

REVIEWS AND NOTES

**DESPINA STRATIGAKOS, HITLER'S NORTHERN UTOPIA.
BUILDING THE NEW ORDER IN OCCUPIED NORWAY
Princeton University Press, 2020, 313 p.**

Review by Lars BAERENTZEN*

Despina Stratigakos is a professor of architecture at the university in Buffalo, New York. Her new book, *Hitler's Northern Utopia*¹, is an account of Norway during the Second World War. The book is based on a comprehensive study in the archives and it makes available many hitherto unknown details. Very thorough notes leave the reader in no doubt about the sources – and they are, at the same time, a key to the most recent research both in Norway and internationally.

The book opens with Hitler's voyage at sea to Norway in April 1934 on board the pocket-battleship *Deutschland* in the company of Admiral Raeder and Colonel-general von Blomberg. The ship entered the Sogne Fjord at 07.30 am, on April 12, "in exceptionally beautiful weather" and stopped briefly at Balestrand, where the Emperor Wilhelm II in the summer of 1913 as a present to Norway erected a statue of the Viking hero Frithiof. Stratigakos makes use of Norwegian and German press accounts – and the pictures taken by the photographer Heinrich Hoffmann – to present a main theme of the book: Hitler's personal enthusiasm for Norway as an important centre of the "Nordic race".

When the war broke out in 1939, Admiral Raeder was quick to suggest getting bases in Norway for the great fleet he was planning. The

* Historian and a former intelligence practitioner for Danish Defense, independent consultant and lecturer.

¹ This review was previously published in Danish in *Krigshistorisk Tidsskrift (Journal of War Studies)* on February, 2021.

voyage in 1934 seemed idyllic – but the book reminds us that quite possibly it was on board the *Deutschland* that Hitler planned the “Night of the Long Knives” which happened shortly after, on June 30, 1934 – (an event which provided an early success for the Polish code breakers, viza deciphered Enigma message “to all airfields. Röhm must be brought here, dead or alive”).

Before the war in Norway had ended with a German victory on June 10, 1940, Hitler had already named the veteran Nazi from the Ruhr area, Josef Terboven, as “Reich Commissioner” in Norway. Together with von Falkenhorst, the military Commander, it was his task to change Norway into an ideal Nazi community – and at the same time, if possible, make the Norwegians into friends of Germany (as Hitler is said to have told Terboven when he gave him the title on April 24).

In Denmark, we are used to thinking of “Conditions in Norway” and “Conditions in Denmark” as two very different things. (Actually, a book under this title was published in 2010²) Stratigakos’ outstanding book illustrates clearly and informatively just *how very* different these conditions were – if only by the fact that Quisling and his Nazi *Nasjonal Samling* became the civilian Norwegian authority with whom Terboven and the Wehrmacht were going to cooperate.

Stratigakos shows in many different areas, how this cooperation in practice happened – and that it presented other problems that those encountered by the Germans in Denmark. In Berlin, the aim was to build up Norway as a base for German Uboats and aircraft and to make it a strong fortress able to withstand the expected British attacks. At the same time, Berlin aimed to create an ideal Nordic Nazi society that, incidentally, should become part of the German “Grossraum” – after the expected victory – equipped with a German-planned and German-populated town with living space for those who were to work at the large naval base and its associated shipbuilding yard. Furthermore, the intention was that this town should become the northernmost in a series of “culture-cities” in the Greater German Reich.

It was a problem for Hitler and for the local German leaders in Norway that this vision did not correspond to the wishes of Quisling

² “*Conditions in Denmark*” 1940-45. Hans Fredrik Dahl, Hans Kirchhoff, Joachim Lund & Lars-Erik Vaale. København 2010.

and his supporters. Therefore, the final aim had to be kept secret – even though the preparations of course were large-scale and very costly. The Norwegian infrastructure (roads, railroads, power stations, airfields) was greatly strengthened. That created full employment, but in addition the Germans used many thousands of slave-workers (especially Russian and Yugoslav prisoners-of-war). These were guarded in part by Norwegians, and thousands died during the work.

