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Introduction

Hitler in the Fjords

The weather was exceptionally beautiful on Thursday, April 12, 1934, when Hitler cruised into the Sogne Fjord on Norway's west coast (fig. i.1). He was sailing on the *Deutschland*, Germany's new pocket battleship, accompanied by naval commander in chief Admiral Erich Raeder and defense minister Colonel General Werner von Blomberg. The voyage was not publicized, surprising Germans and Norwegians alike when news of it leaked to the press. It was Hitler's first journey abroad since becoming chancellor, yet no one could say what he was doing in Norway.

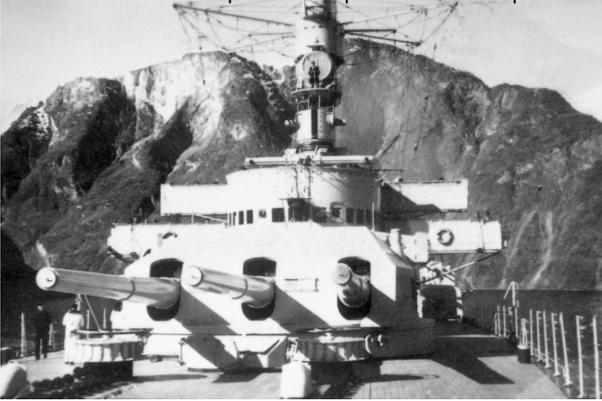
The Norwegian government had been given little warning that the *Deutschland* was coming. German Foreign Office records in Berlin reveal a hastily planned trip. A telegram sent to the German Embassy in Oslo on April 7 asked that the local government be informed of the ship's training exercises, which might involve passage through Norway's territorial sea. There was no intention to enter the country's inland waters, which required permission from the Norwegian government.¹

But a last-minute change of plans to tour the Sogne Fjord in order to show "guests" on board its "scenic beauty" left German diplomats in Oslo scrambling to alert Norwegian authorities before the battleship entered the fjord at 7:30 a.m. on April 12. A German Foreign Office memo composed later that day now described the voyage as a "short vacation" for the Führer, the admiral, and the defense minister, and made clear their intention to travel "quasi-incognito," without flying their respective flags. As a result, they expected the presence of the ship to garner little attention from the Norwegian side.²

The secret of who was on board was quickly exposed, however, when a Norwegian pilot, Martin Karlsen, embarked to navigate the heavy cruiser through the fjord and was greeted by a smiling Hitler. Interviewed by the Norwegian newspaper *Tidens Tegn* (Sign of the Times), Karlsen enthused over the German chancellor and star passenger: “He went around the deck and talked to everyone, sailors and officers, and their rank did not seem to matter to him. Everyone on board really liked him—at least, that is my impression. I thought he was a pleasant and convivial man. . . . He was so modest, and the only medal that hung on his suit was the Iron Cross that he was awarded during the world war for personal valor. He was easygoing and friendly with the sailors on board. Moreover, his behavior was completely similar toward the generals and the subordinates.”³

Little wonder that Germany’s right-wing newspapers eagerly picked up the story of the smitten pilot.⁴ Importantly, they left out any mention of an article that appeared in *Tidens Tegn* alongside the Martin Karlsen interview, bearing the headline “Is There a Political Backstory to Hitler’s Norwegian Trip?” The journalist wrote that the notable absence of Nazi Party officials on board and the presence of Blomberg and Raeder gave credence to rumors that the purpose of the cruise was to discuss the future of Germany’s military, a subject that had provoked “severe disagreements” between Ernst Röhm (head of the paramilitary Sturmabteilung, or SA) and the Reichswehr leadership, particularly Blomberg.⁵ Indeed, historians have speculated that it was on this voyage that Hitler agreed to address the threat to the military, and to his own position, posed by the defiant SA, resulting in the bloody liquidation of the organization’s leaders and hundreds of political opponents eleven weeks later during what became known as the Night of the Long Knives.⁶

In his interview, Karlsen did not hint at any darker preoccupations troubling the Führer. Instead, he portrayed Hitler as delighted and mesmerized by his encounter with the Norwegian landscape, standing on deck “without stirring” and watching for hours. “Hitler,” he reported, “spent practically all his time at the bridge and enthused like a little boy over the mountains and the magnificent weather. . . . He was particularly impressed by the beauty of Balestrand, of which, as he recounted, he had heard so much, and which became famous throughout Germany owing to the emperor’s visits.”⁷ The *Deutschland* stopped briefly at Balestrand but did not dock. This picturesque village, jutting out



i.2. The *Deutschland* photographed against Norwegian mountains, April 1934.



