

Thuringia under American Occupation (April until July 1945)

The American occupation of Thuringia lasted not even 100 days. This period should not become the most formative for the post-war history of the 'Land'. The Thuringian population was not even allowed to understand this chapter as a liberation experience until 1989/90. Across four decades, the historic memory was steadily channeled and superimposed by the ideologically influenced perception of the DDR regime.

This interlude, when the 'Star-Spangled Banner' was displayed on Thuringian territory, was blatantly ignored and omitted by the contemporary historiography, however, it has been more intensively researched by now. Many new findings could be revealed about this rather short period of American occupation, lasting from April until July 1945.

In April 1945, Thuringia was seized within 16 days by American military units, while the operations of the Western Allied Armed Forces landed an unexpected and far-reaching territorial gain in central Germany. Outside the prospective occupation zone the high command of the Armed Forces erected a military administration that governed Thuringia and western Saxony on a preliminary basis, until the beginning of July 1945.

The occupation regime stayed in many aspects provisional, due to the knowledge by the American military leadership and their forces that their stay was merely transitional.

The occupation policies, directed at the population, were dictated by standard principles applied in a relationship between an occupying power and a defeated country.

The Americans came into a country that not only carried the guilt and responsibility for the outbreak of the war, but had nurtured a brutal dictatorship against dissidents interlinked with a system of extermination camps.

The imprisonment and the internment of those, who supported the unjust, national socialist regime, traffic restrictions and the imposing of nocturnal curfews, restrictions and prohibitions of political activity, dominated the life under the occupying force. Private contacts between members of the American military service and the German population (fraternization) were strictly prohibited. Within the first months of occupation, the American policies towards Germany demonstrated the rigor and rule over a defeated people. From April until July 1945, these policies were also applicable to the population of the Thuringian territory.

The Military Occupation of Thuringia

The occupation of Thuringia by the Western Allied Forces was performed within the first weeks of April 1945, when the central German area was in focus of an offence by the 12th

US-Army and the, from General George S. Patton led, Third Army stood just before the Thuringian border. The VIII., XII., and XX. corps of the Third Army were involved in the liberation of Thuringia and were meant to occupy the Thuringian area approaching from west. The VIII. corps operated in the centre between the XX. corps in the north and the XII. corps in the south. On March 31, the armored divisions of the XII. corps had reached the western border of Thuringia and stood 10 kilometers west from Eisenach.

On the "Reichsstraße" (autobahn) Kassel-Eisenach, their forefront approached the Hesse-Thuringian border at the Rhön. The operational directives for Patton's army aimed at the conquest of a German intelligence centre that, as assumed by the American military leaders, was located in the area of Ohrdruf-Gotha-Erfurt-Weimar. Another objective was the rapid advancement towards the Thuringian capital Weimar.

The American occupation of Thuringia commenced on April 1, 1945. On the very same day, the first units of the armored divisions crossed the river Werra, close to Creuzburg.

The armored divisions of the VIII. corps operated in the area of Gotha-Ohrdruf on April 3 and thereafter. The divisions of the XII. corps stood already south from the Thuringian forest in the area of Schmalkalden-Suhl-Meiningen. Simultaneously, General Patton received the order to hold, after reaching the line Meiningen-Ohrdruf-Gotha-Mühlhausen and to wait for the approaching of the First and the Ninth Army. Thus, the advance of the Third Army was delayed by several days. On April 8, the forefront of the three corps stood at the requested stop-line in Thuringia. The occupation of the north Thuringian town- and land districts took place after April 9.

Since April 12, the advance of the American Forces was concentrated on the area of Erfurt-Weimar-Jena. At the same time, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces, General Dwight D. Eisenhower arrived in Thuringia and viewed the, in the bore plant of Merkers at the Rhön, stored art treasures and stocks of gold, and to see the external camp Ohrdruf that belonged to the concentration camp Buchenwald and was liberated on April 4. Erfurt and Weimar were seized on April 12, Jena on April 13. The VIII. corps that was allocated to the mid-section of the front protruded to the east Thuringian town- and rural districts and occupied them by April 16. The occupation of Thuringia was therewith completed.

General Patton had setup his headquarters in the former mansion of the fugitive Thuringian 'Gauleiter' (head of Nazi district) in Weimar. On April 15, he inspected the concentration camp Buchenwald that had been liberated on April 11. In the same evening, he commanded that at least 1000 citizens of Weimar to be sent to view the conditions of the camp, which

was located on the Ettersberg (a hill not too far from Weimar town-centre), with their own eyes.

Soon, the headquarters of the Third Army received new operational directives that requested a troop swing to the south. Until the retreat of the American Forces from Thuringia, the VIII. corps continued to occupy large parts of the territory, while the area around Erfurt and in the north Thuringian territories of the Prussian governmental district Erfurt with the Thuringian district Sondershausen were occupied by the XX. corps that was subordinated to the Seventh Army.

