

**ENSANGUINED:**

Architecture, Militarism, and Slave Labor in the Nazi Monumental Building Program

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It is often said that Adolf Hitler wanted to build (or re-build) a new European order under the Deutsches Reich, in the past, historians have taken this premise to predominantly refer to the remaking of the world politically, racially and militarily. Yet for Hitler, this new world he so craved was a world built in stone, steel, concrete and glass, in addition to one built up by violence, genocide and hatred. In the same way that architecture had served its purposes for the emperors, kings and warlords of history, architecture would serve as a physical manifestation of radical new political ideology for Hitler. Hitler's architectural aspirations cannot be better encapsulated than in his plan, done in conjunction with Albert Speer and Wilhelm Kreis, for Reichshauptstadt Berlin<sup>1</sup>, a completely new masterplan for Berlin, which would have been the largest building program in history. At the center of Reichshauptstadt Berlin was the Volkshalle, a massive domed hall that, if completed, would have been the largest building in the world. The Volkshalle was to be the architectural pinnacle of Hitler's new German nation. But the Volkshalle, and all other Berlin reconstruction projects were to be built utilizing the massive systems of oppression and forced labor that the Third Reich had created, often parts of it being purpose built for the buildings themselves. This massive network of shell companies, slave labor camps, deportations and mass violence were the brutal reality of Hitler's sketches and architectural aspirations.

For this project I want to explore the relationship between this vast labor network and the building that sat atop of it, how did the Nazi's plan to deploy that network to build these buildings, how was the architecture and construction methodology designed to harness forced labor and materials. From this, I want to try and make new connections about the usage of labor in architecture and answer the question, what does the usage and scale of labor for monumental

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<sup>1</sup> Translation: Reichshauptstadt Berlin - Imperial Capital Berlin - author

architecture reveal about the national and cultural worldviews of political ideologies in Nazi Germany?

My main body of sources are primary sources that pertain to the architectural design of the project, the logistical development and financial planning of the project and finally, more general documents about the labor apparatuses inside of the third reich. The Nazis are ubiquitous with cultural world and state building, specifically inside of the occupied territories, the eastern Reichskommissarats and Generalplan Ost. These organizational systems of control over the occupied populations were instrumental in deportations of forced laborers into the Reich as well as deportations to the labor camp system that supplied building materials for the capital building projects. Given the scale of the projects, these documents are extensive and given the sheer scope of work that was required, there is a vast pool of documents to use. Critically, the usage of construction schedules and planning documents are important as they document the import of materials and labor for the site<sup>2</sup>. Given the project's size, rail, road and even canals were part of infrastructure built specifically for the project, with special rail stations made for the unloading of materials and labor. Records kept by transit authorities for these points will be essential to establishing just how much material was used and just how many laborers would have been used for the projects<sup>3</sup>. Additionally, these rail documents can definitely establish where materials and laborers were coming from. Sourcing of labor and materials is critical to establishing the buildings placement in a larger, nationwide system of infrastructure, labor and mass terror. The main body of the primary source material used in my project will be archival documents from the Bundesarchiv, the German Federal Archives in Berlin.

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<sup>2</sup> NS 3 - 32, 1346, 1538, Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde

<sup>3</sup> R 3 - 1809, Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde

Researching the Volkshalle and its forced labor apparatus represents a unique challenge as the Volkshalle was never built, in fact construction never even started on the project. Even though the final set of architectural construction documents were never fully completed there is still a tremendous amount of planning information and detail that went into the project that can be leveraged<sup>4</sup>. One of the reasons we have access to so much information about the Volkshalle is that the project was deeply personal for Hitler. One of the primary architectural documents I have been using is a sketch of the Volkshalle, at that time simply denoted as a “domed hall”, that was done by Hitler while he was imprisoned in Landsberg writing *Mein Kampf*. Prophetically, this is the same sketch that, following his appointment to Chancellor of Germany in 1933, as he walked down of the rostrum to his entourage, he would hand his sketch to Albert Speer and remark under his breath<sup>5</sup> “Wenn ich Europa regiere, wirst du das für mich bauen”<sup>6</sup> - “When I rule Europe, you will build this for me”<sup>7</sup>. Hitler’s obsession with the Volkshalle and the rebuilding projects for Berlin never ceased, he was so obsessed in fact that when his empire was literally falling apart around him in 1945 and the Soviet Red Army was only a few hundred yards away from the Reich Chancellery bunker in Berlin, Hitler spent hours upon hours with drawings and models of the project, planning a building for a world which no longer existed<sup>8</sup>. If completed the Volkshalle would have dwarfed the Berlin skyline, the dome of the Volkshalle alone would have been so large that all of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome could have fit inside of it<sup>9</sup>. The largest stadium in the world, even by today's standards, seating for 180,000 people and space for another 180,000 soldiers on parade on the floor of the hall. Cost and labor estimates for the project

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<sup>4</sup> Jaskot, P. B. (2005). *The Architecture of Oppression: The Ss, Forced Labor and the Nazi Monumental Building Economy*. Routledge.

