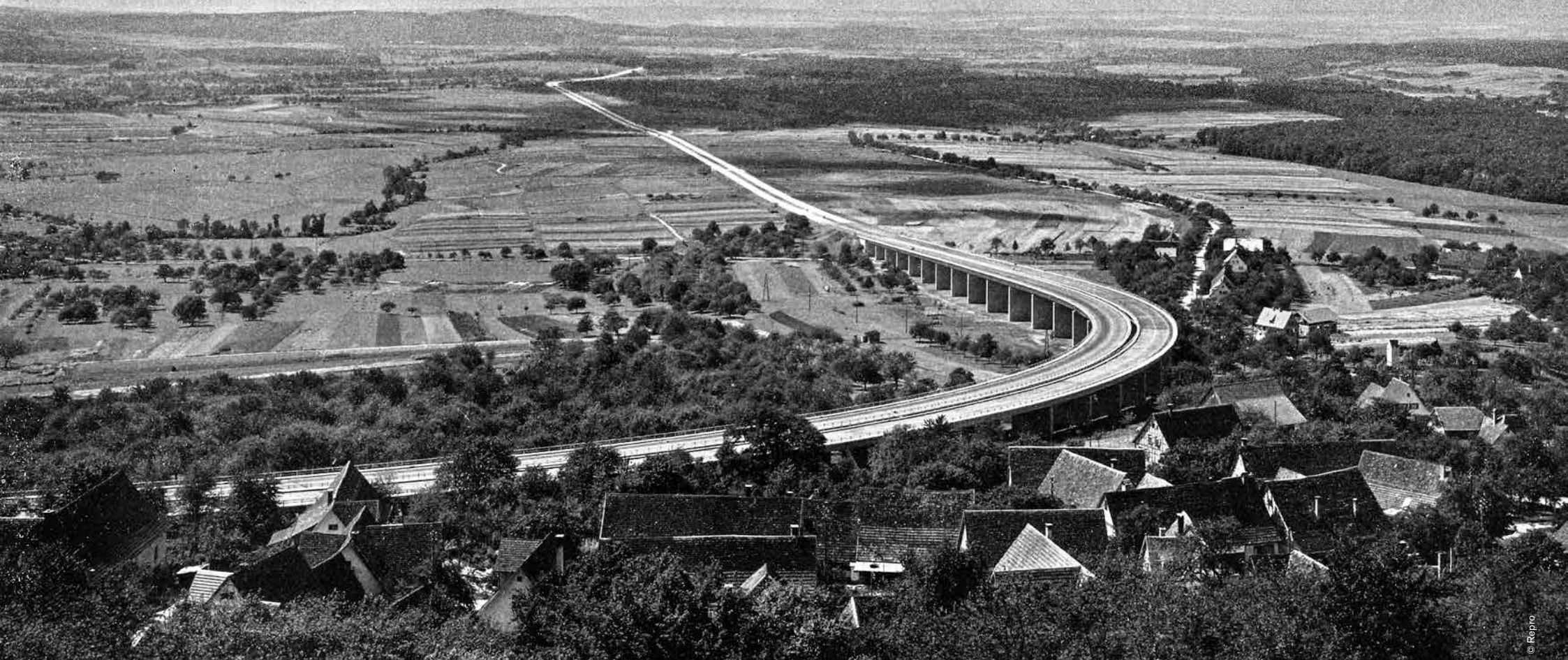


# Urban Planning in Nazi Germany

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A key image of Nazi urban planning: Hitler with Hermann Giesler (front left), Albert Speer, and Arno Breker (right) on June 23, 1940 in Paris.



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**May 8, 2025 marks the eightieth anniversary of Europe's liberation from National Socialism. On this date, the work will be published – in a German and an English edition, as a voice of science in the concert of controversial messages on this day.**

Urban planning was an essential instrument of the Nazi dictatorship. It always served to legitimize rule, to produce approval, to demonstrate strength, effectiveness, and speed, it accompanied rearmament and war, it conveyed the dictatorship's sociopolitical program both at home and abroad, it was a medium of competition with democratic states and above all with other European dictatorships, it bound old and new experts to the dictatorship and systematically marginalized population groups. Since the 1970s, there have been many precise partial studies of national socialist urban planning, but these do not always take into account the hectic changes in urban planning between 1933 and 1945. They also generally ignore international references.

