

Fritz Sauckel (1894-1946)

At dawn on October 16th, 1946 at Nuremberg's prison, the execution of Fritz Sauckel was carried out, a man whose career as a leading *NSDAP*-official (National Socialist German Workers' Party) had begun 20 years earlier in 1927 with his appointment as Thuringia's *Gauleiter*, the leader of the Nazi district in that region. By 1930, Sauckel was able to lead the nationalist splinter party to becoming the first to participate in governing in a German district. Another two and a half years later he was able to achieve the "preponed takeover of power" as the head of the government. With Hitler coming to power 1933, Sauckel, a Northern-Bavarian by birth, rose to *Reichstatthalter* (imperial governor) in Thuringia and make his district into a strong regional power. In this way and thanks to personal connections, he increased his position of power within the polycratic "land of the Führer". When he became "the general commissioner of the labor effort" in 1942, this was the most obvious expression of the power of the so-called "*Gaufürst*" or "district prince". This position led to Sauckel becoming the "biggest and cruellest slave owner since the Egyptian pharaohs" (Robert H. Jackson, main prosecutor during the Nuremberg trials). Sauckel had six million forced labourers deported to Germany, which was the crucial factor in his being sentenced to death by hanging.

Ernst Friedrich Sauckel was born on October 27th, 1894 in the Northern-Bavarian town of Haßfurt. As the son of a post office employee and a seamstress, he was of lower middle class origin. At the age of 15 he dropped out of school, left his home, and travelled the world's seas as a sailor on trading ships. The question remains whether he was driven by adventurism or rather the nationalist upbringing by his father, who, like many of his contemporaries, saw the future of the German Empire overseas. After 1933, NS-propagandists claimed that Sauckel wanted to become a commanding officer of the emperor's navy. When the World War I broke out in August 1914, the young seaman was sailing towards Australia. However, his German cargo ship was stopped in the English Channel, and the crew was transferred to French civil internment. For five years Sauckel was kept prisoner in an internment camp near Brest. While others achieved "fame and glory" on the battle fields, this inactivity must have galled the future representative of the extreme right like a stain which he tried to eliminate with even keener and more radical political advancement. Sauckel shared the hate-filled rejection of the Versailles peace agreement of June 28th, 1919. Just like most of his fellow countrymen, his feelings were a mixture of personal deprivation and

national defeat. At that time he might have already been following the path to national radicalism, which rejected the proclaimed republic of November 1918 as something that was forced upon the nation and as something that was “un-German”. After returning home in November 1919, Sauckel was first a worker in a ball bearing factory in Schweinfurt, and then he joined the *Deutschvölkischer Schutz- und Trutzbund* which dominated the extreme right scene at that time. Here his political qualities were shown which were based rather less on intellectual skills than on persistent devotion to the “movement” and some technical skills. Ascending very quickly to the position of Gauleiter of the Northern-Bavarian area, Sauckel personified a vulgar and brisk plebeian tribune who instilled disgust in his enemies and respect as well as admiration in his own supporters. Hitler himself later showed his appreciation of the activism, organisational talents and oratory skills that this party official demonstrated despite his rather insignificant outer appearance.

In 1922 Sauckel was driven to Ilmenau’s “*Technikum*”, the precursor to the technical college of today. Though he called himself a technician from time to time, he never obtained a degree. The NSDAP-member with the number 17357 (integration on January 1st, 1923) seemed to concentrate all his efforts on politics. Already a member of the SA, Sauckel founded the cover organisation *Deutscher Wanderverein* (German walking union) following the failed Beer Hall Putsch of November 9th, 1923. In this manner he tried to keep the national socialists united in Ilmenau in “gothic loyalty” to Hitler as the *Bund Teja*. He also tried to make contact with the so-called *Völkisches Netzwerk* (Justus H. Ulbricht) in Thuringia in order to become acquainted with prominent people, like Adolf Bartel, “the public literature pope” from Weimar, or the author Artur Dinter, whom Hitler appointed as the leader of all regional NS-organisations while he was imprisoned in Landsberg.

