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Assault on "German Village"

During the Second World War the Americans tested in the desert of Utah the bombardment of Berlin. In accurate detail they had copies of tenement buildings constructed. The architect was the well-known German Jew Erich Mendelsohn. By Mike Davis

The most faraway, unknown suburb of Berlin lies abandoned in the desert of the US federal state of Utah, about one hundred kilometres south-west of Salt Lake City. It carries the name "German Village" and is part of the army's "Dugway Proving Ground".

Dugway is about half the size of Saarland and is more contaminated with poisons that the nuclear testing grounds in the state of Nevada to the west of Utah. Three generations of chemical and biological weapons of the American forces have been tested here; the area was always above top secret and during the Cold war was enshrouded in legends.

The "German Village" is the remains of a larger complex of buildings: Copies of Berlin tenements, which served to test the incineration of German cities. A great man of modern architecture had created them – the German-Jewish architect Erich Mendelsohn.

In 1943 the US Corps for chemical warfare secretly hired Mendelsohn and won him over to erect in the desert of Utah – together with technicians from Standard Oil – a Berlin workers' quarter in miniature. A tenement named "Building 8100" is still there today – the building gives no idea that here the very man had been at work who during the time of the Weimar Republic had been responsible for Berlin marks like the Mosse Building, the Columbus House, the residential premises Sternefeld in Charlottenburg or the observatory Einsteinturm at Potsdam.

Absolute similarity in every respect was the specification. His employers were in a hurry. Despite successful air raids that made seas of flames of German cities, frustration grew on the American side because they did not succeed to ignite a firestorm in the German Reich's capital.

Therefore, their scientific advisors asked for an immediate programme in which the burning characteristics of workers' tenements should be tested on exact copies. Planning and building were coordinated with secret research about the inflammability of Japanese houses, for the simulated destruction of Japanese targets were also part of the Dugway programme.

Mendelsohn's achievement was the anonymity of the result: six versions of the typical tenements that made the workers' quarters of Berlin some of the most densely populated poor-people lodgings in Europe. The copies were not as tall as the seven-story originals in Wedding or Kreuzberg, but in all other respects they were surprisingly faithful duplicates.

The German star architect procured for the Americans extensive information about the roof construction in the target areas, as these were a critical factor for the success of the incendiary bombs. According to Standard Oil these data were "expanded and confirmed by a member of the teaching body at the Harvard School of Architecture, an expert in German wood frame building techniques".

The construction companies made sure that the frames used at Dugway compared as closely as possible with the originally in age and specific density. Some of the wood had been imported from Murmansk. Since incendiary experts maintained that the climate at Dugway was too dry, Standard Oil ensured the proper humidity: In copying Berlins rain, GIs had to douse the targets continuously with water.

The interior decoration was handed to skilled Hollywood decorators from the RKO studios; they had gained accolades for their work on "Citizen Kane". Aided by workers who had learned their craft in Germany they created the cheap but heavy furniture that was part of the furnishings in most Berlin workers' households. They even got German textiles in order to study carefully the typical properties of bedcovers and curtains in conflagrations.

Inmates of the Utah state prison who were put to work only needed 44 days to finish both the German Village and its Japanese counterpart (twelve double apartments, completely furnished with hinoki wood and tatami mats). The whole complex was then bombarded with incendiaries and between may and September 1943 completely re-built three times.

Mendelsohn's responsibility for the Berlin project in the Wild West is full of irony. The architect was highly interested in reforms in the building of tenements and in a new culture of housing. Yet he never participated in the important contracts that in the later 20s had been organised by the social democrats.

Most mysterious is Mendelsohn's absence at the planning of the Weissenhof residential estate in Stuttgart in 1927, a showcase project supervised by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe which the American architect Philip Johnson called "one of the most important groups of buildings in the history of modern architecture". Mendelsohn biographer Bruno Zevi surmises that the architect had been excluded for anti-Semitic reasons.

If this is true, the Dugway was his revenge. The tenement copies had been constructed to "take the roof from over the head of the German industrial worker", as the British openly formulated – even if the USA shortly after they entered the war continued to maintain that their air force would never intentionally target "the small man in the street", it was committed exclusively to the "clean" destruction of purely military or military-industrial targets.

The 8th US aerial fleet flew "precision strikes" in daylight – in contrast to their British allies who, embittered by the bombardment of London, covered German cities with bombs by night and hoped that the citizens would become discouraged and would rise against the Nazi regime.

The new technical equipment of the B-17s (the "Flying Fortresses") and the highly sophisticated Norden airdrop targeting instruments enabled the USA to conduct a bombing war "with democratic values". Then as today the "civil marginal damage" was brushed aside in order not to encumber national consciousness. But as the erection of the German Village shows, reality has very much darker sides.