Because the buildings plans in Norway had such a high priority for the inner circle in Berlin, they became the object of a bitter internal power-struggle about who was going to control the development – and get control of those large resources which were needed. The personal involvement of Hitler made this power-struggle constant and relentless. Stratigakos shows how Terboven and his “Reich Commissariat” in Oslo was one pole, and the Wehrmacht chiefs in Norway were another. Terboven was interested in having competent Norwegian specialists becoming involved, and some Norwegians wanted the same.

One of the interesting “case-studies” in the book deals with the creation, as early as June 1940, of the purely Norwegian organization “Brente Steders Regulering” (Burnt Sites Redevelopment). A large number of towns (about 14.000 houses) were burnt down during the fighting between April 9 and the beginning of June. A well-known Norwegian town planning expert, Sverre Pedersen, from the Technical University in Trondheim managed to collect a large group of Norwegian architects who were to take care of the restoration work. The Germans – Terboven and his people – were in a way positive, but could they be sure that this group would be able to create the right German style in design and town planning?

Now enters a new player: Albert Speer with his extreme ambitions and his wish to control all (important) building activity in the Third Reich by using his personal relation with Hitler. Both with regard to the “Burnt Sites Redevelopment” and with regard to the planning of an ideal town at Trondheim, Speer succeeded in getting the upper hand over Terboven and his Oslo-based German civil servants. Stratigakos shows with merciless clarity how Speer used every method to get his way. Her picture of his cold efficiency is precisely in accordance with the impression one gets from the comprehensive biography of Speer

which professor Magnus Brechtken published in Munich in 2017 (one of the few relevant books not cited in *Hitler's Northern Utopia*).

Speer used many kinds of method, also flattery and apparent friendliness. For instance, he invited the above-mentioned Norwegian group of architects led by Sverre Pedersen in November 1940 on a luxurious visit to many cities in Germany where they were everywhere received with honour – in Munich they were even received by Speer's rival, the architect Herman Giesler, also an ardent Nazi, to whom Hitler had entrusted the development of "die Hauptstadt der Bewegung". For her brilliant description of this journey Stratigakos has used, among other sources, Sverre Pedersen's personal notes from the visit, which are still preserved in Trondheim. In his speech to the Norwegians, Geisler quoted the words of Aristotle about "the purpose of the Greek polis: to make the citizens secure and happy."

Just like Speer, Terboven was also a seasoned power-player with access to the inner circle (he had married Goebbel's former secretary), and it was Terboven himself who in August 1940 asked Speer to take care of the general oversight of the reconstruction in Norway. Speer was pleased to let the local Germans in Oslo do the considerable preparatory work which Stratigakos describes in such a way that the reader clearly feels that the special field of the author is architecture. But the task of designing the important new town at Trondheim – that was something Speer wanted for himself. In the spring of 1941 Speer wrote to Terboven that Hitler had given him full powers to "create a new town at Trondheim". He also wrote that the final location probably could be only decided by a personal visit by Hitler. This did not happen. Speer decided that he should travel to Norway – but Hitler ordered the visit to be cancelled at the last moment giving as a reason that it was still too unsafe to travel in Norway. As Speer wrote to Terboven, "I am indispensable for him".³

The final decision about the location of the ideal city just west of Trondheim was made by Hitler in person on June 21st 1941 – that is, on the day before the attack against the Soviet Union ("Barbarossa") was

³ "Unfettered by modesty" is the apt comment in the book. It also mentions that Norwegian saboteurs had been very active in the days before Speer's planned visit, "perhaps prompting Hitler's reluctance to let him go".

opened very early next morning. This took place at a meeting with Speer and Admiral Raeder (whose fleet had recently lost one of its super-battleships, Bismarck, while the other, Tirpitz, only on January 16 arrived off Trondheim.)

Militarily, Norway continued to have great importance, especially for the German Uboat-warfare. The defensive build-up of the Atlantic Wall demanded great resources and many soldiers. Stratigakos notes Hitler's great sensitivity with regard to an Allied landing which on several occasions made him send more troops to Norway.⁴ Hitler also long continued to demand that work on the new Trondheim be carried on – a demand that he did not abandon until after the defeat at Stalingrad.

