The fields of engineering and technology have received significantly less attention than science and medicine in scholarship on the Third Reich. Arguably the only attempt at a comprehensive study of “engineers under Hitler” is the classic but by now outdated work by Karl-Heinz Ludwig.[1] Historians have only examined specific aspects of engineering, including, for example, the so-called people’s products, consumer goods produced for the “people’s community” (Volksgemeinschaft),[2] the construction of the Autobahn,[3] the roles played by engineers in the SS and concentration camp system,[4] and especially sophisticated armament programs like rockets,[5], but they have rarely engaged with the question of how German engineers interacted with Nazi ideology. John Guse’s book confronts this question directly by analyzing the regime’s two most prominent engineers, Gottfried Feder and Fritz Todt.

Feder played an important role in Hitler’s movement from the very beginning. Belonging to the “socialist” wing of the National Socialist party (NSDAP), he combined outspoken criticism of “rapacious” capitalism with a virulent anti-Semitism. Feder’s technocratic vision was radical, including plans to de-urbanize Germany, decentralize German industry, and establish a centrally directed economy, with state monopolies managing the post office, telegraph, telephone, railroads, mines, forestry, and power industries. Racist “blood and soil” ideology and modern technology were synthesized by Feder into what Guse calls “völkisch technology,” with völkisch here essentially meaning nationalist, racist, and anti-Semitic. Perhaps most important, Feder believed that engineers should play a greater public and political role in society. He sought to utilize modern technology for political purposes, in particular by controlling the technical professional organizations and creating a powerful Ministry of Technology.

Feder’s efforts to combine the engineering societies into a single body under his control failed. The engineering professions did not fit the typical pattern of Nazi “coordination” (Gleichschaltung).
Compared to lawyers or physicians, for example, engineers faced less pressure to join Nazi organizations and were allowed to “self-coordinate.” The Verein Deutscher Ingenieure (VDI), the largest professional engineering organization, was able to rebuff Feder by offering to support the goals of Hitler’s regime and voluntarily applying the new civil service law, including its “Aryan paragraph” that excluded Jews. Feder had a second opportunity at power when he was subsequently appointed Reich commissioner for settlement, but his proposals for urban and industrial decentralization faced considerable opposition from vested interests important to the Nazi leadership and went nowhere. However, several of Feder’s concepts for building new settlements, including the optimal size of towns and their relationship with surrounding farmland, found their way into the plans of geographers and other officials working on the murderous “General Plan East” for the occupied territories.

Once the Nazis were in power, representatives of the socialist wing of the movement, with their calls for different types of “second revolutions” that challenged the status quo, were gradually eliminated. Feder was perhaps the last of this group to go, but in contrast to SA leader Ernst Röhm, who was murdered, Feder was handled gently and merely shifted into a professorship at the Technical University of Berlin.

Feder and his völkisch technocracy were gradually eclipsed and supplanted by Fritz Todt and his less controversial concept of “German technology.” The key difference between the two men was that Todt desired first and foremost a “spiritual revolution,” in effect a political baptism through renunciation of materialism and apolitical specialization, allowing the cleansed engineer to enter the spiritual community of the Nazi faithful. The goal was neither völkisch revolution nor necessarily technocratic control for its own sake, but rather service to Hitler.

Fritz Todt was both a fervent National Socialist and a highly competent engineer. Like Feder, Todt joined the NSDAP early on and was a dedicated, hardworking, and convinced National Socialist—the very opposite of apolitical. Todt’s personal standing with Hitler was excellent. His emphasis on spiritual regeneration as the key to integrating technology into Nazi society, his conviction that technical progress could only be achieved by Aryans, and his acceptance of the strict hierarchy embodied by the “leadership principle” fit very well with Hitler’s own beliefs. When Hitler appointed Todt as inspector general of German highways, this was the first example of an extraministerial post in the Third Reich, including the authority to circumvent the ordinary governmental apparatus, a model that Hitler subsequently employed often in order to advance his favored policies and goals.

The Autobahn construction Todt oversaw, which established his reputation as someone who could use unbureaucratic methods to achieve significant results, expressed his conception of a new Nazi technology serving an “organic” harmony of man, technology, and nature. The new highways were supposed to reflect the creativity and superiority of Nordic man and were a cultural expression of National Socialism. This was not, however, accompanied by any real concern for the Autobahn workers. As head of the Organisation Todt, which built the Westwall fortifications as well as other construction projects in Germany and occupied Europe during the war, Todt did not hesitate to use Jewish concentration camp inmates, prisoners of war, and foreign workers as forced and slave laborers who lived and sometimes died under appalling conditions. Indeed, Todt was a vocal advocate for the use of slave labor.

By taking Fritz Todt’s commitment to National Socialism seriously, Guse provides a much more critical and insightful analysis of the engineer than previous authors. Todt’s skills as a bureaucrat surpassed Feder’s by far, and eventually he consolidated all the technical associations, includ-
ing the VDI, into the National Socialist Association of German Technology (NSBDT) under his authority. Once this was achieved, the next goal for Todt was the spiritual “regeneration” of German technicians, particularly through “techno-political” (political and ideological) education. Training courses were developed with the goal of educating the whole technician, not simply discussing specific technological developments. Equal emphasis was to be placed on technical knowledge, political attitude, leadership, and physical training. German engineers were to be infused with Todt’s philosophy of devotion to the Volk community, made sensitive to the aesthetic potential of technology, and awakened to the harmony of man, machine, and nature.

Todt used the NSBDT to establish a national “speaker system” for the further education of German engineers. Here the goal was to establish a techno-political way of thinking among technicians who were so often accused of lacking one. In fact the lectures were mostly pragmatic with only a small percentage that could be considered ideological. This exposes the dilemma faced by Nazi functionaries: as far as lectures and propaganda were concerned, the practical needs of harnessing engineering and technology for the war effort squeezed out much of the ideology.

When Todt became Hitler’s armaments minister, he was one of the most important and powerful people in the regime. He used the concept of “industrial self-responsibility,” embodied in a system of committees and advisory boards, to dramatically increase armaments production. Engineers played an important role in this process, something which Guse describes as their greatest political success during the Third Reich. Paradoxically they could not take political advantage of this at the time to expand their influence because, once again, time and resources had to be concentrated on the war effort. However, some more radical engineers planned to perpetuate their newfound strength after German victory in a postwar Nazi society with the creation of a powerful Ministry of Technology.

When Todt died in a plane crash in February of 1942, Hitler chose the architect Albert Speer to become the new minister of armaments. Although Speer’s innovations built upon and refined Todt’s methods for increasing armaments production, he also reduced the role played by NSBDT engineers in directing the war economy and focused training lectures on what was needed for the war effort. This greatly reduced the influence of the “techno-political” engineers and was therefore the end of Todt’s efforts to politically activate German engineers. In his final chapter, Guse addresses the question of how and why German engineers played a role in war crimes. By convincing engineers of their Aryan superiority, national destiny, and duty to help accomplish Hitler’s goals, Todt’s ideology had still succeeded in grooming them to participate in heinous crimes, including in particular the deadly use of slave labor.

Notes
[1]. Karl-Heinz Ludwig, Technik und Ingenieure im Dritten Reich (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1974).
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