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Sabine Kalff

Humboldt University, Berlin

Back to the cellar. Underground urban spaces of fear and air warfare in Berlin, 1940-1945

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As a consequence of air raids, a substantial part of Berlin's population resided permanently in cellars towards the end of World War II. Berliners thus returned to the space that around 1900 constituted an important dwelling place for the urban poor. Based on war diaries and prose, this essay examines the reorganization of the vertical under the influence of the air war, particularly within the apartment building. The large-scale destruction of urban housing and the return of the population to the cellar are understood as indicative of a psychological, social, and political reversal.

1. Introduction

From World War I onwards, the air war radically transformed traditional conceptions of warfare. The introduction of the airplane and its use in bombing campaigns successively dissolved the military partition between front and rear. The air war brought about a new combat zone, the airspace, which extended the traditional combat zone to above. Thus, it also blurred the distinction between combatants and non-combatants, intentionally involving civilians in large numbers within warfare, not least of all women and children.¹ The war from above was an overwhelmingly vertical business, although techniques of bombing strategies frequently referred primarily to horizontality, at least at the metaphorical level.² In this regard, bombing campaigns were conducted in 'waves', with one group of bombers following another in short intervals. Cities and infrastructure were destroyed by means of 'carpet bombing', which meant bombs were dropped in large numbers simultaneously.³ A bombing campaign

¹ Cf. e.g. Roger Chickering/Stig Förster, *Are We There Yet? World War II and the Theory of Total War*, in: Roger Chickering/Stig Förster/Bernd Greiner (eds.), *A World at Total War. Global Conflict and the Politics of Destruction, 1937–1945*, Cambridge 2005, p. 1–18, here p. 12. Cf. also Lester Nurick, *The Distinction between Combatant and Noncombatant in the Law of War*, in: *The American Journal of International Law* 39:4, 1945, p. 680–697, here p. 680.

² The verticality existed at the figurative level, however, in cases where dive bombing was practiced. Cf. Stephen Graham, *Vertical. The City from Satellites to Bunkers*, London 2018, p. 53f. This metaphor ceased as soon as dive bombing was abandoned.

³ See e.g. the illuminating scheme for the British raid on Lübeck on 28/29 November 1945 in Olaf Groehler, *Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland*, Berlin 1990, p. 40f.

against Ploiesti in Bulgaria in August 1943 was tellingly labelled 'Operation Tidal Wave'. Despite all allusions to horizontality, bombing campaigns operated physically at the vertical level. William Mitchell, the 'father' of the US air force had already observed in 1927: "There are no longer frontiers, in the old way. A nation's frontier now is a blanket of air ten miles thick, laid entirely over it."⁴ The main concern of the air force was thus how this "ten miles thick" blanket could best be penetrated.

That the bombing war was an experience of verticality was also strongly felt by Berlin's population, who, due to lack of space in bunkers⁵, sought refuge in large numbers in private shelters in the cellars of the apartment buildings.⁶ 389 bombing alerts in Berlin between 1940 and 1945 gave ample opportunity to experience the lowest level of the house, the cellar, which during the bombing war became a space of fear in the very sense of the word. Remarkably, Berliners of various social strata retreated to a zone that until at least the 1920s had been heavily inhabited by the poorest tier of the urban population. Cellars were thus not only places in which fear of one's own life thrived, but also a wide range of anxieties, stretching from social decline to archaic angst. In this paper, I propose that the retreat by all strata of society to the cellar may be understood as a collective return to the previously repressed and unresolved living conditions of the poor. Based on Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1957)⁷, which defined the house as a vertical being, ascribing the basement and attic with psychological qualities, the essay will furthermore investigate the ways in which the perception of the basement oscillated between being a space of fear and one of shelter. By whom and why was it perceived in these respective ways? Testimonials of the bombing war in Berlin, many of them written by women — who in German towns at that time frequently constituted the majority of the population — will function as my main sources.

⁴ William Mitchell, *Airplanes in National Defense*, in: *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 31, 1927, p. 38-42, here p. 38.

⁵ In Berlin, there was approximately enough bunker space for 6% of the population around 1941. Exact numbers do not exist. It is however clear that bunker space was not at all sufficient. Cf. Groehler, p. 244 and Dietmar Arnold/Ingmar Arnold/Frieder Salm, *Dunkle Welten. Bunker, Tunnel und Gewölbe unter Berlin*, Berlin 1997, p. 118.

⁶ Evans lists the existence of four large flak bunkers in Berlin and suggests that they were relatively unsafe. Initially, they were only three flak bunkers, and they all withstood the bombing. They even withstood the Allied attempts to blow them up in the aftermath of the war. Cf. Jennifer V. Evans, *Life among the Ruins. Cityscape and Sexuality in Cold War Berlin*, Basingstoke 2011, p. 22.

⁷ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, New York 2014 [1957].

