u.a. wegen Mordes.
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- 253** ‘deskbound perpetrator’: Mallmann and Paul, *Karrieren der Gewalt*, pp. 5, 17–18.
- 253** ‘Overall, prosecutions of SS offenders’: Wachsmann, *KL*, pp. 607–13; Jürgen Finger, Sven Keller and Andreas Wirsching, *Vom Recht zur Geschichte: Akten aus NS-Prozessen als Quellen der Zeitgeschichte* (Göttingen, 2009), pp. 9–20; Ludwig Eiber, ‘Nach Nürnberg: Alliierte Prozesse in den Besatzungszonen’, in Finger, Keller and Wirsching, *Vom Recht zur Geschichte*, pp. 38–51; Edith Raim, ‘Westdeutsche Ermittlungen und Prozesse zum KZ Dachau und seinen Außenlagern’, in Ludwig Eiber and Robert Sigel (eds), *Dachauer Prozesse: NS-Verbrechen vor amerikanischen Militärgerichten in Dachau 1945–1948: Verfahren, Ergebnisse, Nachwirkungen* (Göttingen, 2007), pp. 210–36; Claudia

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## A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

Charles Dick is a historian who obtained his PhD from Birkbeck, University of London. He was a journalist for Reuters News Agency (later Thomson Reuters) in North Africa, Bonn, Paris, Vienna and London over a 35-year-career. He lives in London.

## PLATES SECTION



Hitler with Fritz Todt (centre) and Albert Speer (far right) looking at the model of a motorway viaduct, 1937;



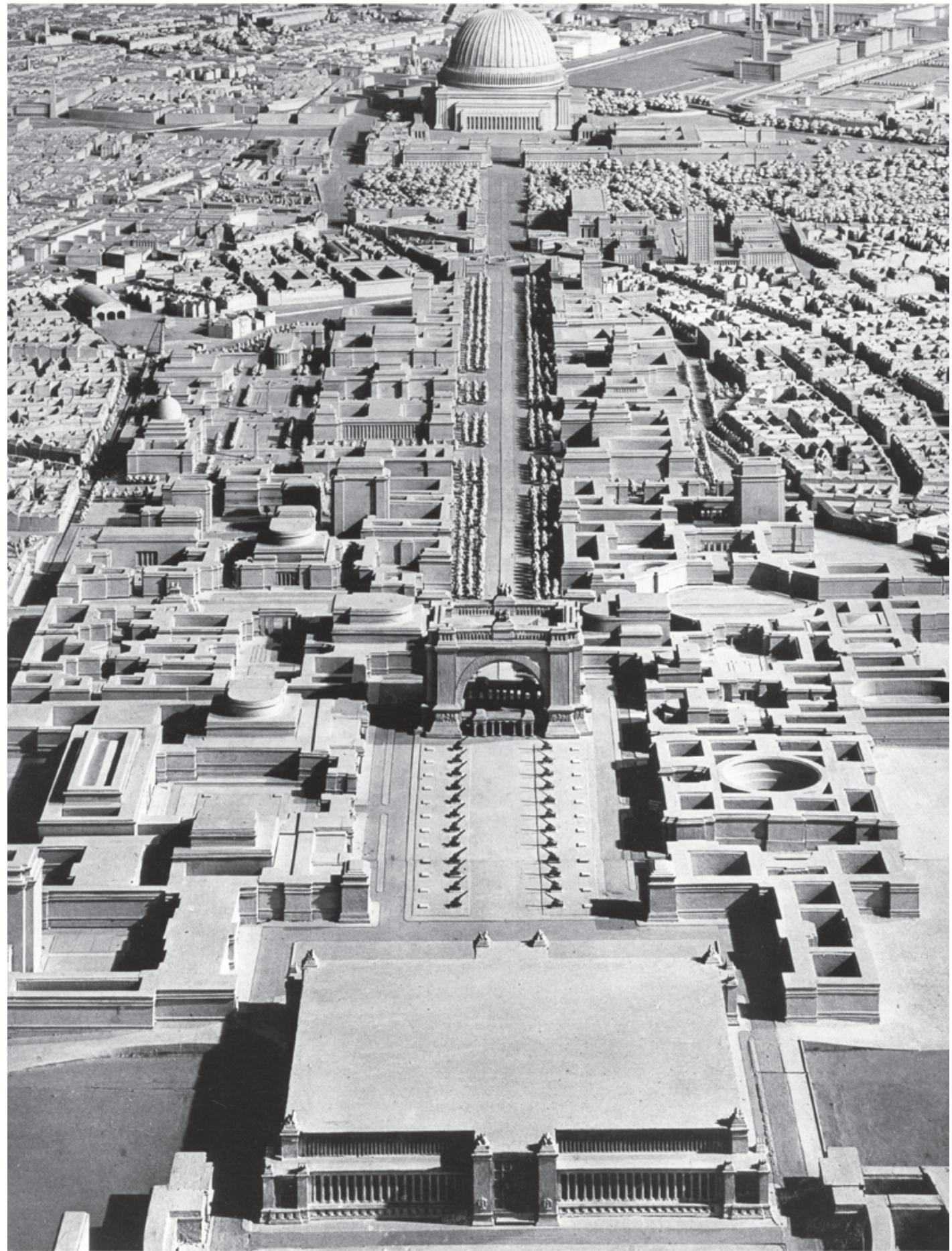
Hitler saluted by OT Westwall workers, May 1939