At the same time, Sauckel served as a newspaper publisher. However, the Ilmenau Nazi paper *Deutscher Aar* (“German Eagle”) appeared only in 1924/25 and, due to financial problems, had to merge with Hans Severus Ziegler’s paper *Der Völkische* (“The Nationalist”) of Weimar. The merger resulted in *Der Nationalsozialist* (“The National Socialist”), a paper that, under the leadership of Ziegler as one of Bartel’s employees, became the determining party institution of Thuringia’s NSDAP. When Hitler was released from prison, he re-founded the NSDAP in February 1925. Artur Dinter then received the official order to serve as district commander of Thuringia. Hans Severus Ziegler became his surrogate. Sauckel, however, ascended to be the NSDAP’s district manager and thus established a firm position within the regional Nazi

leadership. The new job proved to be a convenient position for further promotion – after all, the district's leader Dinter was a highly controversial character among party members because of personal rivalries and a pseudo-religious sectarianism. In 1927, Hitler removed him from office, a move in which Sauckel had had a considerable share. Now, on September 28, 1927, the 33-year-old faced no more obstacles – he became the head of the district of Thuringia that was of great significance to the entire national party.

The reason for this is that the *NSDAP* benefited from the strong polarization between a right wing and a left wing in the state of Thuringia which had been founded by former small states. From 1921 to 1923 “red Thuringia” was governed by the labour parties, followed by bourgeois-national *Sammelkabinette*¹(1924-1929) that depended upon the support of the national opposition in the state parliament. As early as March 1924, the *NSDAP* was no longer banned in Thuringia, and, consequently, the Party found an extraordinarily large scope for development. It was this region that advanced to be an early National Socialist stronghold. One of the most significant events of that time was the first *NSDAP* convention after the *NSDAP*'s reunion. It took place in Weimar in 1926, organized by Dinter. Yet, shortly afterwards, Sauckel played to the gallery as the “father of success” in the “green heart of Germany”, as Thuringia is often referred to.

From 1929 onwards, during the last days of the Weimar Republic, indefatigable propaganda and organization efforts were rewarded by spectacular political victories with nationwide emanation. It was with the so-called Fritz Marschler government of 1931/1932 in Thuringia that for the first time in Germany two National Socialists ranked as secretaries. When discussing the matter with the bourgeois parts of the coalition in Weimar, Hitler himself had insisted on the positions for the Department of Education and the Interior. For these essential offices he selected the to-be *Reichsinnenminister* (“Secretary of the Interior”) Wilhelm Frick, who was said to be a “dodgy National Socialist” and a legal expert. In this “dry run for the takeover” Frick recklessly advocated the interests and ideology of the party. Sauckel had to make do with the chair of the faction in the state parliament. Yet, he remained the undisputed party leader.

In August 1932, the *NSDAP* achieved a triumphant election victory (42.5%), which was followed by a “preponed takeover” (Berhard Post) under the direction of Sauckel. He was henceforth promoted to be the chairman of the Thuringian Ministry of

¹ Political cabinets including all organisations of the bourgeois-nationalistic wing

State, and he also became Secretary of the Interior. The establishment of the Nazi dictatorship that began on January 30th, 1933 when Hitler was appointed chancellor thus had a considerable lead in Thuringia. Using methods of brutal intimidation against all opponents, the Nazis had deactivated democratic structures and executed personnel “cleansings” on a large scale.

As Sauckel was conscious of his power and proved to operate successfully after 1933, he is a good example of the dual nature of the Third Reich. It was poled between centralization and “district particularism” (Jürgen John) as well as regional events specific to the person of the district commander. It was he who, despite a drastic loss of sovereignty to the Reich and a lack of formal reform of the same, managed to integrate the state of Thuringia as well as the Prussian administrative district of Erfurt into a united stronghold within the overall Thuringian NSDAP district. After he had been appointed head of state government in 1932, he became *Reichsstatthalter* of Thuringia. However, this office became less important due to the states’ *Gleichschaltung*, the alignment of the complete life in Germany to the Nazi pattern, that was implemented from 1933-1935. Sauckel openly criticized this process. He even demanded strong *Reichsgaue*, i.e. regional districts of the Reich. Although unsuccessful on this path, he still managed to sustain and strengthen his position of power as district commander and *Reichsstatthalter* by means of a mixture of regional authorities, personal loyalties, the strive for prestige, and economic influence. This is the basis upon which Sauckel pursued a brisk regional policy while strictly acknowledging Hitler’s sovereignty to whom he was virtually embarrassingly devoted as one of the most fervent preachers of the “Führer” cult.