i.3. Hitler and Erich Raeder on board the *Deutschland* in April 1934. Admiral Raeder would later press Hitler to invade Norway to ensure his navy access to Norwegian ports.

into the blue waters of the fjord, had been a favorite destination of Emperor Wilhelm II on his annual summer trips to Norway. Here, while on vacation in July 1914, he helped steer Europe into war. Compelled to return to Berlin by a nervous German government, he never saw his beloved Norway again.⁸ *Bergens Tidende* (Bergen Times), which broke the story of Hitler's visit, connected the kaiser's final voyage north with the chancellor's inaugural foray abroad, alluding to a history coming full circle.⁹

Across from Balestrand, the *Deutschland* passed the colossal statue of legendary Viking hero Frithiof, which Emperor Wilhelm II erected above Vangsnes in the summer of 1913 as a gift to the Norwegian people.¹⁰ The cruiser then sailed to the hamlet of Gudvangen, at the end of the Nærøy Fjord. Hitler did not make it quite as far as Stalheim, another regular destination of the kaiser, who stayed at its grand hotel many times. Finally, the *Deutschland* proceeded down the adjoining Aurlands



i.4. Hitler with sailors on board the *Deutschland*, April 1934.

Fjord, with its snow-covered peaks and waterfalls, before exiting the Sogne Fjord and sailing southward.¹¹

The next day, Friday, April 13, with a different Norwegian pilot on board, the *Deutschland* continued its voyage, entering the Hardanger Fjord. The ship traveled its entire length to reach Odda, another of the kaiser's favorite places, and on the way back paused at the village of Ulvik. As they had the previous day, the *Deutschland's* passengers remained on board at all times. The Norwegian pilot disembarked in Leirvik, and the ship headed out to sea, arriving in Hamburg on Saturday, April 14, four days after its departure. *Bergens Tidende* reported that "the Führer and his entourage were highly impressed by the western Norwegian fjords' mighty nature, and the Reich chancellor appeared to want to repeat the visit at an opportune time." The article concluded by noting that the glorious weather had allowed the fjords to present themselves "most advantageously, although one could have wished the Reich chancellor to see these areas slightly later, when the fruit trees are in bloom."¹²

Hitler's photographer, Heinrich Hoffmann, documented the *Deutschland's* voyage in the fjords (figs. i.1–i.4).¹³ His photographs capture the dramatic power of the Norwegian landscape, which he juxtaposed with the *Deutschland's* enormous guns. Hitler appears frequently on deck

gazing at the fjords in the company of Raeder and Blomberg. The sailors energetically swab the deck and perform gymnastics in the spring weather. Everyone seems to be having a wonderful time.

German battleships continued to sail into Norwegian waters that spring and summer. The *Deutschland* returned to the Sogne and Hardanger fjords just two weeks after Hitler's trip, this time accompanied by the cruiser *Leipzig*. In total, twelve battleships sailed into Norwegian waters between mid-April and mid-July 1934. These visits became problematic after the horrifying violence and lawlessness of the Night of the Long Knives turned public opinion in Norway sharply against Berlin. On July 4, 1934, just days after the massacre had ended, the German fleet flagship *Schleswig-Holstein* docked in Oslo. Workers and Communist Party members protested, and police turned back demonstrators attempting to reach the battleship. As a secret report prepared by the German ambassador to Norway disclosed, King Haakon VII was furious that the ship and fleet commander had appeared in Oslo so soon after the slaughter, "as if nothing at all had happened in Germany," and with a total disregard for the mood then prevailing among Norwegians, considering it "an imposition on the Norwegian government and on him personally." At first the Norwegian king refused to receive the fleet commander, as was customary, but relented at the last moment to avoid a diplomatic insult. Nevertheless, he let it be known that he hoped "very much" that no German warship would arrive in Oslo in the years to come. Given his majesty's displeasure, German officials reluctantly and quietly decided to keep their battleships out of Norwegian waters "for the time being."¹⁴

No amount of protest from the king, however, could turn back the German battleships and warplanes that invaded Norway six years later. The dawn attack on April 9, 1940, code-named Operation Weserübung (Weser Exercise), caught the Norwegians by surprise. Within hours Germans had seized control of major coastal towns. King Haakon VII and the Norwegian government refused the German demand that they surrender, escaping from Oslo into the interior of the country and eventually to Tromsø in the north; from there, on June 7, they left for England and exile. On June 10, the remaining Norwegian troops on the mainland capitulated. The campaign for Norway was over, with Germany occupying the entire country.