The American Military Administration of Thuringia

Already in 1944, the Allied Forces had determined the demarcation line for the respective areas of occupation, if the case of German surrender should arise. Thuringia was to belong to the Soviet occupation zone. However, the situation of the battle demanded a provisional occupation through the American Forces and their military administration being in charge of the occupation regime. Specially trained military government officers, together with their forces, exercised the supreme legislative, judicial and executive authority within these territories. In order to organise the civil administration, many statutory provisions (proclamations, directives and laws) had been prepared and came into force at the beginning of the occupation of each administrative district. The organisation of the American military administration in Thuringia was conducted according to the standards that had been developed for the American occupation zone.

The VIII. corps, which was particularly involved in the military occupation of the 'Land', controlled the largest part of Thuringia and shifted its headquarters to Weimar at the end of April 1945, where it remained until July 2, 1945. Until the establishment of an own, self-reliant military government for Thuringia, the staff division G-5 of the VIII. corps was in charge for all administrative matters concerning the territory. At the beginning of June 1945, a new, superordinated military government (Detachment F1C9) was established for the territory of the new province Thuringia.

There were 34 local American military governments within the Thuringian and west Saxon town- and rural districts around this time. In the first phase of the occupation, the organisation and staff allocation of the military government departments in the town- and rural districts changed several times, mainly due to the ongoing troop movements.

The legal framework for any decisions and directives made by the local military governments was provided by the decreed laws and regulations of the American military government for Germany. They applied to civil citizens of the seized territories and to the German administrative authorities that were subordinate to the military government. The continued existence of the district- and communal authorities went hand in hand with the proclamation No 1, issued by the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces. All officials were bound to remain at their posts, until further notice, and to follow and execute all orders issued by the military government. Only later, the dismissal of still active national socialists was pursued.

The Reorganisation of the Administration

The starting point for the future rebuilding of the political, governmental and public structures in Thuringia was the former Thuringian capital, Weimar.

The close proximity of the liberated concentration camp Buchenwald caused that dignitaries and representatives of public life of the country convened in anti-fascist organisations and in the, in the reorganisation-process being, parties. Additionally, the command centres of the occupying power had found their places in the capital. Under the conditions of political quarantine, party-political activities and organisations were prohibited for the time being.

The emphasis was on the effort of creating a unified, standardized Thuringian administration for the Thuringian territory and the Prussian governmental district Erfurt. Impulses for the reconstruction in Thuringia derived from the former political prisoners of the liberated concentration camp Buchenwald. On April 15, 1945, the former Thuringian parliamentarians Dr. Hermann L. Brill (SPD) and Otto Schieck (KPD) approached the American commander of Buchenwald and demanded the release of all political prisoners of Thuringia, amongst them being experienced communal- and 'Land' officials from the time of the Weimar Republic. These people would be able to rebuild a well-regulated, ordered public administration in Thuringia within a short period of time. The administrative jurist Hermann L. Brill was as former Ministry official especially suitable for this challenging task. In 1944, he had founded an illegal 'Volksfront' committee, in which social democrats, communists and bourgeois democrats gathered and developed ideas and concepts on the rebuilding of Germany, after the collapse of the NS-dictatorship.

On April 26, 1945, Hermann Brill authored a memorandum on behalf of the military government, in which he elaborated the necessities and goals of the rebuilding of the Thuringian administration.

On May 1, the appointment of a new town committee took place in Weimar. This could, due to its superiority over 'Land'- and 'Reich' authorities, assign the 'management of affairs' to Hermann Brill on May 7. On May 20, he was requested by the commanding officer of the military government of the VIII. corps to draft a concept on the organisation of the Thuringian administration. On June 6, Brill presented his draft to the supreme headquarters SHAEF in Frankfurt am Main. His proposal for Thuringia's reorganisation was in its core adopted. Thereupon, Dr, Hermann L. Brill was appointed by the military government officer of the VIII. corps, Colonel Azel F. Hatch, to be the interim president of the Thuringian government. Therefore, he was authorized to conduct the government formation for the province Thuringia on June 9, 1945.

On June 13, the, by Hermann Brill proposed, potential government cabinet, to which belonged members of the SPD, the KPD, the Democratic Party and the Christian Democrats (former 'Zentrum'), introduced itself to the meanwhile newly formed American military government of the province Thuringia. Therewith, the new province Thuringia was constituted. It comprised the previous 'Land' Thuringia, the previous governmental district Erfurt, the district Schmalkalden and the, within the command area of the VIII. Corps situated, West Saxon town-and rural districts Auerbach, Oelsnitz, Plauen, Reichenbach, Rochlitz and Zwickau. All local authorities were obliged to legally obey the new province government.