Fritz Todt, 1939;



Speer addressing OT staff after taking over from Todt, February 1942



Architectural model of 'Germania', 1939



*Top left:* Armband for NCO in the OT; *top right:* OT Truppführer armband, 1940s; *middle right:* Armband for civilian OT worker, 1940s;



Hermann Göring, Hitler and Speer (with OT armband), April 1942

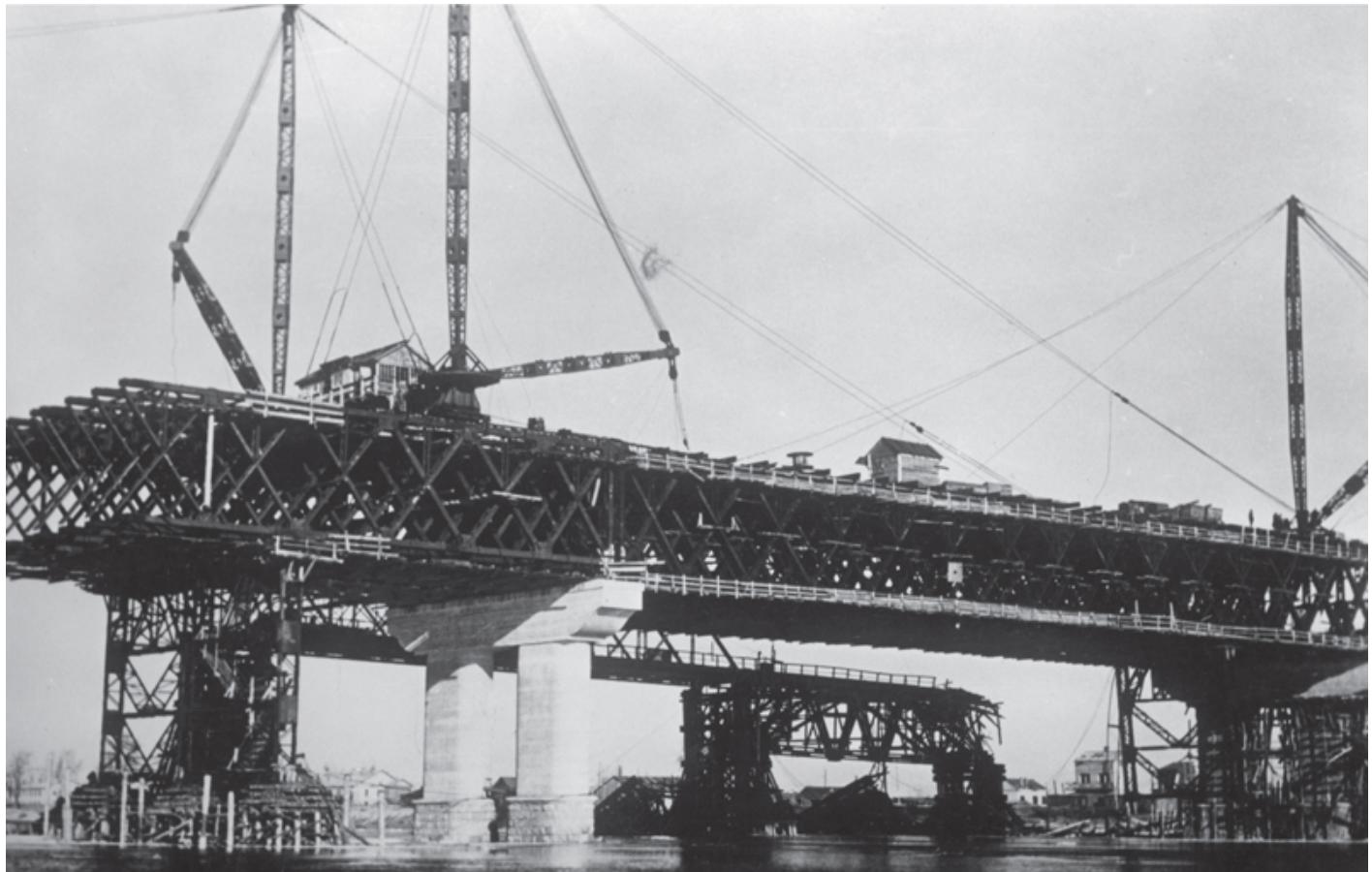


At the place of execution, waiting for the slaves to arrive, as  
henchmen are apt to do.

'Place of execution', 1942, by Arnold Daghani



Hitler breaks ground for the Autobahn section from Frankfurt. Fritz Todt is standing behind his left shoulder, 1933;



Construction of a large bridge by the OT over a river in occupied Soviet territory on the Eastern Front, 1941



Hitler (standing in the car with Fritz Todt to the rear of the vehicle) salutes workers passing in a truck on the Breslau-Kreibau Autobahn to mark the construction of the 1,000th kilometre of Germany's motorway network, 28 September 1936;



An OT unit constructing a bridge in the area of Lake Peipus, near the Estonia-Russia border, October 1941

(Done early February, 1943, on a Sunday. Nanino is to be seen on top, left. The inmates shown were portrayed.  
The top of the painting was damaged when on our escape we were wading through the river Bug.)



Camp interior showing Anishoara (Nanino) top left. Daghani writes how water damaged the picture during their escape across the Bug river, 1943



Ghetto market at Bershad. Daghani explains in his note on the picture how he had to hide to paint it, 1943. These artworks are by Arnold Daghani.

Wife and husband, which including wife and son, two daughters and their husbands, two sons and their wives, three grandsons and their wives, and one granddaughter, make a total of 26 people.

Werner Cohn and wife

Edgar, wife, mother-in-law

Edgar, wife and mother-in-law

Edgar, wife and daughter, Martha

Edgar, wife and daughter,

Edgar, wife and three daughters, Werner wife and daughter

Edgar and family, Mr. Light's wife and three daughters, Ed and Ling

Edgar and son-in-law, Edgar, Edgar, wife and daughter, Ed and Ling

Edgar, wife and daughter, Edgar, wife and daughter, Ed and Ling

Edgar, wife and daughter, Edgar, wife and daughter, Ed and Ling

Edgar, wife and daughter, Edgar, wife and daughter, Ed and Ling

Woman wearing headscarf of names of prisoners executed at Mikhaïlowka and Tarassiwka camps