2. The Apartment House as a Vertical Being in Berlin Prior to the Air War

In *Großstädtisches Wohnungselend* (1908), Albert Südekum, a journalist and social democratic member of parliament, counted 25,170 cellars in Berlin, inhabited by a total of 95,948 persons.⁸ For the year 1925, statistician Friedrich Leyden gave the number of 17,671 cellar apartments.⁹ Due to the heavy population increase between 1910 and 1925 — also as a consequence of the incorporation of suburban municipalities under the Greater Berlin Act — the housing situation in Berlin remained tense. While the Weimar Republic undertook astounding efforts with regard to housing construction, the Nazi regime from 1933 onwards slowed down construction projects.¹⁰ By 1939, they came almost entirely to a halt.¹¹ This does not mean that the problems of the housing situation had meanwhile been resolved. To the contrary, since Albrecht Speer's reconstruction of Berlin, its transformation to "Reichshauptstadt Germania", entailed large-scale demolition in central parts of the city.¹² During the Second World War, a third of Berlin's living quarters, approximately 500,000 apartments, were successively destroyed through air warfare.¹³

Südekum's study of the living conditions of the Berlin poor utilises the spirit of Marxist criticism towards the workers' housing situation as an ubiquitous concomitant of capitalism.¹⁴ But the author also referred approvingly to the housing inquiries undertaken between 1901 and 1920 by a Berlin association of communal health insurances.¹⁵ Their documentation, accompanied by photographs, showed the dramatic living conditions of their members, inhabiting dark, damp and overcrowded cellars and attics, which left their residents exposed to heat and cold.¹⁶ The motivation of the health insurances was less

⁸ Albert Südekum, *Großstädtisches Wohnungselend*, Berlin/Leipzig 1908, p. 66.

⁹ Cited after Johann Friedrich Geist/Klaus Kürvers, *Das Berliner Mietshaus. 1862-1945*, Munich 1984, p. 511.

¹⁰ Cf. Groehler, p. 254f.; Geist/Kürvers, p. 515.

¹¹ Cf. Andreas Bernard, *Die Geschichte des Fahrstuhls. Über einen beweglichen Ort der Moderne*, Frankfurt a. M. 2006, p. 188.

¹² Cf. Susanne Willems, *Der entsiedelte Jude. Albert Speers Wohnungsmarktpolitik für den Berliner Hauptstadtbau*, Berlin 2000.

¹³ Cf. Laurenz Demps, *Die Berichte der Hauptluftschutzstelle 1940-1945*, Berlin 2012, p. 94.

¹⁴ For the Marxist origin of the argument cf. Graham, p. 318.

¹⁵ Christoph Sachße/Florian Tennstedt, *Krankenversicherung und Wohnungsfrage. Die Wohnungs-Enquête der Ortskrankenkasse für den Gewerbebetrieb der Kaufleute, Handelsleute und Apotheker*, in: Gesine Asmus (ed.), *Hinterhof, Keller und Mansarde. Einblicke in Berliner Wohnungselend 1901-1920*, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1982, p. 271-297, here p. 288f.

¹⁶ Such living conditions of the poor were not limited to Berlin. As a concomitant to industrialisation, they were to be found in all major cities across the world. 19th and 20th cen-

Marxist, and aimed rather at the reduction of costs.¹⁷ Critics of tenement houses around 1900 viewed the connection between the deplorable living and health conditions of the tenants as causal, in line with the motto that headed Südekum's text: "You can kill a man with an apartment as with an axe."¹⁸

Berlin proletarians' and workers' apartments were on average composed of a kitchen and a single room, inhabited by a couple with three children and¹⁹ — up to seven! — so called 'Schlafleute': lodgers who rented not the whole room, but only the right to a bed.²⁰ Evidently, the rooms were hopelessly overcrowded. On a visit to an apartment on the third floor of a side building in Wedding, a worker's quarter in the north of Berlin, Südekum strongly disapproved of the lack of air circulation. Despite the excessive heat, the ill female tenant kept the windows shut due to heavy noise from the courtyard. To have at least some fresh air, she kept the door leading to the stairwell open. In this way, not much less noise entered. Ascending the stairs, Südekum observed: "Almost every step cracks and groans under our steps. [...] How much it cracks and booms in such a house, when a weary, heavy man with tough boots trudges up the stairs, no one from a residential house can imagine."²¹ The crammed apartment could not be shut off from the stairwell and was constantly penetrated by its sounds. Proletarian housing thus did not provide any private sphere.²² Furthermore, the tenants were dependent on communal facilities, such as toilets, bathrooms, washrooms, laundry rooms and spaces in cellars and attics for drying laundry and storing belongings.

At the beginning of the 20th century, working-class living conditions, which were frequently linked to apartments in basements and attics, were feared by elites mainly for hygienic reasons, particularly due to infectious diseases, such as cholera and tuberculosis. But there was additionally fear of moral dissolution supposedly arising particularly from cellar apartments and their dwellers.

tury cellar dwelling is well documented for London, New York and Odessa. Cf. e.g. Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives. Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, New York 1897 and Vladimir Jabotinsky, *Die Fünf*, Berlin 2017 [1936], p. 75.

¹⁷ Sachße/Tennstedt, p. 284.