One major field for Sauckel was culture. Herein he was able to distinguish both himself and his *Schutz- und Trutzgau* in the heart of Germany. The National Socialist with a bourgeois and radical background sometimes overshot the mark in cultural issues. This, however, did not jeopardize the position of the man who later boasted he had never read a single book. Furthermore, he proved to have a tactical sense to tie those middle-class intellectuals to the Third Reich who were partially compliant.

In particular it was important to unite the deeply symbolic high culture with ideology and the NSDAP’s claim to power in Weimar, the city of the classics. Sauckel hoped to distinguish the University of Jena as a model NS university. While ensuring high academic standards he wanted to make it a further medium of his cultural policy. This tendency became especially apparent by the appointment of the ‘racial scientist’

Karl Astel as rector. He was the first representative of this profession at the head of a German university.

However, the ambitious pursuit of transforming Weimar into a representative district capital in the style of the NS-architecture remained the primary objective. The central component of this project was the district forum. The Führer's fondness for Weimar, which had been returned by many of its townspeople, fit quite well to Sauckel's plans. The Führer had visited the city of the classics on the river Ilm frequently since 1925. As early as 1928 he is said to have told Hans Severus Ziegler: "I just love Weimar. I need Weimar as much as I need Bayreuth." Every Thuringian should be "excessively happy and thankful" for this preference, the head of the district declared in the photo book "The Führer in Weimar 1925-1938". In connection with Weimar's elevation to a nationally and culturally consecrated district residence, a number of other projects are worth mentioning. These are, for example, investments in the classical sites, the creation of a Nietzsche memorial hall, or the building of Hitler's favorite hotel "Elephant". The construction of a castle-like serviceable domicile in Windmill Street for Sauckel and his extended family can also be added to the list. After all, the *Gauleiter* and his wife Elisabeth ("Lisa") – the marriage dated back to the year 1924 – had "contributed" ten children to the "national community".

Driven by political intuition, Sauckel also maintained good relations with the armed forces, and the SS and operated actively in economic policy. With the expropriation of the weapon and vehicle factory of the Jewish family Simson in Suhl, which was celebrated by Sauckel as an "Arianizing" pioneer activity, he laid the foundation for the "Wilhelm-Gustloff-Foundation", whose leading position he assumed in 1936. The "national socialistic prototype factory" of the booming war economy with its many branch factories gave Sauckel economic power. Though, at the same time, the companies distinguished themselves in the area of social policy in terms of national community propaganda.

The criminal character of the dominion of the "Thuringian dictator" becomes most obvious in the concentration camp Buchenwald, which was built as one of three large camps in the empire (alongside Dachau and Sachsenhausen). Together with the strong SS-troupes stationed there the camp was a part of Thuringia's establishment as a "model district". After 1945 the "fatal neighbor Buchenwald" eventually cast a dark cloud over the bright image of Weimar as a capital of culture. This way, Fritz Sauckel, as co-initiator of the camp in which more than 50,000 people lost their lives, is also

accountable for the much cited duality of the most popular national place of remembrance in Thuringia.

Despite his undisputed establishment as "*Gaufürst*", which was not granted to any of the other 31 *Gauleiter* in the empire, there repeatedly were more or less latent power struggles with regional rivals. These included, amongst others, the Thuringian "*Kulturdiktator*" ("Culture Dictator") Ziegler and minister Fritz Wächtler. Sauckel's ability to successfully win such struggles like the one with Wächtler contributed considerably to the consolidation of his predominance.

The beginning of World War II in September 1939 represented a new challenge. The military employment that the former seaman had wished for was refused to him by Hitler. A journey as a stowaway on a submarine of Admiral Karl Dönitz was immediately foiled when it was discovered. In the war, Sauckel was supposed to render outstanding services to "Führer, nation and fatherland" elsewhere. As a Reich Defence Commissar for the military district IX (with Kassel as its capital) and for the district Thuringia starting in 1942, he organized the '*Heimatfront*' (home front). In this context, the *Gauleiter* pursued the expansion of the war industry. This led to an extensive "industrial and demographic change of structures" in the centrally situated Thuringia, which was at first still unaffected by the war. Under the harsh conditions of "total war", Sauckel also came close to reaching one of his former goals - the political and administrative unification of Thuringia. After a number of intermediate steps concerning the transfer of competences that related to the whole of Thuringia, an edict by the Führer in 1944 commanded the partition of the Prussian province Saxony. In the process, the authority of the highest official in the area of the administrative district of Erfurt was devolved to Sauckel.