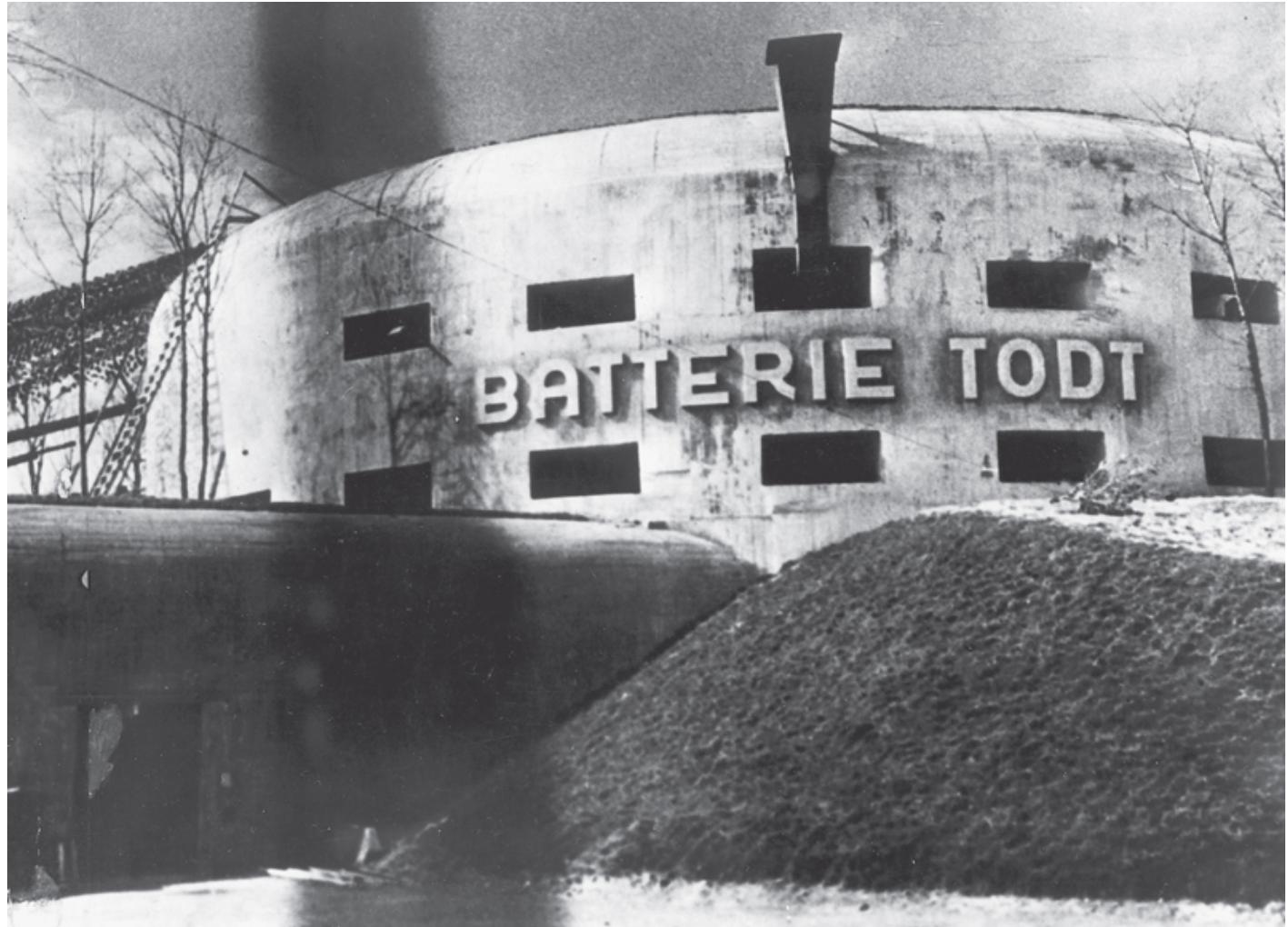
OT workers having pre-Christmas lunch with Hitler and Todt in a tent in northern France, 23 December 1940;



Hitler in conversation with architect Hermann Giesler in front of a model of the planned redesign of the Nazi leader's home town of Linz, 22 April 1944



Speer with his OT deputy leader, Franz Xaver Dorsch, in France in 1943



German gun emplacement at Cap Gris-Nez as part of the Atlantikwall in Nazi-occupied France, 1944;



Turret with three 28-centimetre guns from the former German battleship *Gneisenau* installed as part of coastal defences in Nazi-occupied Norway at Ørlandet-Austrät, near Trondheim. Slave labourers under OT supervision were used in the construction work



