

**Bernd Lemke.** *Luftschutz in Großbritannien und Deutschland 1923 bis 1939: Zivile Kriegsvorbereitungen als Ausdruck der staats- und gesellschaftspolitischen Grundlagen von Demokratie und Diktatur.* München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2004. X + 524 S. EUR 44.80 (paper), ISBN 978-3-486-57591-0.



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## Preparing for Total War: Civil Defense in Interwar Germany and Britain

“Suddenly, hundreds of aeroplanes took off.... They hummed steadily towards their target, a metropolis.... Three hours later, the residents—although they wore masks and protective clothing—lay whimpering and crying for help, most of them in the shelters. Others wandered about on the roofs like madmen, spread their arms and legs, and cursing, threw themselves onto the pavements. There were pools of blood everywhere.”[1] The European imagination of the 1920s and 1930s abounded with apocalyptic visions of total war, as this excerpt from a novel by the German expressionist poet, Johannes R. Becher, illustrates. Politicians, military analysts and intellectuals concurred that the next military conflict would expose noncombatants to an unprecedented degree of organized violence. To the minds of many commentators, the most devastating blows against the socioeconomic sources of power in the enemy’s heartland would be delivered by large fleets of bombers.

How to sustain the war effort in the face of massive aerial bombardment was a question that exercised government circles, military planners and concerned citizens throughout the interwar period and beyond. One answer

was to promote *Luftschutz* or air-raid protection—that is, to make the civilian population familiar with the eventuality of aerial bombing and to train them in methods of defense and relief. Despite the unquestioned importance of the issue for contemporaries, the history of civil defense has remained woefully under-researched in recent historiography. In the case of Germany, scholars still have to turn to the biased and narrowly technical account by the ex-general and NS-ideologue, Erich Hampe, of 1963.[2] For Britain, Terence O’Brien’s study of 1955, *Civil Defence*, is equally narrow in focus, although less ideologically loaded.[3] In view of the dearth of research, a comparative study on air raid precautions in Britain and Germany is highly welcome.

In his Ph.D. dissertation, Bernd Lemke explores the organization, ideology and propaganda of air raid protection in the 1920s and 1930s within the context of broader sociopolitical developments. He considers what the various responses to the threat of total war can tell us about the structure of the state and society that engenders them. In order to study this link between “external threats” and “inner structures” (p. 2f), Lemke

draws on a sociological model of power, Max Weber's famous typology of rule. According to Weber, any exercise of power needs legitimacy, which can either derive from traditional, legal-rational or charismatic relations between government and the governed. With the help of these ideal types, Lemke hopes to situate air raid protection in the matrix of government, bureaucracy and population (p. 9).

The study is divided into three chapters that treat popular discourses on the role of the civilian in war, the institutionalization of air raid protection in the 1920s and the mass mobilization of the 1930s. In Weimar Germany, influential theorists demanded the wholesale militarization of society as a necessary precondition for the nation's victory in a future European conflict, as chapter 1 shows. The ideal of the civilian-as-warrior was extolled by such diverse writers as the constitutional lawyer, Carl Schmitt, the retired general, Erich Ludendorff, or the poet, Ernst J  nger, who found institutional support for their views within the army, veterans' organizations and the nationalist-conservative parties of the Weimar Republic. In Great Britain, similar demands were voiced as well, most prominently by the military theorist, John F.C. Fuller, but such concerns had limited resonance among the political elites and the population at large. Here, the notion of the civilian-as-victim-popularized in such nightmare scenarios as H.G. Wells' novel, *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933)-gave way to the idea of the "citizen hero," of the courageous and determined civilian who staunchly defends liberal-democratic society against foreign aggression (p. 79).

While chapter 1 sketches the ideological background, chapter 2 deals with the inception of civil defense policies in the 1920s. In Germany, the ministerial bureaucracy conceived of air raid protection as disaster prevention, in which the ministry of the interior would rely on the police rather than local self-government for the coordination and implementation of measures on the ground. Throughout the duration of the Weimar Republic, however, this "legal-rational" approach was challenged by the "charismatic" activism of popular associations such as the Deutsche Luftschutz e.V. (founded in 1927) or the Deutsche Luftschutz-Liga (founded in 1931), which saw air raid protection as a tool to imbue the civilian population with a war spirit. Although unsuccessful in their attempts at influencing official policy, the associations popularized their ideas through publications, public lectures and air raid exercises. In Britain, the inter-ministerial Air Raid Precautions Committee was convened in 1924 in order to assess the scale of attack and to develop an infras-

tructure for protection and relief measures. In contrast to Germany, the work of the ministerial bureaucracy attracted little public discussion and faced few challenges from non-government organizations. Here, power was vested in the local authorities rather than the police.

Chapter 3 examines the mass mobilization of the 1930s. With the establishment of the Nazi dictatorship in 1933, the aviation ministry under Hermann G  ring took over responsibility from the ministry of the interior, but competed with Heinrich Himmler's police and the mass organization of the Reichsluftschutzbund for control of civil defense policy. Despite the passing of an Air Protection Law in 1935, air raid precaution played a subordinate role only in the regime's preparation for war, which gave precedent to the creation of an attacking air force. More important was the propagandistic activity of the Reichsluftschutzbund, which contributed significantly to the militarization of German society despite the fact that the Nazi party sneered at the "insipid would-be warriors" of the civil defense organization (p. 309). There was no parallel to the Bund in Britain, where air raid wardens were responsible to the local authorities (p. 475f.). Here, the Air Raid Precautions Act of 1937 settled the areas of responsibility between the central government and the local authorities, while making no mention of individual civilians. Air raid precaution formed an integral if subordinate part of the policy of rearmament that was agreed upon by the government in February 1936. As in Nazi Germany, the goal of civil defense was less to protect the individual from aerial bombardment than to sustain the national war effort.

Lemke has written an informative book that examines, for the first time, the civil defense planning of the interwar years within a wider sociopolitical context. Despite this achievement, I cannot help but feel that a number of conceptual and other problems seriously limit the heuristic value of Lemke's study. The least of these concerns the author's penchant for stale phrases, such as the incessant use of the Latin tag, *mutatis mutandis*. More serious are the self-imposed limitations on the spatial and temporal scope of the study. Why focus exclusively on the interwar years when the efficacy of civil defense was not put to the test until the aerial bombardments of World War II? Likewise, one might object that a closer look at the local implementation of central policies would have benefited the study a great deal, providing an important corrective to the planning schemes of the ministerial bureaucracy. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the application of Weberian typology to the empirical evidence frequently produces results that cannot be called

anything other than banal. Little productive insight is to be gained from a conclusion that repeats what is already a commonplace: namely, that Great Britain was distinguished by “rational” forms of government whereas the Third Reich was structured “charismatically” with “rational-legal” elements (p. 492). In sum, this useful study is hampered by serious conceptual limitations.

#### Notes

[1]. Johannes R. Becher, (*CH Cl = CH*) 3As (*Lev-iste*) oder *Der einzig gerechte Krieg*, in idem, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 10 (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau, 1969), pp.

137ff.

[2]. Erich Hampe, *Der zivile Luftschutz im Zweiten Weltkrieg. Dokumentation und Erfahrungsberichte über Aufbau und Einsatz* (Frankfurt a.M.: Bernard & Graefe, 1963). Compare his article of 1934, “Luftschutz als Schicksalsfrage des deutschen Volkes,” in *Der zivile Luftschutz*, ed. Kurt Knipfer and Erich Hampe (Berlin: Stollberg, 1934).

[3]. Terence O’Brien, *Civil Defence* (London: Her Majesty’s Stat. Off., 1955).

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