

Front to Rear: Architecture and Planning during World War II

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Building bridges – burning bridges

With the banks, the bridge brings to the stream the one and the other expanse of the landscape lying behind them. It brings stream and bank and land into each other's neighborhood. Martin Heidegger, 1951 buildings often carry symbolic messages. Probably the most obvious one is transported by bridges, transforming landscapes, countries, or people, which had been separated before, into neighbors. But, in contradiction to their constitutional idea of peace, bridges can also develop into symbols of a dangerous threat or domination. This is what happens especially in wartime. Shortly after coming into power in the summer of 1933 Adolf Hitler ordered the construction of the *Reichsautobahnen*, a vast motorway system for Germany. Work on one of the most extensive infrastructure projects of its times was started the same year under supervision of the Inspector General for German Roadways, Fritz Todt. Due to the concept of a street network avoiding intersections at the same level, bridges became a central constituent of the motorway project. Furthermore, besides their technical task, motorway bridges also developed into an important element for propaganda. In fact, even if many of the approximately 5000 motorway bridges built under the Nazi regime cannot be valued as outstanding constructions, the comprehensive quality of design in nearly all the structures--reaching from small culverts to gigantic viaducts--played a key role for the international enthusiasm towards the German motorways. Against many widespread beliefs, the aspect of war preparation only played a marginal role during the first years of motorway construction. But, as the war approached, this situation rapidly changed and especially the bridge builders got increasingly involved in the war machinery. In 1938 Todt was ordered to build a 400-mile-long line of defensive forts and tank traps. Works on this so-called *Westwall* were supervised by an extraordinarily effective branch office of the Inspectorate General, soon known under the name *Organisation Todt* (OT). At first only needed for their general engineering skills, many of the bridge builders soon returned to their original profession. Being distributed by the OT on bridge building brigades, they followed on the heels of the forward moving army, rebuilding bridges that had been damaged during the fighting. Surprisingly, the works on the motorways were not totally stopped when the war broke out, and the plans for the motorway network were even extended with every victory of the German army. Thus, also the architects involved in the motorway project had plenty of planning to do. But, the expression of their bridges underwent a decent change. From sober and harmonious engineering structures they developed into gigantic monuments of a conquering, militarized country. When the war tide finally turned, most of these projects still were nothing more than hypertrophic dreams--dreams that finally turned into the nightmare of the destruction of German bridges by the own retreating army.

It is the aim of the author to discuss the involvement of German bridge builders in the war

process through exemplary projects. Therefore, the paper would mainly focus on the works of some key figures for German bridge building of that time, such as the architects Paul Bonatz and Friedrich Tamms, and the engineers Karl Schaechterle, Gottwalt Schaper and Fritz Leonhardt.

Roland May read architecture and town planning at the Technical University, Darmstadt, and has been a research and teaching associate in the Department of History and Theory of Architecture there from 2002 till 2008. His research is focused on the so-called ‘traditionalist’ architecture in 20th-century Germany, especially on the work of Paul Bonatz, about whose bridges he finished his PhD thesis in 2007. He co-curated the exhibition and catalogue *Architektur der fünfziger Jahre – Die Darmstädter Meisterbauten* (1998) and collaborated on exhibitions such as *Architektur des 20 Jahrhunderts – Deutschland* (2000) or *100 Jahre Deutscher Werkbund 1907|2007* (2007). Roland May has received scholarships from the Federal State of Hesse and the Centro Internazionale di Studi di Architettura Andrea Palladio.

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