<sup>5</sup> R 4606, Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde

<sup>6</sup> R 4606, Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde

<sup>7</sup> Translation by author

<sup>8</sup> Spotts, Frederic. *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics*. New York, NY: Overlook Press, 2018

<sup>9</sup> R 3 - 1809, Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde

(which is available as primary sources and is a big asset for this essay) put construction costs at over 200,000,000,000 in today's dollar, part of the 2,000,000,000,000 (2021 USD) plan for Berlin's redevelopment<sup>10</sup>. In terms of labor, the Volkshalle called for a labor force of a little over 1,000,000 forced laborers to live and work in the heart of Berlin for over two decades, all at one time<sup>11</sup>. Given that the average lifespan of a forced laborer in the SS camps systems was only three months<sup>12</sup>, it stands to reason that well over a million forced laborers would have died in the construction of the building alone.

Additionally, at every level the Volkshalle was to utilize the vast slave labor state the Germans had planned in the east under Generalplan Ost. Developed by the RSHA in secret, Generalplan Ost laid out the framework for the German occupied eastern territories of Poland, the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, Soviet Belorussia, Soviet Ukraine and the rest of the U.S.S.R<sup>13</sup>. During the latter half of the 19th century, while Germany was in the process of becoming a unified nation, other European states were aggressively pursuing vast colonial empires in Africa and Asia<sup>14</sup>. Germany was late to the game and the few overseas territories they had were given to the Allied powers in the aftermath of World War One. Many radical German political and social thinkers, long before Hitler and the NSDAP entered politics, had thought of having a vast German colonial empire inside of Eastern Europe, this thinking would form the basis for Nazi worldbuilding in the East<sup>15</sup>. In a series of broad actions, spanning several decades after defeating the Soviet Union, over 100,000,000 people were to be exterminated by bullet or

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<sup>10</sup> R 43-II - 688, 1026b, Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde

<sup>11</sup> NS 19 - 2046, 544, Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde

<sup>12</sup> Jaskot, 2005

<sup>13</sup> Synder, 2012

<sup>14</sup> Hagen, Joshua, and Robert Clifford Ostergren. *Building Nazi Germany: Place, Space, Architecture, and Ideology*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Welch, David. "Nazi Propaganda and the Volksgemeinschaft: Constructing a People's Community." *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, no. 2 (2004)

by starvation, 40,000,000 were to be deported beyond the Ural mountains, a massive, desolate and completely uninhabited part of Russia, essentially condemning these people to death<sup>16</sup>. The remaining group, approximately 25,000,000 people, were to be “germanized” into the Reich, this was a glorified term used by the Nazis for slave labor<sup>17</sup>. If they had successfully implemented Generalplan Ost, the Nazis would have had direct control over the largest pool of slave labor in the history of the world. These laborers were to be worked to death throughout Germany and the occupied territories. One of the primary uses for these laborers was in the extraction and process of building materials, specifically brickmaking and stone quarrying<sup>18</sup>. It is no surprise that the two main building elements used in the Volkshalle were bricks and quarried granite. Production of these materials were standardized across all concentration camps, even those that operated during the war<sup>19</sup>. The Brickworks at Auschwitz were completely identical to the brickworks at Sachausen<sup>20</sup> and so on. Likewise, the layout for granite quarries at Mauthausen was a carbon copy of the quarrying operations at Natzweiler-Struthof. These brickworks and quarries were in fact designed by architects, under the direction of Albert Speer, who would come to have a monopoly of building material production throughout German private enterprise, as well as through the German forced labor empire, often running as shell companies run by the S.S.<sup>21</sup>. Another major building material that was vital to the Volkshalle was large format structural steel, which was composed of a specially created steel alloy, rather akin to metals used in aircraft production, so that it could be extremely strong but also light, necessary for supporting that dome of the building. Structural steel was to be rolled at the Salzgitter steel plant, the largest steel plant

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<sup>16</sup> Synder, 2012

<sup>17</sup> Synder, 2012

<sup>18</sup> Jaskot, 2005

<sup>19</sup> Vossoughian, Nader. “From A4 Paper to the Octametric Brick: Ernst Neufert and the Geo-Politics of Standardisation in Nazi Germany.” *The Journal of Architecture* 20, no. 4 (2015)