This book examines urban planning under Nazi rule in its extraordinary dynamics and in the context of other European dictatorships of the time. For between 1933 and 1945, the major themes of urban planning, the most important actors, the cities affected and the areas to be developed in these cities, the programs and practices, the winners and losers changed several times. The constant expansion of the spaces to be planned through "annexations" and violent occupations had far-reaching consequences. A wide variety of institutions and experts struggled for responsibility for the growing field of action. Marginalized social groups increasingly experienced disenfranchisement, predation, displacement, persecution, and murder through urban planning. At the same time, the media and content of urban planning propaganda, the production of the desired perception of what should be understood as urban planning, shifted. The reception of Nazi urban planning after 1945 was also influenced by the dictatorship's propaganda.

The Kamperfehn labor camp near Oldenburg in Lower Saxony, probably 1935, Postcard.



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The European 20th century was a century of dictatorships. These were not only regimes of terror, but were also welcomed or tolerated by many. This was because they offered an enticing program: an evocation of former greatness and a promise of a bright future. Urban planning played a role that is still underestimated today: it served to legitimize rule, produce approval, demonstrate strength, efficiency, and speed, underpin economic, social, and cultural development, communicate the socio-political program both nationally and abroad, and mobilize old and new experts. And from the very beginning, it was an important means of preparing for and waging war. Everyday urban planning made visible which social classes were marginalized, persecuted, imprisoned, and murdered – in the prisons and concentration camps, in the forced labour camps, but also in simple housing projects (“Schlichtwohnsiedlungen”) far outside the city. Even after the fall of the dictatorships, the built legacy of this period has affected Europe – right up to the present day. Despite its significance for the 20th century, this urban planning has not yet found a permanent place in European historiography. Within the debates on national socialist urban planning, the urban planning of other dictatorships has not yet been adequately considered and Nazi urban planning has rarely been contextualized internationally.

But why urban planning at all? Up till now, the reception of the architectural activities of the Nazi dictatorship concentrated primarily on individual architects and buildings, while the urban planning context often remained in the dark. However, in Nazi Germany – as in other dictatorships – architecture was largely subordinated to urban planning, i.e. an orientation that went beyond individual buildings. Without the urban planning dimension, the architecture of the Nazi dictatorship is incomprehensible. And the isolated view of architecture makes it difficult to understand its dictatorial character.

Is there even a need for a book on Nazi urban planning? Aren't there numerous excellent publications on this topic already? Fundamentally, a lot is already known or could be known about Nazi urban planning. This is because there is a great deal of highly productive research on this topic, and there are many dedicated local initiatives that document and publish studies on the ground – this knowledge is becoming more and more precise. No other twelve years of German history have probably been researched as intensively as the years 1933 to 1945. However, the undoubtedly impressive diversity of analytical research of national socialist urban planning also points to some unanswered questions, which are particularly evident in the general historiography of urban planning. These relate above all to the primarily national perspective, the concentration on a few propagated large-scale projects, the isolation of the debates, and the sometimes inadequate periodization.

As a rule, research in Germany, as in other countries, has a national focus. The simultaneous or earlier developments in other dictatorships in Europe, even those of the two large dictatorships in the Soviet Union and Italy, which have existed for much longer and are significant in terms of urban planning, are hardly or not at all taken into account. Yet urban planning in dictatorial states not only served to establish legitimacy, consensus, and representation in their own countries, but also to gain recognition from the politically democratic states and, especially after Hitler came to power, increasingly as a medium for rivalry between the major dictatorships in Europe. However, the cross-dictatorship perspective not only serves to understand the development of urban planning against the background of competition between the states, it also clarifies the respective peculiarities and European references of the dictatorships and complicates the often-times simplified understanding of dictatorial urban planning. It points to major differences between the dictatorships at the time – for example in housing construction, the organization of urban planning, the involvement of experts, the militarization of urban planning, the construction of forced labor camps, etc. It also reveals similarities – for example with regard

to the expansion of the capital as a showroom of the dictatorship, the great importance of transport and educational infrastructure, the elimination of municipal autonomy, and the propagandistic exploitation of realized and planned projects.

