Eight decades on, unraveling the web of Nazi criminality is still an active process. And while many of the Third Reich’s most prominent institutions, such as the Sturmabteilung (SA), the Schutzstaffel (SS), and the Wehrmacht, have received intense scholarly attention, there is one group which has mostly escaped the gaze of historians: Organisation Todt. Named for its founder, engineer Fritz Todt, this paramilitary force was responsible for a multitude of military construction projects both inside the Reich and throughout Nazi-occupied Europe. To carry out these expansive operations during wartime, Organisation Todt (OT) ruthlessly exploited millions of foreign slave laborers. With his 2020 monograph, *Builders of the Third Reich: The Organisation Todt and Nazi Forced Labour*, Charles Dick provides the first comprehensive English-language examination of the structure, character, and crimes of the OT.

With any study dealing with the labyrinthine bureaucratic inner workings of Nazi Germany, there is always the risk that even the well-versed reader will quickly become disoriented. *Builders of the Third Reich*, however, excels in its structure and its clarity. Dick divides the piece into five chapters, the first three of which—“The Organisation Todt in Hitler’s Empire,” “Plunder in Europe,” and “The Organisation Todt in the Nazi System”—are primarily technical in nature, focusing on the OT’s internal makeup as well as its relationships with the Third Reich’s other institutional players. The final two chapters, “Slave Labourers under the Organisation Todt” and “Engineers as Slave Drivers,” center on the social history of the OT, which includes the experiences of former slave laborers and discussions of life at various OT worksites. Dick’s sources, too, are excellent. Not only is his command of the secondary literature (in German and English) absolute, but similarly impressive is the array of personalities that vividly emerges from Dick’s archival research. From a young Serbian man forced to endure the brutal conditions of the Ørlandet labor camp in Norway to a bloodthirsty OT chief stationed in occupied Radoskowice, the reader is introduced to many diverse figures who aid in understanding the sheer scale of OT operations.

On the subject of personalities, Dick stresses from the outset that the swift rise and prevailing influence of the OT resulted primarily from its two executives: Fritz Todt and Albert Speer. Historians have devoted much attention to Speer, which makes the author’s detailing of Todt’s background a refreshing and helpful inclusion when describ-
ing the OT’s origins. Todt, a veteran of the First World War and an early member of the Nazi Party (NSDAP), had earned Hitler’s favor by successfully overseeing the construction of the Autobahnen in the mid-1930s. The relationship between the two men only deepened when, irritated by the slow pace of the Wehrmacht’s engineers, Hitler selected Todt and his men to finish construction of the Westwall. Indeed, the tight bond between the Führer and his favorite engineer was what gave the OT (the name of which, as Dick insightfully points out, shows how highly Hitler held Todt in esteem—few others in the Reich lent their names to national institutions,) its priority status during the war years.

Despite Todt’s deep ideological commitment to Nazism and the OT’s leadership structures deeply resembling those of the NSDAP, Organisation Todt never became an official organ of the Nazi party. Todt, and following his premature death in February 1942, Speer, reported directly to Hitler, thereby being able to avoid the wrangling that was so pronounced up and down the chain of NSDAP hierarchy. Still, that does not mean that the OT was able to completely avoid confrontations with other institutions in the Third Reich. As Dick discusses, although the OT successfully worked with the Wehrmacht, SS, and various interests in big business, collaboration was not always without difficulty. Speer often found himself combating Himmler’s encroachments into armaments production, as well as the propensity of the SS to guard its authority over concentration camp prisoners when it came to assigning manpower to certain projects. That said, Dick repeatedly stresses that in a regime plagued by bureaucratic infighting, the OT actually worked remarkably well with its partners. It was this easy cooperation between like-minded allies that allowed for such rampant exploitation of slave labor.

Builders of the Third Reich is an important and necessary addition to scholarship on Nazi Germany. Not only does it illuminate a critically important entity of the period, but it also places the OT firmly within the broader context of Hitler’s imperial agenda. There was a greater point to the OT’s many bridges, roads, and architectural designs (real ones or those postponed until after that ever-elusive “final victory”). While the tasks of the OT ultimately became subsumed by mundane wartime necessities, its raison d’être, building, remained bound up in the Hitlerian vision of German greatness and expansion. At their core, the OT’s projects throughout occupied Europe aimed either to support the conquering Wehrmacht soldier or to entrench German presence in the newly conquered East—both functions very much in line with the general Lebensraum idea. As with all “great” visions, though, they almost always come at a great cost. In this case, it was the abuse of millions of civilians, POWs, and concentration camp inmates who labored in vain to furnish Nazi ambitions.
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