Thus, it was the war that allowed Sauckel even more power and influence. However, this was increasingly overshadowed by the threat of defeat despite all the propaganda about the "final victory" that Sauckel himself eagerly pursued. The most significant step in his career was also closely connected to the economic consequences of World War II: the nomination for the office of the general commissioner for the labor effort in March 1942. During the blitzkriegs of 1939/40 Germany had had no difficulties providing a sufficient number of soldiers as well as workers for its domestic economy. However, with the beginning of the invasion of Russia in June 1941, this was no longer possible. The wide fronts and the losses of the war led to the draft of more and more workers to the military. That way, 7.5 million vacancies were available despite (predominantly still voluntary) recruitment of laborers

from other countries. It was exactly this problem that Sauckel was henceforth supposed to solve.

He went about his new job demonstrating his typical eagerness and fanaticism. The position eventually promoted him to the national ranks of the NS elite, but it also forced him to commute between Berlin and Weimar where he had to continue his duties as *Gauleiter* and Reich Defence Commissar. The fact that it was impossible to erect representative buildings in the middle of warfare for the new labor recruitment agency which employed thousands of people all over Europe did not pose a problem to Sauckel: He had long received a residence fitting his position in the Reich's capital. It carried the name "Thüringenhaus" (House of Thuringia) and had already been built in 1933 as "Thuringia's window to the Reich". It was here that Sauckel now installed his staff. By doing so, he counted on reliable Thuringian followers and appointed the rest of the *Gauleiter* as his regional commissioners.

The man who was in charge of the German military economy since early 1942 was Hitler's star architect, Albert Speer. In order to avoid a concentration of power in Speer's hands, Martin Bormann had achieved the nomination of the Thuringian *Gauleiter* as "commissioner for the labor effort". Bormann used to be Sauckel's former head of administration for the district during their mutual time of combat and now was head of the party headquarters as well as an influential assistant to Hitler. As early as 1942, approximately 2.7 million people were brought into the Reich by means of large-scale "Sauckel campaigns". Here, due to a special order by Hitler, international law was not to be considered, especially in Poland and the Soviet Union. However, in Germany itself the last reserves were made accessible after labor laws were tightened. The general commissioner for the labor effort did not hesitate to systematically use the possibilities of influence that his office offered to the military economy of his own Gau of Thuringia.

After the definite turn of the war in the winter of 1942/43, however, Sauckel was confronted with Speer's constant demands for more laborers. The number of forced laborers, often abducted with brutal means mainly from Eastern Europe and partly living under disastrous circumstances, rose up to 6 million. Eventually, around 20 percent of all jobs were filled by foreigners; including prisoners of war and concentration camp prisoners they amounted to more than one third. Although the demand could never be met, forced labor prevented an early collapse of the German war industry.

Though his measures were clearly arranged in a hierarchy according to origin and qualifications, Sauckel was totally aware of their rigid and compulsory character. By his own account, at most 200,000 of the five million laborers came to Germany voluntarily. In numerous speeches and publications as general commissioner, Sauckel called on his staff members to overcome all repressive scruples. He was then completely blinded by loyalty to the Führer and ideological infatuation. Efforts for a more humane and well-regulated treatment of the laborers were primarily directed towards the most effective exploitation of their productive forces.

In the final stage of the war Sauckel demanded the uncompromising defense of Thuringia against the advancing Americans but fled just in time towards the south in April 1945. After the capitulation of Germany on May 8, he surrendered to the Americans in Berchtesgaden and was placed in the dock in Nuremberg as one of the 22 main perpetrators of the war crimes in 1945/46. Without denying the inhumane dimension of the activities of Hitler's "slave-trader", the question has often been raised, if the death sentence for war crimes and crimes against humanity passed by the international military tribunal was justified. In comparison, rather mild judgments were given to Walther Funk (life sentence), minister for economic affairs, and Albert Speer (20 years in prison), who were both equally involved in the employment of forced laborers.

Sauckel himself was aware of the destiny that was to await him in case the NS-dictatorship failed. As early as May 1941 he explained at a meeting of high party officials: "If we lose this war, not only will they hang me, but they will also hang you. This can be taken for granted."

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