The Berlin tenements were erected in May 1943 on the Dugway Proving Ground, shortly before Winston Churchill had gale-force firestorms ignited in the centre of Hamburg. Their in-

tended purpose was to try out the possibilities and to solve the problems that clearly lay beyond any moral limits of target bombardments. The buildings became a trade fair for the growing lobby of fire war.

The planners of the looming aerial war against Japan were highly interested to see what effects new incendiary agents like Napalm and even "bat bombs" – containing hundreds of living bats prepared with tiny incendiary compositions – would have when launched against Japanese houses.

Berlin, however, would "prove more difficult than most other German cities", the leading incendiary expert Horatio Bond avowed before the national commission for armament research of the USA. "The building quality is higher, and the single blocks are better separated from each other." As the tests at the Dugway Proving Ground showed, is "was hardly to be expected that the flames would jump unhindered from one building to the next".

Thus Armageddon happened in two acts: The first was the "aerial battle around Berlin" of the Royal Air Force (RAF) from November 1943 to March 1944, the second was "Operation Thunderclap" in February 1945. Air Marshall Arthur Harris, who had promised the British to "bombard Berlin until the heart of Nazi Germany has stopped beating", sent the heavy bombers of the RAF on November 18, 1943, towards the German capital.

The Lancasters flew in dangerously close formations and concentrated their loads on small, densely populated areas. The incendiary bombs were followed by explosives the expressive aim of which was to kill firemen and rescue workers. Following the doctrine of the Royal Air Force to attack Berlin's red belt of industrial workers to sow unrest and resentment, the area of Wedding, stronghold of the KPD (Communist Party of Germany) was almost completely reduced to rubble.

Although Harris did not succeed to unleash a firestorm like the Hamburg one, the Lancasters nevertheless flattened about one quarter of the central city. Up to 1,5 Million Berliners became homeless, about 10'000 lost their lives.

When Hitler after the landing of the allies in the Normandy took revenge with the V1 and later V2 attacks on London, Churchill's first reaction had been the demand for further attacks on Berlin – he even had checked whether poison gas could be used, and bio weapons were also not taboo: "It is absurd to apply morals to this question."

He asked Roosevelt for an expedited delivery of 500'000 highly secret "N bombs". They contained deadly anthrax viruses that the scientists at Dugway had grown. Poison gas and anthrax were too much for the White House, but Roosevelt absolutely wanted to accommodate the British.

In August 1944, he angrily said to his Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau Jr. : "We have to treat Germany harshly, and I mean the Germans, not just the Nazis. We either have to castrate the German people or to treat it such that it can no longer beget offspring that wants to continue as in the past."

In the same month Churchill presented to the American president the plan for "Operation Thunderclap" that foresaw that 220'000 people of Berlin would be wounded or killed in one great attack with 2'000 bombers. Roosevelt agreed in principle, although some of the top commanders of the Air Force objected because of the expected effects.

The US war hero Jimmy Doolittle, commander of the 8th air fleet, also reacted with bitterness when General Dwight D. Eisenhower commanded him to be ready for the "indiscriminate" bombing of Berlin.

In the end Operation Thunderclap – now extended to Dresden and Leipzig as further targets – was ordered for reasons that had as much to do with the ending of World War Two as with the later Cold War. "The complete destruction of the inner city of a metropolis as large as Berlin," the RAF had announced at a conference with foresight, "would convince our Russian allies and the neutral states of the striking power of the Anglo-American air forces."

When on February 3, 1945, the grey leaden skies over Berlin finally cleared, Doolittle held his vulnerable B-24 bombers back tenaciously and sent more than 900 B-17s, escorted by hundreds of fighter planes. It was not the great knock-out hit the British had envisaged, nevertheless it killed 3'000 people in Berlin.

Ten days later Dresden came closer to the original apocalyptic vision of "Operation Thunderclap". The culture city jam-packed with fugitives from Silesia, forced labourers and allied prisoners of war had strategic import only as a temporary traffic junction for the collapsing eastern front. American bombers concentrated on the train stations and railroad tracks, the British targeted everything else.

The result was the greatest firestorm since Hamburg. The estimated number of dead was 35'000 to 40'000. In the same year, hundreds of thousands of Japanese succumbed to the firestorms that the B-29 bombers unleashed in their cities.

These reminiscences of the darkest side of the "good war" are still hanging over the poisonous legacy around the German Village – even today, when Potsdamer Platz and other open wounds in Berlin change into magnificent symbols of prosperity in reunited Germany.

Mendelsohn's lonely tenement is a memorial for an overly righteous punishment of the refuges of evil. German Village, the secret place of mourning of Berlin, lies unnoticed in the middle of the Utah desert.

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