¹⁸ The sentence has been frequently attributed to Heinrich Zille, without any proof. Cf. Südekum, p. 5.

¹⁹ Cf. Rosmarie Beier, *Leben in der Mietskaserne. Zum Alltag Berliner Unterschichtsfamilien in den Jahren 1900 bis 1920*, in: Gesine Asmus (ed.), *Hinterhof, Keller und Mansarde. Einblicke in Berliner Wohnungselend 1901-1920*, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1982, p. 244-270, here p. 247.

²⁰ Südekum, p. 47. All translations from German by the author. Sometimes the bed was also shared. Cf. e.g. Minna Wettstein-Adelt, *3 ½ Monate Fabrik-Arbeiterin*, Berlin 1893, p. 58.

²¹ Südekum, p. 15.

²² Similar observations in Werner Sombart, *Das Proletariat*, Frankfurt a. M. 2008 [1906], p. 21-32.

Inhabiting the lowest levels of the large apartment houses seemed to indicate the social position within a strongly hierarchical society.²³ Typical Berlin apartment blocks, which were the most common form of housing in the central quarters, were highly socially stratified. The front building was unfailingly more elegant than the much more modest side and rear buildings. Social hierarchy was also strongly expressed through the position of the apartments vertically, with the *piano nobile* on the first floor being the most exquisite apartment, while those on the margins of the vertical, in the basement and the attic, possessed the lowest esteem.²⁴

Berlin's politicians at the beginning of the 20th century did not seem particularly concerned by political upheavals emerging from these dreadful living quarters — at least they did not work much towards changing them.²⁵ The Nazi regime meanwhile devoted significantly more energy than their predecessors to empty the spaces at the extremes of the vertical, the cellars and the attics. Their wish to gain control over these spaces was motivated twofold: cellars and attics were sensitive spots connected to air protection, and they were spaces that escaped political and social control most easily. From the first issues from 1934 onwards, the *Sirene*, the monthly magazine of the *Reich Air Protection League* put forward the necessity to clear cellars and attics of all objects that could interfere with fire-fighting. The official Berlin housing rules ("*Hausgemeinschaftsordnung*"), which were an essential part of any apartment lease from 1935 onwards, prescribed:

"In the interest of air and fire protection, easily inflammable objects like packing material, packets of paper and newspapers, mattresses, straw sacks, rags, old garments and upholstered furniture, cages for small animals, fuel, and larger amounts of fodder are not be stored in the rooms of the cellar and the attic."²⁶

According to an observer of the exiled German Social Democratic Party (*Sopade*), air protection was simply a pretext for the Nazi regime to tighten its hold on tenement houses in traditionally poor and 'red' quarters, such as Wedding. Accordingly, the *Sirene* described the urban tenement as a "confusing swarming [...] with its families, handicraft and trade businesses, its store-

²³ Cf. Graham, p. 316.

²⁴ This vertical order was reversed with the introduction of the elevator, a process which in Berlin did not take place before 1945. The elevator was similarly never to a significantly introduced after the war, at least not in the traditional four-storey apartment houses. Cf. Bernard, p. 76.

²⁵ Graham suggests that they were universally feared for their potential of insurrection. For Berlin, this cannot be confirmed prior to 1933. Mass evictions, as in New York for example, did not take place. Cf. Graham, p. 315f. For New York cf. Riis, p. 16f.

²⁶ Cited after Geist/Kürvers, p. 435.

houses, cellars, staircases, attics and courtyards.”²⁷ To put an end to this confusion, an air-raid warden was to be established alongside the landlord and the janitor, who traditionally managed private property. The warden was to control the apartment block “from the attic to the cellar” according to the principles of air defence.²⁸ But the informer of the *Sopade* explained that the air-raid warden also had to gather details on the tenants concerning their political convictions, professions, social habits and mail correspondence.²⁹

Nevertheless, Nazi efforts seem to not have been particularly successful in the first years of their rule. In *Meyer’s Hof*, one of Berlin’s hugest tenement complexes, consisting of six courtyards and housing up to 2,000 people, an air-raid warden was only established in 1939, at the beginning of the war.³⁰ Another means to gain control of the tenement houses like *Meyer’s Hof* was to depopulate them. An article by H. Günther in the weekly *Das Reich* from 1941 called for the reduction of inhabitants.³¹ According to Günther, in the spaces at the vertical margins of the tenement houses, in cellars and attics, prostitution and misdemeanour held sway:

“In the cellars the prostitution took up quarters, in the attics people stayed overnight. Many a time, the police picked up ten, twenty and more of those ‘visitors’ of male and female sex and conducted them to the police station for a thorough examination.”³²

The Nazi authorities suspected cellars and attics not only of prostitution and crime. The “confusing swarming” also made these spaces ideal hiding places for those inclined to subversion and insurrection. The actual physical and

²⁷ Die Sirene. Illustrierte Zeitschrift mit den Mitteilungen des Reichsluftschutzbundes 8, 1934, p. 2.