On April 24, 1940, even as the fighting in Norway continued, Hitler appointed forty-one-year-old Josef Terboven, *Gauleiter* (district leader)

of Essen, as the head of the civilian occupation regime, the Reichskommissariat (Reich Commissariat). As a reward for his collaboration, Vidkun Quisling, leader of Norway's fascist party Nasjonal Samling (National Unity), was eventually named head of a puppet Norwegian government.¹⁵ General Nikolaus von Falkenhorst served as the military commander of the very large German army of occupation, the needs of which placed a heavy economic burden on Norway's population of three million people, who were expected to shoulder the costs. Falkenhorst, who was in charge of all military aspects of the occupation, clashed with Terboven over his brutal policies, which he believed alienated the Norwegian people. Neither controlled the SS or its dreaded Gestapo, which functioned independently in Norway. This tangle of organizational structures, typical of the Nazi state more broadly, produced confusion, inefficiencies, and tensions among the occupational authorities.

Above these competing interests and voices stood Hitler, with his own vision and agenda for Norway. As Winston Churchill later wrote, Hitler's naval strategy focused obsessively on Norway, which he believed would be the "zone of destiny in this war."¹⁶ Convinced of the danger of an Allied invasion of Norway, a fear stoked by repeated British commando raids, Hitler ordered additional troops and resources to Norway, as well as the fortification of its coastline, in an effort to make the country an impregnable northern fortress. Defensive structures mushroomed along thousands of kilometers of coastline, from the Oslo Fjord in the southeast to the border with the Soviet Union in the far north. The manpower needed to build and maintain these defenses was enormous. A German war correspondent, writing in January 1941, described the resinous scent of freshly cut fir wood that filled the air "throughout Norway, from Oslo to Kirkenes."¹⁷ Norway's forests were being razed to build barracks for hundreds of thousands of German soldiers.

But what Hitler saw in Norway went far beyond the fortress. Among the vast construction projects undertaken during the occupation, not all were driven by immediate wartime needs. Many, in fact, were intended for the period *following* the war, when the Nazis expected to reign supreme over Europe. Despite promises made to Quisling of Norway's eventual independence, Hitler had no intention of withdrawing. In the military and civilian building projects explored in this book, we see the German occupiers taking root in Norway and creating a space

for themselves as rulers of a Nordic empire that stretched beyond the Arctic Circle. Alongside this physical appropriation, we also witness the imaginary construction of Norway as a place that belonged to the invading Nazis, who sought to naturalize themselves as the saviors and rightful inhabitants of this northern land.

Today, as we look back on the war period, the intensity of building in occupied Norway often comes as a surprise, even to Norwegians themselves. Except for the massive fortifications along the coasts, visual evidence of Nazi construction is no longer immediately apparent. What we see—or, rather, do not see—is hard to reconcile with the view from the archives, which reveals frenetic building activity almost from the moment the Germans arrived. Those efforts transformed not only the landscape but also the labor market. In the summer of 1942, for example, every fifth Norwegian worker was employed on a German construction site.¹⁸ So where, we might ask, did it all go?

To begin with, not all of the Nazis' building schemes were realized by 1945. After Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, construction materials grew scarce in Norway as resources were diverted to the eastern front. Some ambitious building projects had to be downsized or deferred. Yet even these unfinished plans have a great deal to tell us about how Hitler and other Nazi leaders envisioned laying out the Greater German Reich in the far north. So, too, do the extensive infrastructure projects the occupiers undertook in Norway. Infrastructure in all its forms was vitally important in the Nazis' determination to connect the peripheries of Europe to Berlin, the intended political and economic heart of their global empire. Yet such projects are commonly overlooked today as physical relics of the past.

Our preconceptions of what a National Socialist–built landscape looks like have also played a role in what we see. In Germany, Albert Speer's colossal schemes for Germania (Berlin redesigned as a fitting imperial capital), as well as his Reich Chancellery and Nuremberg Rally Grounds, reinforce the idea that Third Reich architecture was driven solely by the desire to dwarf people into submission through its sheer monumentality.¹⁹ In Eastern Europe, Hitler's belief in the racial inferiority of the region's Slavic and Jewish peoples and cultures justified a horrific *tabula rasa* approach—wiping the slate clean to create an all-new Germanic landscape, in which “subhumans” would be replaced by “supermen,” and all physical traces of the “unclean” would be erased or pushed into the dark margins of a New Order. In the context of this

well-documented history, we do not expect Nazi architecture to blend or coexist with its surroundings.