Despite the availability of differentiated research findings, the German perspective is still dominated by a focus on large-scale projects, a view that was propagated by the dictatorship itself. This often reveals an overly narrow understanding of urban planning, which includes representative buildings and housing, but tends to exclude the renewal of historic city centers, internal colonization, the construction of industrial areas, freeways, educational institutions and camps as well as other facilities of the material and social infrastructure. These subjects have certainly been investigated, but the knowledge gained has only been incorporated into the general historiography of urban planning to a very limited extent. The compartmentalization of the individual research contexts and the strong isolation of the discourses are also unmistakable. This is because many research findings remain confined to specific circles: be they small, regional, national, disciplinary, or generational. And also in thematic circles that make integration into overarching discourses more difficult. The willingness to process the results of other disciplines such as the history of everyday life, military history, political history, history of technology, economic history, and history of science is not very pronounced.

The extraordinary dynamics of Nazi urban planning are also rarely given adequate consideration. For between 1933 and 1945, the major themes of urban planning, the fundamental goals, the most important players, the cities affected and the areas to be developed in these cities, the programs and practices, the winners and losers changed several times. It is impossible to overlook the constant expansion of the spaces to be designed. What was planned, what was realized, what was demolished, how it was argued about, is generally a meaningful source about the functioning and the socio-political program of the dictatorship at a given time. However, urban planning also changed in



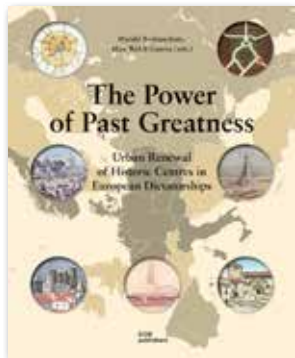
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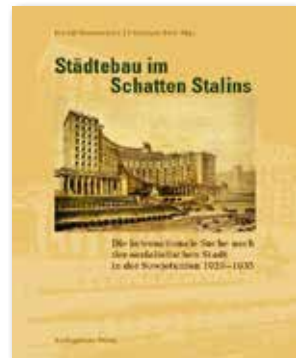
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terms of its impact on disenfranchisement, predation, displacement, persecution, and violence against various marginalized social groups. At the same time, the media and content of urban planning propaganda, the production of what parts of the Nazi leadership wanted to be understood as urban planning, shifted.

This book also marks the end of Harald Bodenschatz's and a changing group of experts' long involvement with the subject of urban development and dictatorship in various European countries: in the former Soviet Union, in Italy, in Portugal and in Spain. 25 years ago, Christiane Post was instrumental in writing the book on Stalin's urban planning. Together with Harald Bodenschatz, she was also involved in the federal research project "Planning and Building under National Socialism – Prerequisites, Institutions, Effects", which was supervised by an independent historical commission. Max Welch Guerra has been leading the research on urban planning and dictatorship for thirteen years. And for the past three years, Victoria Grau has been researching historical urban planning topics as a research assistant. Together with Max Welch Guerra, she published the book "Histories of Urban Planning and Political Power. European Perspectives" in 2024.

The results of our research to date have been published in a series of four books (plus one book in Russian and an expanded second edition), which were always a product of collaboration between several academics of different generations, including the cooperation between the Technical University of Berlin and the Bauhaus University Weimar as well as the publishing houses Braun and DOM publishers.



### The editorial team

Harald Bodenschatz, Max Welch Guerra,  
Christiane Post, Victoria Grau

The authors of the concluding book “Urban Planning in Nazi Germany” come from different countries (Chile, Germany, Italy), represent different disciplines (architectural and planning sociology, urban planning, art history, urban studies, and political science) and represent different generations (from 1946 to 1999). This also largely applies to the editors of the book.