²⁸ Ibid. These measures corresponded to the Nazi policy to ‘de-proletarianize’ the lower classes. Cf. Michael Schneider. Unterm Hakenkreuz. Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung 1933 bis 1939, Bonn 1999, p. 492, 767, 775.

²⁹ Deutschland-Berichte der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands (Sopade) 1934-1940, ed. by Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, 7 vols., Salzhausen 1980, here vol. 1, p. 781f.

³⁰ Geist and Kürvers’ exemplary study on the Berlin tenement house gives a detailed chronological report on the almost 100 year long history of the tenement complex until its demolition in 1972. Geist/Kürvers, p. 561. Establishing air-raid wardens was not the only means by which the Nazi regime hoped to get a hold on the tenement houses. While there is much that could be discussed, unfortunately this lies beyond the scope of the present paper due to a restriction of space.

³¹ By 1941, this had already been accomplished: From the 945 dwellers of 1933 only 675 were left. Cf. H. Günther, Ackerstraße 132/133. Ein Besuch in ‚Meyers Hof‘ nach acht Jahren, in: *Das Reich*, 25/1941, p. x.

³² Ibid.

social underground was thus additionally supposed to constitute a political underground, hiding a resistance movement.

3. Verticality of the Bombing War and its Effect on the Urban Apartment House

The air war intensified notably from 1942 on. Allied bombing experts had tested and finally found ways to not only penetrate the “thick blanket of air” over the German territories, but also strategies to pierce through urban apartment houses from the roof to the cellar by means of incendiary bombing. While Americans experimented in Utah and New Jersey with burning through different kinds of structures and simulated German roofing, the British worked on igniting conflagrations impossible to control. From the perspective of incendiary strategies, roofs were not only the highest points of houses in the vertical, but also the most sensitive spots, which, once penetrated, gave access to the whole building, fuelling the combustion.³³ This was easiest to accomplish through initially dropping large amounts of incendiaries simultaneously, followed by high-explosive bombs “to destroy windows, crater the streets, and intimidate civil defence and fire-workers.”³⁴

This strategy of vertical penetration was understood by Berlin’s residents, like the young writer Hannelore Holtz, later the long-standing assistant chief editor of the woman’s magazine, *Brigitte*. In her novel *Wir lebten in Berlin* (1947), she observed:

“The bombs [...] penetrate the stately high houses, the elegant, graceful villas and the grey, narrow-bosomed tenement houses. The incendiaries, the long sticks, are like harmless snakes. You can beat them to death with a few buckets of water and sand [...]. But the white phosphorus bombs are poisonous snakes. The phosphorus eats his way through the wood, permeates your flesh, when you come too close to it. Phosphorus burns on, hidden, like a creeping, slowly worsening disease.”³⁵

Like in medieval *danses macabres*, she ascribes an egalitarian effect to the bombing campaigns: In the war from above, all houses are equal — they are equally vulnerable, the villas as well as the ‘narrow-bosomed tenement houses’.

In his 1956 work, *Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard states that in modern towns there are no houses, but “the inhabitants of the big city live in superim-

³³ Cf. Jörg Friedrich, *Der Brand. Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940-1945*, Frankfurt a. M. et al. 2002, p. 24.

³⁴ Richard Overy, *The Bombing War. Europe 1939-1945*, London 2014, p. 329.

³⁵ Hannelore Holtz, *Wir lebten in Berlin*, Berlin 1947, p. 25. Phosphorus bombs were a special form of incendiary.

posed boxes.”³⁶ He defines the house as a “vertical being”, in which cellar and attic constituted two opposite poles³⁷, while ascribing psychological qualities to these spaces: the attic has an edifying function and contributes to clearness of mind, the cellar appears as a “dark entity” that conspires with subterranean forces and irrationality. Bachelard here referenced C.G. Jung’s concept of the soul as a house, whose storeys stem from different eras.³⁸ This idea corresponds to historical constructions — basements are frequently much older than the buildings above them.³⁹ Their origin and utilization is often not known anymore, which contributes to an atmosphere of the uncanny. The psychological subconscious coincides with the cultural unconscious.

Bachelard’s theory of space may however be more relative to time and space than he allows for, and for this reason, this paper will pay more attention to the questions of who, why and at which point attributed which meaning to underground spaces. But his approach to the emotional significance of space doubtlessly has its merits, as he puts forward hypotheses concerning the symbolical meaning of buildings and their varying levels. In this, he is the sole theorist having voiced an emotional topography of the house.⁴⁰ Although his attributions of the house, derived from the experience of rural life, may not be universally applicable, they were shared by a large part of Berlin’s lower classes, who from the late 19th century onward poured into the city from rural territories, particularly from Pomerania.

³⁶ Bachelard, p. 47.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 39.

³⁸ Carl Gustav Jung, *Seelenprobleme der Gegenwart*, Zurich 1950, p. 159.

³⁹ Cf. on the medieval cellars of Erfurt: Elmar Altwasser/Sigrid Schmeer, *Der Keller. Mythos und Wirklichkeit*, in: Niko Rollmann (ed.), *Reise durch den Untergrund. Architektur, Geschichte und Konstrukt*, Berlin 2013, p. 233-246, here p. 238.