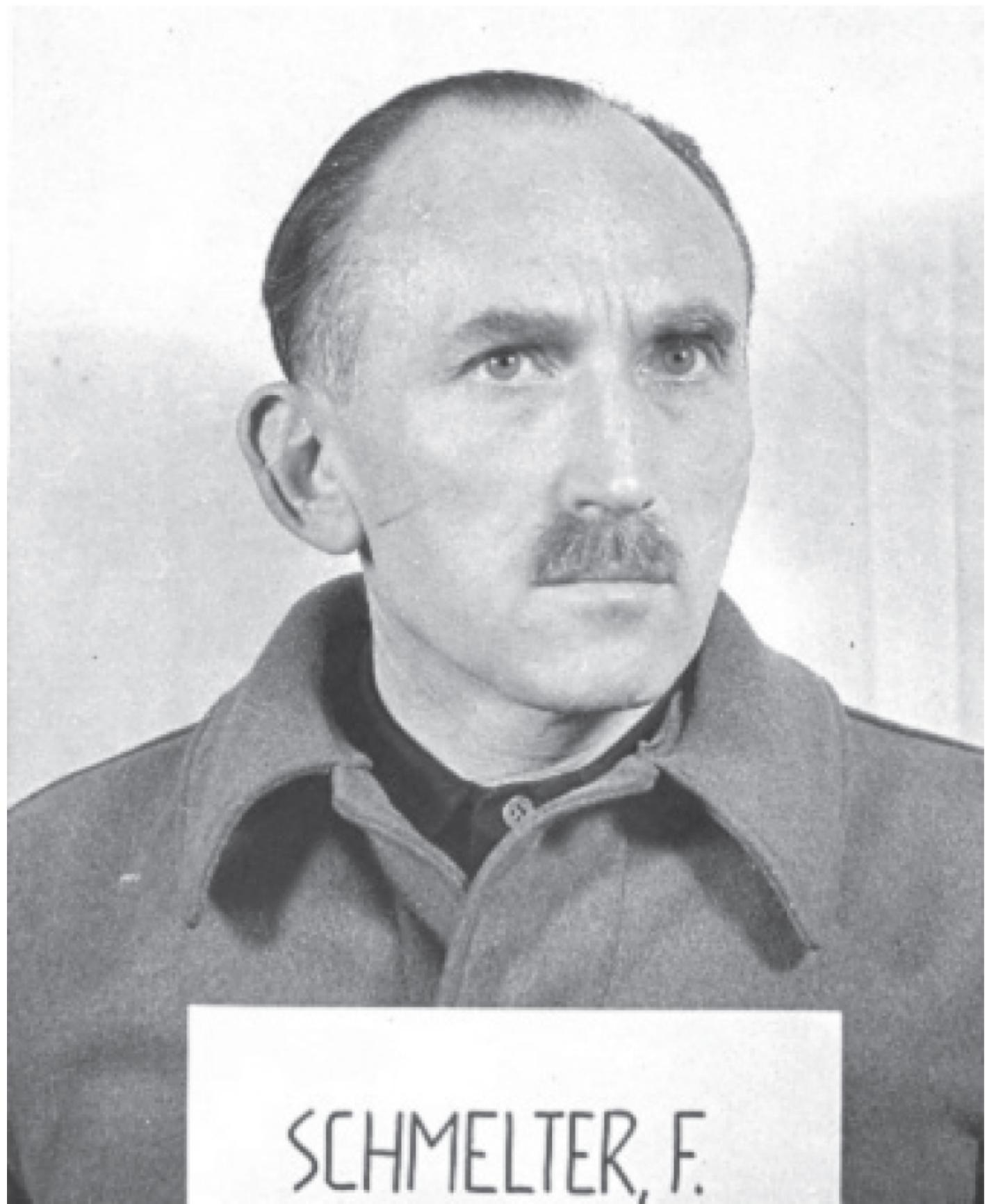
Konstantin Seredintsev, a Soviet prisoner of war, wrote a diary in which he told of extreme hardship as a slave labourer in an Arctic labour camp in Norway. He died in 1943;



OT man directing Jewish labourers repairing a road near Grodno, 1941



OT Dr Erika Flocken,



SCHMELTER, F.

OT manpower chief Fritz Schmelter at Nuremberg as a defence witness in the trial of Erhard Milch, 1946



Trial of the major war criminals at Nuremberg 1945–1946. Speer is in the second row, third from right;



Albert Speer is arrested at Flensburg in 1945



1964

DASHANI  
(Self-portrait)

Self-portrait by Arnold Daghani

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Maps by Mike Athanson

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