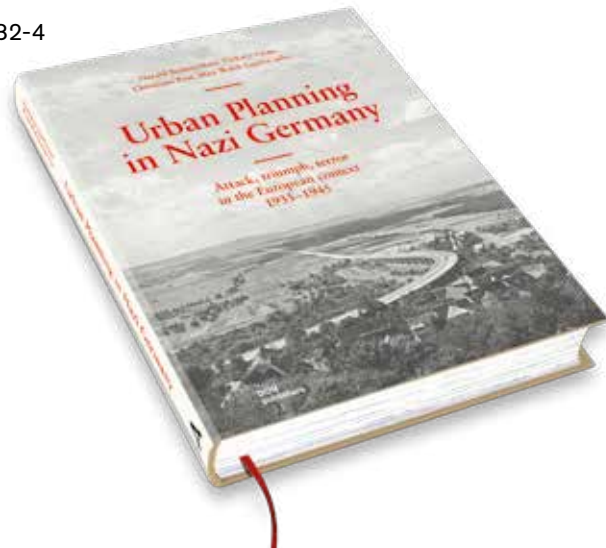
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	<b>Twelve Long Years</b> Urban planning – an essential instrument of the Nazi dictatorship
1941-1945	<b>Outlook</b> Remembering: but what and how?

Against this background, our concept of National Socialist urban planning primarily comprises six analytical levels, which are summarized here in the form of theses:

1. With a view to the designed and built product, Nazi urban planning was more than the oft-cited grouping of monumental state buildings in “Gauforums” and along central axes; it also encompasses housing construction, educational, social and transportation infrastructure, military facilities, industrial and agricultural complexes, green spaces, camps of various kinds, and much more (diversity of urban planning).
2. Nazi urban planning was in a state of constant change. This includes themes and goals, actors and places, programs and practices, winners and losers (dynamics of urban planning), it also includes constant conceptual controversies and personal rivalries.
3. Nazi urban planning not only unfolded within a national framework, it was always also a medium of international competition and international relations (internationality of urban planning).
4. Nazi urban planning often implied an isolated, introverted spatial fundamental form (isolation of urban planning), combined with an orientation towards the German landscape. This is not least a consequence of the dominant urban planning tasks: Barracks, air bases, educational institutions, Thingstätten, Gauforen, forced labor camps, armaments factories, etc. Only on paper did it also lead to a neo-absolutist form under the slogan “redesign”, which was intended to spatially subordinate the entire existing city to a new center.
5. However, Nazi urban planning was more than the designed and built product, more than the spatial form – it encompasses product, production, production relations, and propaganda, although the product is the core of urban planning (complexity of urban planning). On all these levels, urban planning also means the exercise of power.
6. With the fall of the dictatorship, national socialist urban planning has not simply become history; rather, it influences the present and the future by becoming the subject of constantly changing verbal and practical interaction (remembrance of urban planning).

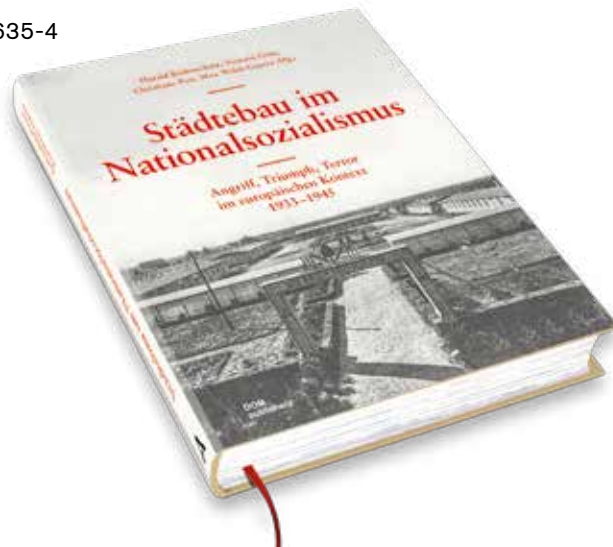
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