⁴⁰ The standard allegation of Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space* is his putting forward a universal concept of the emotional topography of the house. This is a result of his phenomenological approach, which does not conform to today’s social constructivism. However, I find Bachelard’s hypotheses inspiring, despite its possible flaws. These hypotheses will therefore serve as a starting point for further investigation into the field of symbolic attributions to the house. Since I presume the poorer inhabitants of Berlin in the first half of the 20th century to agree with Bachelard on his concept of an archaic house and its emotional attributions, due to the similarity of experience and due to the proximity of time and space, there is no need to historicise his assumptions here. For criticism on Bachelard cf. e.g. Edward Kaplan, Gaston Bachelard’s *Philosophy of Imagination*, in: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 33:1, 1972, p. 1-24, here p. 1, Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Oxford 1991, p. 121. For a recent approach to assess Bachelard’s thought on emotions and space cf. Anne Game/Andrew Metcalfe, ‘My Corner of the World’. Bachelard and Bondi Beach, in: *Emotion, Space and Society* 4, 2011, p. 42-50.

Although basements were intended by the Nazi regime to function as shelters, vague cultural associations between historic cellars and dungeons, graves and crypts were also strongly felt by Berliners sitting in cellars during air-raids. Obviously, it was not solely the cellars' frightening features which released archaic fears, but their combination with modern air warfare. Not surprisingly, in her anonymously published war diary *A Women in Berlin* (1954/2005)⁴¹, journalist Marta Hillers evoked the cellar as a highly ambiguous space that did not only function as a shelter, but also evoked the fear of being buried alive:

"Finally we're in our shelter, behind an iron door that weighs a hundred pounds, with rubber seals around the edges and two levers to lock it shut. The official term is air-raid shelter. We call it cave, underworld, catacomb of fear, mass grave."⁴²

The cellar released archaic fears, resulting in several witnesses of the air war refusing to go to the cellar during air-raids altogether. The German-American journalist Margret Boveri stopped descending to the cellar towards the end of the war. She spent her time during raids either in her apartment on the fourth floor or outdoors. In her wartime recollections, she explains: "During the mild days of early spring I almost never again went to the cellar during alerts, but strolled around the park."⁴³ Boveri was not alone in doing so. In his study of the psychological effect of air-raids, military physician and psychiatrist Friedrich Panse encountered similar cases of cellar aversion.⁴⁴ One man reported: "By the way, after the heavy air-raid I did not go to the cellar again, but I ran into the open air. [...] I believe, even under extreme pressure it would have been impossible to force me into the cellar. I felt there immediately like buried alive."⁴⁵

But strolling around during air-raids was considered unsafe by Nazi authorities for reasons of air protection. Moreover, it was perceived as highly suspicious. Going to shelters, meanwhile, was compulsory during air-raids⁴⁶, at least

⁴¹ The dates refer to the publication of the English editions.

⁴² Anonymous [Marta Hillers], *A Woman in Berlin*, London 2011, entry from 20.04.1945], p. 23.

⁴³ Margret Boveri, *Tage des Überlebens*, Frankfurt a. M. 1996 [1968], commentary on 20.03.1945, p. 58.

⁴⁴ Panse's study is based on 95 interview records of witnesses of the air war. He held the interviews during the war. Panse had already been active as a military psychiatrist in World War I. In its aftermath he advocated electroshock therapy as a cure for shell shock, and he became involved in the Nazi euthanasia programme *Aktion T4*.

⁴⁵ Friedrich Panse, *Angst und Schreck in klinisch-psychologischer und sozialmedizinischer Sicht*. Dargestellt an Hand von Erlebnisberichten aus dem Luftkrieg, Stuttgart 1952, p. 141. See also p. 100f., 142.

⁴⁶ Cf. Overy, p. 418.

for those strata of society, whose survival was wanted by the regime. Jews, gypsies, forced labourers, and POWs—particularly those from Eastern countries such as Poland and the Soviet Union — were for the most part not allowed to take refuge in shelters.⁴⁷ Access to safe spaces, especially in bunkers, was thus highly restricted, at least theoretically. A lack of interest by Germans to seek refuge in shelters was not foreseen. When Boveri was caught by air-raid wardens in her apartment, she was threatened with imprisonment: “Saturday evening two air-raid wardens warned me of three months of prison, because they met me 35 minutes after the sound of the air-raid siren in my apartment.”⁴⁸ The wardens were not entirely mistaken to find her behaviour suspicious. Boveri in fact listened to forbidden foreign broadcasts to find out “what was really going on.”⁴⁹ Similarly, young Jewish Margot Friedlander, who went into hiding in Berlin in early 1943, took the occasion of being excluded from those worthy of shelter preservation to listen to the BBC.⁵⁰ During the air war, the Nazi regime managed to control air-raid shelters to a large extent. From the regime’s perspective, cellars thus shifted from spaces of suspicion, in which dubious activities were suspected to be carried out, to spaces of social control. Civilians, particularly those pursuing subversive activities or with illegal status, benefited from the lack of control during air-raids. As a consequence, the regimes’ fears concentrated on persons outside the shelters, rather than on those within.

