



Hitler's Northern Utopia: Building the New Order in Occupied Norway

by Despina Stratigakos.

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Review by Jonathan Beard, New York City (jb752@caa.columbia.edu).

For most of Europe, World War II and German occupation meant death and ruin. Poland was invaded twice, Warsaw was left in ruins, and millions of Poles died in fighting or in death camps. The fates of Belgium, the Netherlands, and France were not as grim, but millions of their workers were conscripted by German factories, and the Allies bombed them for years. Then there was Norway, the subject of architecture professor (Univ. at Buffalo) Despina Stratigakos's unusual and provocative new book, *Hitler's Northern Utopia*. To begin with, she says, "The Nazis believed Norwegians to be racially superior to Germans, and admired—even envied—their Viking origins. As fellow Nordic brothers, the Norwegians were to be treated differently from other conquered nations" (8). Given this, and Hitler's obsessive fear that the British would invade Norway, things turned out very differently there. Over the course of the occupation, the Germans built military defenses and installations, roads, bridges, tunnels, railroads, airfields, docks, power stations, and commercial and industrial facilities. The astronomical cost of these projects made Norway the only occupied country in Europe where Germany invested more resources than it withdrew (38).

The book comprises five distinct thematic chapters, rather than a continuous chronological narrative of the German occupation. Chapter 1, "Romanticizing the North," is the fruit of an unusual resource.

The National Archives of Norway holds the vast press clippings collection of the Reich Commissariat's Department of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. The collection contains articles on Norway published after April 1940 in German-language newspapers and journals from across Germany and occupied Europe. (239n3)

The chapter shows what Nazi propagandists wanted Germans to believe about Norway as a new part of the Third Reich. They touted the noble peasants and shepherds of the countryside, but depicted Oslo, the nation's largest city, as effeminate, cosmopolitan, and full of soulless modern architecture—so different from the wooden farmhouses in the mountains.

Chapter 2, "Norway in the New Order" is far more interesting, since it concerns the two issues that made Norway exceptional within occupied Europe: infrastructure and baby-making. Since Germany, and Hitler himself, viewed Norway as a privileged part of an envisioned postwar Greater Reich, the authorities went to work immediately after fighting ended in June 1940. Their ambitious plans included extending the country's north-south highway all the way to its northern tip, and likewise improving the rail net. In both cases, the Germans boasted that they were doing what Norwegian governments had failed to do for decades. Stratigakos stresses that these vast public works projects put Norwegians and Norwegian contractors to work. Though neither the rail lines nor highways were ever completed, they became a significant part of Norway's postwar infrastructure and remain in use today. This was even truer of airfields. The Luftwaffe improved

existing airports, and built dozens of airfields throughout Norway. When the Germans left in 1945, Gardermoen, Oslo's airport, was one of the finest such facilities in Europe.

A special strength of the book is Stratigakos's attention to the fate of POWs—some Serbian, but mostly Russian. Tens of thousands of these men had labored in usually harsh conditions; she estimates that over fourteen thousand died in Norway. After the war, Norwegian and Soviet teams searched for their frequently unmarked graves and erected monuments to them at new cemeteries around the country. In 1951, however, as Norway moved west politically, all the dead were exhumed, their monuments obliterated, and their remains reinterred in a new cemetery on a remote offshore island.

The author has a talent for connecting people and policies of 1940 with those of the present day. The Nazis, strong believers in eugenics, wanted certified Aryan babies to grow up to be soldiers and mothers. Their *Lebensborn* (fount of life) program, created in 1935, had yielded few infants. Now, with hundreds of thousands of German soldiers spending years in Norway, their Norwegian girlfriends were bearing thousands of “Nordic” babies. Disused tourist hotels were turned into nurseries and the women were tutored in German language and culture so they could be proper mothers. Stratigakos chronicles the sad fates of mothers and children all the way to 2019. In 1945, fourteen thousand women were arrested and imprisoned for their “horizontal collaboration.” They and their offspring were persecuted for decades, and many of the children ended up institutionalized for life. Not until 2018 did the Norwegian government finally apologize for these actions.

The next two chapters will particularly interest students and specialists in architectural history and city planning under totalitarian regimes. Chapter 3, “Islands of Germanness,” describes the construction of “soldiers’ homes”—elaborate entertainment/recreation centers for the troops. They were needed because Hitler's determination to make Norway a bastion against Allied invasion resulted in an exceptionally large occupation force. Averaging around 300,000 German troops, it reached almost 450,000 (including 25,000 German civilians) by war's end (78). Much of the country, especially the sparsely settled far north, lacked large buildings to requisition. The troops were often cold and bored, since there was no combat in Norway till 1945. The invaders' islands of Germanness were explicitly intended to keep their soldiers from “going native.” Though thousands of them had Norwegian girlfriends, Norwegians were not permitted inside the soldiers' homes buildings. Only German women cooked for and served the soldiers.

Chapter Four, “The Nazification of Norway's Towns,” focuses on the small seaport city of Molde, one of over a dozen towns heavily damaged during the German invasion. With much of its center destroyed, German city planners wanted to turn it into a model of what towns in the new Reich would be like. Avenues and squares would be enlarged to accommodate parades and rallies; Nazi Party buildings would take pride of place, while traditional structures, especially churches, were downgraded. Stratigakos finds a nice irony in the fact that Molde's wider streets accommodated increased traffic after the war; the city also takes advantage of its grand square during its annual jazz festival.

The final chapter, “A German City in the Fjords,” draws almost entirely on archival research, rather than facts on the ground. At the beginning of World War II, the German Navy and Hitler himself wanted to base a vast fleet on the Atlantic, supported by a new shipyard/naval base. They chose a rocky peninsula near the city of Trondheim as the site. But, despite months of planning, the project (and most others in Norway) had to be abandoned after major defeats in Stalingrad and North Africa.

The book's conclusion, "Ghosts in the Landscape," helpfully ties together its various themes and surveys what remains from the occupation. A few of the soldiers' homes still stand; the babies born of relationships with German soldiers are dead or septuagenarians. Norwegian historians are coming to terms with both the occupation and their country's response in the 1950s and 60s. *Hitler's Northern Utopia* should be high on their must-read list. Nor will non-specialist readers be disappointed in it.¹

1. The book is enriched by its collection of illustrations; chap. 3 alone has twenty-seven well chosen black-and-white photos of the soldiers' homes. Other enhancements are fifteen color plates, including maps, as well as forty-five pages of unusually thorough endnotes, a fifteen-page bibliography, and an index.