Stratigakos writes in particular about the consequences for the German building activity in Norway, including the building of "Soldiers' homes". The book has an interesting chapter about these under the title "Islands of Germanness". The Army leadership was aware of the need to counteract loneliness and depression among the soldiers, and many large "Soldiers' homes" were planned in which a "homely German atmosphere" was aimed at. Several were indeed built and some even exist today. Stratigakos shows with many photos that the wish to create a homely and very German atmosphere (as in a local inn) succeeded quite well.

The "Soldiers' Homes" were run by German women volunteers who were supposed, for instance by cooking, to make the soldiers feel at ease. But when German soldiers began to invite their Norwegian girlfriends to the Soldiers' Homes, the Commander-in-Chief, von Falkenhorst, put his foot down: he forbade Norwegian women entry using the argument that this would mean that the volunteer German women would have to wait at table for Norwegian women, and he saw that as an unacceptable affront to the German women.

⁴ The British exploited this anxiety in three large-scale "deception-plans", in which notional attacks against Norway were used to deflect attention from real attacks against other targets. There was, however, also a real British plan for an attack against Trondheim, put together on Churchill's direct order in October 1941. According to British generals, Churchill, too, was "obsessed with Norway" and he never stopped talking about attacking there: "Merely the sight of a map of Norway was enough to make him begin again".

German soldiers in Norway were not always lonely, as Stratigakos shows in a section dealing with the roughly 12.000 children who were born by Norwegian women to German fathers. At the Liberation in 1945 there were more than 500 children in so-called "Lebensborn" homes in Norway, and it is a bitter irony that many of these "Aryan elite children" after the war without any evidence (as the book shows) were considered to be mentally retarded.

In the book Stratigakos speaks about many well-known Nazis seen from an angle that is not so common. This is true for Terboven and those working in his administration in Oslo and also for Speer and his close collaborators. In this book one meets them *also* as hard-working and efficient people whose work is of course influenced by rivalry, but maybe not more so than is commonly seen among very ambitious people. The explanation is – of course – that this book to a large extent builds on contemporary documents in which individuals themselves discuss the technical or practical problems which they are engaged in solving. They did not often write to one another about the brutal cruelty shown towards Norwegian resistance fighters and Norwegian Jews, and they talked as little as possible about the many thousands of prisoners-of-war whose labour was cruelly exploited to build the roads and the buildings which the Germans needed.

The author is well aware of the dilemma that can be created from building a large part of the text upon contemporary sources. This she states clearly and beautifully in words that deserve to be quoted: "... *these sources are distinctly one-sided, giving voice to German illusions and ambitions. This book thus should not be read as a general or balanced history of the occupation. Rather, the Norway envisioned by the Nazis and explored in this book is a fantasy and a dangerous one*" (Italics in the original).

The concluding chapter of the book is named "Conclusion. Ghosts in the landscape." Here Stratigakos explains how the many consequences of the Occupation have been handled by Norway in the years since the war. This includes the treatment by the Norwegian State of some of the citizens who "failed" during the Occupation. Much of this is not pleasant to read, but it is not unknown in more recent Norwegian historiography to which the book is a good guide. A well-known

example is the brutal treatment of the children born by Norwegian mothers with German soldiers as fathers. A perhaps less well-known example is “Operation Asphalt” in the summer of 1951 when the Norwegian Government – now a member of NATO – “quietly and hurriedly” began to move 95 Soviet war cemeteries in the northern provinces to the remote island of Tjøtta. Many local memorial stones were also removed in spite of protests from local Norwegians who remembered the suffering of the prisoners. But Norway wanted to avoid visits by Russians who wished to remember the dead and perhaps had other reasons for their visit.

The reader gets an enormous amount of information about Norway in this beautiful and well-written book. Professor Stratigakos deserves much gratitude **for a book which combines clear-headed precision and richness of detail with an understanding for the human cost of history.**