4. Basements as Ambiguous Spaces

Cellars remained ambiguous spaces for their temporary inhabitants. Through air-protection measures they developed from almost unregulated spaces to relatively safe, but strongly controlled zones. Air-raid wardens initially were frequently male. At the onset of the war, they were often replaced by women, who

⁴⁷ Cf. Ralf Blank, *Kriegsalltag und Luftkrieg an der ‚Heimatfront‘*, in: Jörn Echterkamp (ed.), *Die deutsche Kriegsgesellschaft 1939-1945*, vol. 9.1.: Politisierung, Vernichtung, Überleben. Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg, Munich 2004, p. 357-463, here p. 409. Süß comes to a less apodictic conclusion than Blank: Regulations and their application diverged from town to town, even Jews were not excluded in all places alike. Cf. Dietmar Süß, *Tod aus der Luft. Kriegsgesellschaft und Luftkrieg in Deutschland und England*, Munich 2011, p. 328f. Equally, Friedrich reports a variety of exceptions that challenge the assumption of a strict and universal ban. Cf. Friedrich, p. 402f.

⁴⁸ Boveri, entry on 20.03.1945, p. 56f.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁵⁰ Vgl. Margot Friedlander, „Versuche, dein Leben zu machen“. Als Jüdin versteckt in Berlin, Reinbek bei Hamburg 2010, p. 163.

were more consistently available.⁵¹ Part of the wardens' duties included controlling the compliance with air defence regulations, for instance the efficiency of blackouts and proper conduct in the shelters — no alcohol, no animals, no excessive expressions of feelings were allowed. Furthermore, wardens were liable for a list of those present in the shelter in order to know how many people were to be dug out, and they were responsible for fire services and rescue measures during the raids. Holtz describes in detail how the blackout in apartment blocks was meticulously observed not only by air-raid wardens, but also by excessively attentive neighbours. "Lights out! Blackout! Unbelievable!" a neighbour's voice exclaimed on the spot when the protagonist lit light in the bathroom.⁵² Holtz additionally depicts how the apartment doors had to remain open during air-raids, while their inhabitants were in the cellar. A regulation even prescribed that formal notice had to be given of any overnight absence from home and keys to be deposited with the officials.⁵³ Although it is questionable if this intrusive regulation had ever been put into practice⁵⁴, measures of air defence provided representatives of the regime with an almost unlimited access to the private space of the tenants for the sake of fire prevention. Given the numerous raids, Berlin apartments remained unlocked quite often during the war. This created an atmosphere of fear among tenants, not only due to the possibility of theft and looting⁵⁵, but also for anyone with something to hide, be it people, sensitive writing, or forbidden books. Thus, the air war gave rise to living conditions that notably resembled those described by Südekum in 1908. Now it was not only proletarian and working-class lodgings but also those of the middle class that were not closed. Instead, these lodgings opened toward the communal spaces of the tenements. Hence, air defence measures transformed the private space of one's apartment into publicly accessible rooms, in which private things became not so private.

Simultaneously, cellars and attics became easily accessible spaces between 1940 and 1945. The air war thus provided city dwellers with ample opportunity to experience the verticality of the house, which urban apartment blocks, according to Bachelard, previously lacked entirely. Fire protection measures transformed the two extreme points in the vertical into highly frequented places. Escape routes perforated cellars and attics and connected adjacent spaces

⁵¹ Overy, p. 415f.

⁵² Holtz, p. 11.

⁵³ Cf. Overy, p. 418.

⁵⁴ None of the testimonies reports anything of the sort, and usually the testimonies are more elaborate than the regulations.

⁵⁵ Thieves were radically sentenced to death as a deterrent to the crime. Nonetheless, property offenses were very likely ubiquitous. Cf. e.g. Friedrich, p. 444.

through break-through points, covered with a thin wall of mortar in order to be easily opened up with an axe.⁵⁶ In this way, subterranean chains of cellars and passages were constructed, leading through several buildings into the open.

Cellars might have been the safest places in urban apartment blocks, but they remained such only temporarily. As soon as the house above was on fire, it was necessary to leave at once. Besides being buried alive, one could be killed through carbon monoxide or heat.⁵⁷ But leaving the building during a raid was somewhat counterintuitive: first, staying in one's own cellar seemed subjectively to be safest.⁵⁸ Second, with a fire blazing outside, leaving the building was not very appealing. Thus, when the warden in Holtz' novel urges the cellar dwellers to leave and patrol during a raid, no one follows: "No one volunteers. Not a man. Not a woman."⁵⁹ One of Panse's witnesses reports having experienced real terror when faced with a raid in the open: "My head was spinning as if I was going insane. I felt like running into the flames, since the flames exerted such an attraction on me, like a force which I had to obey."⁶⁰ The prospect of experiencing exceptional fits of fear made it difficult to leave shelters during air-raids.⁶¹ Leaving cellars promptly if necessary was a conduct that had to be acquired. Cellars thus remained ambivalent spaces for their temporary inhabitants during air-raids: they could easily change from shelter to a trap.