Norway, however, was neither Germany nor Eastern Europe. The Nazis considered 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. In instructing Terboven on his new role, Hitler told him, “You will give me no greater pleasure than by making a friend of these people.”²⁰ To that end Norwegians were to be convinced rather than compelled—steered gently toward the glorious National Socialist future that they did not yet realize they wanted. Norwegian engineers and architects were brought to Germany to be trained in the forms and technologies of the New Order, which they were expected to adapt to their northern context. Although an alignment between metropole and periphery was considered necessary, it was clear to all that an Arctic fishing village differed from Berlin. Creating the physical conditions for a National Socialist revolution in Norway would thus involve developing novel forms and types of architecture in response to native landscapes and traditions. This more subtle approach was expected to be powerful and effective not despite but by virtue of these adaptations.

I begin this book by surveying the newspapers of the era to understand how the occupation of Norway—and Norway itself—was presented to German readers. This overview is facilitated by the work of the Reich Commissariat’s Department of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, whose staff clipped articles about Norway from German newspapers across Europe and arranged them into binders by theme, such as “Norway in the New Europe.” Since many of these newspapers are long defunct and difficult to find, this collection, held by the National Archives of Norway in Oslo, offers rare insights into the crafting of a space of imagination for German audiences encountering, through these press stories, the northernmost periphery of Hitler’s empire.

Chapter 2 plumbs the role played by infrastructure in the creation of a Nordic empire, whether in the form of a scenic highway connecting Trondheim to Berlin or in the form of a pipeline of Aryan babies meant to improve Germany’s genetic stock. The ostensible desire to knit together Norwegians and Germans conveyed through such infrastructure projects is challenged in chapter 3, which explores Hitler’s patronage of *Soldatenheime*, cultural and recreational centers for German soldiers stationed in Norway’s remote regions. These elaborate buildings were

designed to reinforce the men's German identities and thus prevent them from "going native" in the wild North. Both chapters 2 and 3 are anchored in the Organisation Todt collection of the National Archives of Norway in Oslo. Comprising the records of the paramilitary engineering division responsible for much of the construction in occupied Norway, this vast archive opened to researchers in 2011. The wealth of fresh materials it offers—including letters, maps, photographs, invoices, reports, and much more—directly shapes the stories told in this book.

Albert Speer sought to leave his own mark on the development of National Socialist architecture in occupied Norway. Chapter 4 examines Speer's collaboration with the Norwegian architects and planners entrusted with rebuilding twenty-three Norwegian towns damaged in the 1940 invasion. Invited by Speer to tour Nazi Germany, the Norwegian architects were expected to bring home with them National Socialist ideals of town planning and thus forge suitable urban settings for a new society. Chapter 5 delves into a special commission given by Hitler to Speer: the design of a major German city outside of Trondheim, a new settlement that would enable the rulers to create their own myths of origin in the North. Plans for the city, as well as for the immense new naval base it would serve, were kept strictly confidential for fear of provoking unrest among Norwegians. Both chapters 4 and 5 draw on the unpublished papers of Hans Stephan, held in a private collection. Stephan worked closely with Speer in Berlin and served as his representative in Norway, traveling back and forth between the two countries to advance the rebuilding of Norwegian towns and to quietly make preparations for Hitler's secret city in the North.

From these and other archival sources emerges the Nazis' vision of the North and their place within it as the new Vikings, conquering with military weapons and engineering skills. More broadly, the projects documented here shed light on how Hitler and his henchmen foresaw the future world colonized under the swastika, which they had begun to build in Norway. As illuminating as they may be, 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.²¹ Rather, the Norway envisioned by the Nazis and explored in this book is a *fantasy*, and a dangerous one. The Nazi perspective does not capture the realities experienced by the occupied or the ways in which Norwegians resisted the appropriation and abuse of their land. It also pays little heed to the extreme suffering of the prisoners of

war deported from Eastern Europe to build Hitler's northern utopia. A large and growing body of scholarship, mostly by Norwegian historians, has made clear the tremendous human cost of the Nazis' dreams of remaking the North—from the prisoners worked to death to the German-fathered babies abandoned after the war. When Hitler sailed into the fjords on his battleship on a sunny day in April 1934, few could have imagined the nightmare that would follow when the Führer, liking what he saw, decided to come back at an opportune time.

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