<sup>20</sup> Vossoughian, Nader. “Standardization Reconsidered: ‘Normierung’ in and after Ernst Neuferts ‘Bauentwurfslehre’ (1936).” *Grey Room*, no. 54 (2014)

<sup>21</sup> Vossoughian, 2014

in the industrial conglomerate of the Reichswerke Herman Goring. The Reichswerke Herman Goring presents an interesting case study facility as it was created out of a physical manifestation of Nazi colonial ideology. Following the anschluss of Austria and the annexation of the Sudetenland and occupation of Czechoslovakia, the Nazi government was at a crossroads, what was to be done with all of the industry they now controlled. In these new territories, industrial plants were a hybrid of private ownership with state subsidization or were completely state owned. The Nazis simply decided to absorb all of the heavy industry into state owned industrial concerns, with no regard for private ownership. The Reichswerke Hermann Goring, which had previously been a single industrial plant, now controlled the single largest conglomerate of industrial plants in the world and was, at one time, the largest company in Europe, if not the world. The factory at Salzgitter was tasked with rolling steel for the Volkshalle and other capital rebuilding projects.

The factories and industrial plants that were tasked with the extraction and processing of building materials mostly occupy an interesting place in industrial development under the Third Reich. Most of these facilities started as civilian enterprises, meaning that they were mostly owned by civilians and staffed by civilians. Throughout their time in power, the Nazis states oversaw a massive consolidation of industry across Germany, according to a classified report compiled by the American Office for Strategic Services (the predecessor organization to the CIA) in 1942, the number of German Industrial corporations had decreased to 5,404, this is down from 9,143 in 1933 when Hitler assumed power. This decrease in the number of corporations is contrasted with a massive increase in capital during the same period, starting at 20,635,000,000 Reichsmarks in 1933 and growing to 29,061,000,000 Reichsmarks by 1942, equivalent to roughly 200,000,000,000 USD in 2022. The industrial consolidation was mainly done to the

benefit of the state, but also of some chosen corporations that enjoyed a close relationship with either the Nazi state as a whole, or specific powerful figures in the Nazi state. Yet still, during this consolidation, most factory employees would have been civilians, after the invasion and partition of Poland and the initial invasion of the USSR, plant employment started to be supplemented by foreign laborers, but almost exclusively from the occupied Eastern territories, not the Western occupied territories. As defeat started to roll in on the Eastern front in 1942, civilian workers were increasingly conscripted, creating a shortage of laborers in factories, as a result the state increased deportations from the occupied eastern territories into the reich for labor. As defeats worsened still, the capital building projects were largely put on hold as these factories and laborers would switch over to the production of war materials and defensive fortifications. The Reichswerke Herman Goring would convert its facilities to produce artillery, tanks, aircraft and so on, KL Sachsenhausen-Klinkerwerke would start sending its brick exports to Berlin to rebuild German homes destroyed by allied bombings instead of building Hitler's monoliths.

Since the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945 by the allied powers, there has been a concerted effort by former architects who worked under the Third Reich, specifically Albert Speer who would go on to write the infamous book *Inside the Third Reich*<sup>22</sup> to craft a myth about what happened during the war, specifically in relation to these massive building projects. Speer and other designer have tried to claim that they had no knowledge of the vast forced labor state and the mass killing actions the Nazi state was committing against occupied populations. Speer and other designers would simply claim that they were nothing more than just that, designers, and artists, not soldiers or politicians. There is utterly no evidence to support that, in fact quite the opposite, although that is not the primary focus of my project, I want to take a hard

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<sup>22</sup> Speer, Albert. *Inside the Third Reich: Memoirs*. New York: Touchstone, 1997.



stance against this myth that has largely gone unchecked. Hitler's team of architects and planners were acutely aware of where the labor and materials were coming from for these projects. They knew exactly how many laborers were coming and where they were coming from, because they were the ones that drew up the requisition forms that were sent to the Ostministerium and the RHSA, the agency in charge of the implementation of the Holocaust.<sup>23</sup>

The Third Reich and the allied powers would go on, from 1939-1945, fight the largest and deadliest war in all human history, a war that would take the lives of around 12,000,000 soldiers and over 20,000,000 civilians. As much as it was a war against nations, it was a war of ideology, a war pitched as a Darwinian ideological struggle between Fascism, Communism, and Democracy, where there could only be one victor, the one who would go on to rule Europe and challenge the Western powers. It was a war of race and culture, a war between modernity and a reversion to classicism, a war between speculation of what the future could be or what needed to be drawn from the past. It was a profoundly personal war between Hitler and Allied leaders. It was a war in stone, a war in timber, concrete, masonry, a war of steel and glass. Neither could live whilst the other survived.

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<sup>23</sup> Synder, 2012

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