To easily gain access to fires, breakthroughs were also created in the attics, and all connecting doors between neighbouring attics were to remain unlocked, stimulating unpredicted usages of these spaces. Waltraud Süßmilch, a 14 year-old teenager at the end of the war enjoyed the newly established playground: "we could run through the attics of the whole block. Of course, the air defence measure had not intended to set up a track for us children."⁶² Fire protection thus did not solely enhance the control of the regime over the citizens, but in some cases, it unintentionally created a higher degree of freedom. This was the case with Marie Jalowicz Simon, another hidden Jew in Berlin. Under the pretext of air defence, the befriended auxiliary air-raid warden, an opponent of the Nazi regime, convinced the warden in charge to construct an escape route in the attic. "Look, fellow", he told him, "where do the people flee? When

⁵⁶ Overy, p. 438.

⁵⁷ Cf. Friedrich, p. 377.

⁵⁸ Cf. E. P. Vernon, Psychological Effects of Air-Raids, in: *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 36:4, 1941, p. 457-476, here p. 459, 470.

⁵⁹ Holtz, p. 26.

⁶⁰ Cf. Panse, p. 57.

⁶¹ Cf. also Friedrich, p. 377.

⁶² Waltraud Süßmilch, *Im Bunker. Eine Überlebende berichtet vom Bombenkrieg in Berlin*, Berlin 2004, p. 39.

they have run from the bombs from top to bottom, and then the bombs hit, they must again escape from bottom to top.”⁶³ He thus successfully incited the air-raid warden to hack a breakthrough into the firewalls in early spring 1945. This was naturally nonsense with regard to fire protection — firewalls were in fact made to stop fires. But when faced with the danger of arrest by the Gestapo, an ‘upper’ escape route was doubtlessly valuable, considering the common Gestapo practice to leave one man at the ground floor to block the ‘lower’ escape route.

5. Returning to the Past’s Housing Conditions

Towards the end of World War II, many Berliners moved more or less permanently down to the cellars, forming a veritable ‘cellar clan’, as Hillers has it.⁶⁴ This created closeness and intimacy among neighbours that greatly transgressed bourgeois standards. The close association came to resemble proletarian and working-class living conditions at the beginning of the 20th century. Cooking together or in turns provided unconventional insights not only into meals, but also into the family structures and the conflicts of neighbours, as 19-year-old actress-to-be Sabine Krug witnessed:

“In the cellar, everyone was cooking zealously, everyone using their own pots, neatly lined up. But living together was not so blissful anymore. Miss K. and Miss D. groused on each occasion that arose. Mrs. B. cut Miss R. short, Miss O.’s voice became coarser and coarser from all the cognac, Mrs. L. scolded, her daughters cried.”⁶⁵

Living permanently in cellars and bunkers without any privacy had notably negative effects on the dwellers. They shifted increasingly to a state of neglect and became apathetic to their own fate and to their dependants, as a physician of the air protection reported: “only a handful of days [...] makes people dull, rude and stolid. [...] They lay hands on anyone else’s property, they disrespect wives and children, their sense of order and hygiene vanishes. Those who have

⁶³ Marie Jalowicz Simon, *Untergetaucht. Eine junge Frau überlebt in Berlin 1940-1945*, Frankfurt a. M. 2014, p. 314f.

⁶⁴ „Kellervolk“ and „Kellergemeinde“ in the German edition. Cf. Anonyma [i.e. Marta Hillers], *Eine Frau in Berlin. Tagebuch-Aufzeichnungen vom 20. April bis 22. Juni 1945*, Frankfurt a. M. 2003, p. 15, 43.

⁶⁵ Cf. Sabine Krug, „... mir ist nur wichtig, ob es in Zukunft so eine Art von Kunst geben wird oder nicht“. Aus dem Jugendtagebuch einer Schauspielerin, in: Ingrid Hammer/Susanne zur Nieden (eds.), *Sehr selten habe ich geweint. Briefe und Tagebücher aus dem Zweiten Weltkrieg von Menschen aus Berlin*, Zurich 1992, p. 379-421, here p. 389.

been very neat and tidy, do not wash or comb their hair for days. Men do not shave, neglect their clothing.”⁶⁶

The physician not only observed dehumanisation and brutalisation of otherwise tidy people, but also saw them “mutate into cave dwellers” shortly after the destruction of their homes.⁶⁷ Hillers had a similar impression: “At this moment we are marching backwards in time. Cave-dwellers.”⁶⁸ But she gave the idea a twist: the whole process of civilisation appears to have been reversed, as if Berliners literally had been bombed back to the Stone Age. This imaginary reversal of chronology was of course brought about by technically advanced and modern weapons. Cave-dwelling in Berlin in 1945 appeared indeed to restore living conditions from earlier periods, but not from that long ago. Berliners towards the end of the war seemed to conform to the middle-class notion of the proletarian cellar dwellers from around the turn of the century, as if a *genius loci* resided there, inspiring their inhabitants to invariably proletarian conduct.

In 1945, cellars were not only the place in which middle-class Berliners came to know their neighbours more intimately; they also became a space in which exceptional psychological states, such as the unadulterated fear of death, were experienced. After her building was hit, Hillers regularly displayed strong physical fear reactions to raids:

“I’m covered in sweat as if from hard labour. [...] The symptoms are always the same. First the sweat beads up around my hairline, then I feel something boring into my spine, my throat gets scratchy, my mouth goes dry, my heart starts to skip.”⁶⁹

At the end of the war, cellars were also the places in which mass rapes took place.⁷⁰ After being raped by Russian soldiers, Hillers has to face the “cellar clan” immediately afterwards: “I don’t want to go back [to our basement], don’t want to look at their faces anymore.”⁷¹ But the forced closeness to the neighbours in the basement was also a context in which Berlin women could speak openly about the war rapes, thus rendering them a collective experience:

“something foreseen and feared many times in advance, that happened to women right and left, all somewhat part of the bargain. And this mass rape is something we are overcoming collectively as well. All the women help the oth-

⁶⁶ Cf. Blank, p. 410f.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 411.

⁶⁸ Anonymous, entry on 20.04.1945, p. 21.

⁶⁹ Anonymous, entry on 21.04.1945, p. 27.

⁷⁰ Cf. also Evans, p. 33.

⁷¹ Anonymous, entry on 27.04.1945, p. 74.

er, by speaking about it, airing their pain and allowing others to air theirs and spit out what they've suffered."⁷²

In this regard as well, the bourgeois norms seem to approach proletarian standards. In the first half of the 20th century, intercourse outside of wedlock, unmarried motherhood, and prostitution were not considered scandalous among proletarians, but rather an inevitable concomitant of widely diffused poverty.⁷³ Being a more or less common experience, they were less taboo, and a similar process can be observed at the end of World War II — now also including rape as a mass experience. As a consequence, the proletariat stratum is considered a veritable refuge by Wolfgang Graetz's rebellious teenage protagonist in *The World from Below* (1966). The proletariat is described as a social space whose moral values are infinitely preferable to those of the middle class, which are utterly corrupted by National Socialism.⁷⁴ Hillers' and Graetz's enthusiasm for proletarian values were not shared by everyone. The writer Horst Lange deprecates exactly what Hillers described as a common experience as a loathsome dissolution of bourgeois standards: "Cellar wrecks under the rubble of the houses, a total repeal of bourgeois notions such as property, morals and individuation of one from the others."⁷⁵

By the end of the war, Berliners had "gone to the dogs" in terms of property and morals.⁷⁶ Given the massive destruction of housing during the air war, they were frequently obliged to reside permanently in cellars or bunkers for years after 1945. The Nazi project to force the basement dwellers out of their proletarian space and to destroy it thus utterly failed. After the war, many more people lived in cellars than prior to 1933.⁷⁷ Instead of a de-proletarianization of the proletariat, as was the Nazi's intention, a proletarianization and uprooting

⁷² Anonymous, entry on 08.05.1945, p. 174.

⁷³ Cf. e.g. Wettstein-Adelt, p. 24f. With regard to proletarian attitudes towards prostitution, there is a noteworthy difference between factual reports and literary ones. Otto Rühle and Wettstein-Adelt hold that proletarians, inspired by bourgeois manners, despised prostitution. Graetz and Alfred Döblin in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1928) on the other hand depict prostitution as an unspectacular part of the proletarian existence, not deprecated by anyone. It is hard to tell which of these cases embellish the situation. Cf. Otto Rühle, *Illustrierte Kultur- und Sittengeschichte des Proletariats*, Berlin 1930, p. 486.

⁷⁴ Cf. Wolfgang Graetz, *Die Welt von unten*, Frankfurt a. M. 1966, p. 19-24.

⁷⁵ Horst Lange, *Tagebücher aus dem Zweiten Weltkrieg*, ed. by Hans Dieter Schäfer, Mainz 1979, entry on 08.02.1945, p. 196.

⁷⁶ The original German version, „auf'n Hund gekommen“, is more subtle in its insinuation. Cf. Anonyma, p. 28.

⁷⁷ Evans suggests that post-war residency in cellars and bunkers was strongly associated with delinquency, particularly that of adolescents. But for the most part, it was regular families, or that what had remained of them, among them numerous refugees expelled from the East, that inhabited cellars and bunkers. Cf. Evans, p. 39.

of parts of the middle class was achieved, at least temporarily.⁷⁸ Hence, the housing conditions of the poor and the working class from the turn of the century became an experience widely shared by the middle class. Jung and Bachelard described the cellar as the seat of the unconscious, as a space, in which the “fears of night” reigned.⁷⁹ Therefore, the cellar experience caused by the air war may be described as a recurrence of repressed knowledge, leading to an illumination concerning the previous disastrous living and housing conditions of the Berlin working class, which had been ignored for decades.

⁷⁸ For de-proletarianization cf. Schneider, p. 767.

⁷⁹ Bachelard, p. 40.