The Revitalization of Political Life

Despite the fact that the Americans had prohibited party political activities, there were efforts of an organisational new beginning. The KPD used as starting point and basis of continuation the activities of the, 1942/43 illegally formed, district organisation. Its new district leadership recruited itself from the organisation of 'Thuringian Communists' that had been established in Buchenwald. Already on April 14, 1945, the district leadership of the KPD was founded in Thuringia and moved its headquarters to Erfurt on May 12. At the end of May, it was moved to Weimar. As its political substratum served the resolution drafted by the KPD 'Parteiaktiv' in Buchenwald of April 22, 1945. Until the change-over of the occupation powers the party organisation of the Thuringian communists remained independent from the central control in Berlin.

The former members of the Social Democratic Party were confronted with the task to re-establish the party organisation and its structure. Its intellectual seedbed also developed in the former concentration-camp Buchenwald, where Dr. Hermann L. Brill endeavored the

gathering and unification of the SPD. Already on April 13, the members of the Social Democratic Party convened for their first, internal assembly, when Hermann L. Brill used the opportunity to elaborate his new, programmatic concepts on 'democratic socialism'.

The final wording of the party program, which became known as the 'Manifesto of the Democratic Socialists of the Former Concentration Camp Buchenwald' was provided by a committee supporting the leadership. A few days later, the first written manifesto of the German social democracy, after the collapse of the national socialist dictatorship, was adopted in Thuringia.

The, in Buchenwald gathered, social democrats declined to organise themselves within the framework of a social democratic party and appeared henceforth as 'Association of Democratic Socialists' (Bund demokratischer Sozialisten). The Thuringian members appointed a provisional district leadership (Bezirksvorstand) to the organisation. The 'Manifesto of Buchenwald' was printed with a great run of copies and distributed across the territory. The registration of the former SPD members and the recruiting for the entry into the 'Association of Democratic Socialists' was conducted on the basis of this manifesto.

The regional conference of the 'Association of Democratic Socialists' on July 5, was simultaneously the constituent assembly of the social-democratic organisation for the 'Land' Thuringia. For the, after the collapse of National Socialism emerging bourgeois-democratic parties, the party foundation meant an entirely new beginning. Although, the members of the former bourgeois parties of the time before 1933 became active during the period of American occupation, a newly established party organisation on the regional level appeared only after the change-over of the occupation powers.

When in connection with the first government formation in Thuringia and the then constituted 'Thuringia committee' (Thüringen Ausschuss), an advisory organ of the regional government, former members of the German Democratic Party (DDP) and the previous 'Zentrum' party as representatives of the Christian Democrats appeared, they were not backed by a party organisation that would have legitimized their participation in these organs. However, those people belonged without exception to the founding members of the new bourgeois-democratic parties in Thuringia, which came into being only in July 1945 (Christian Democratic Union on July 22, 1945; Democratic Party of Thuringia, July 29, 1945).

The Transfer of the Occupation Regime

At the beginning of July 1945, the change-over of the occupation regime was performed in Thuringia, after the Berlin consultations (Berliner Beratung) of the supreme commanders of the Allied Forces had again confirmed the organisation and demarcation line of the occupation zones on June 5, 1945.

The results had not remained unknown in Thuringia, due to the reports by the radio stations as well as by the, from the US army for the civilian population published newspaper "Hessische Post", both of which announced the withdrawal of the American troops from Thuringia and western Saxony. On the basis of an agreement by the Allies, the withdrawal of the VIII. and the XXI. corps began on July 1. On July 2, the headquarters of the VIII. corps and the American military government of the province Thuringia, left the Thuringian capital Weimar. Instantaneous, with their departure the interim occupation of Thuringia by the American Forces had ended.

It did not come to any contact between them and the Soviet troops. The retraction into the American occupation zone on the territory of Hesse and Bavaria involved the evacuation of supply goods and booty and the drain on experts (inter alia from the Zeiss plant in Jena and the University of Jena). Long before the troop withdrawal, the art treasures and gold from the potash mines of Merkers had been transferred into stocks and depots that were located in the longer-term American occupation zone. Shortly after the withdrawal of the American Forces, began the 'invasion' of the Soviet troops in Thuringia. From Saxony coming, they occupied the eastern Thuringian town- and rural districts for the time being.

The industrial town Gera was the first larger town within the territory (Land) that was occupied by the Soviet Army on July 2. At the very same day, the Soviet Units of the 8th Guards Army, under Colonel General W. I. Tschuikow, forged ahead, veering towards Rudolstadt, Jena and Apolda. On July 3, they arrived in Weimar and in Erfurt. The occupation of the south-, west-, and north Thuringian town- and rural districts was performed during the subsequent days and accomplished by July 6. In southern Thuringia, Schmalkalden and Suhl were seized on July 3, Meiningen and Sonneberg on July 4, and Hildburghausen on July 5. The northern Thuringian territories were only taken over after July 4, Mühlhausen on July 5 and Heiligenstadt on July 6.

Similar to the occupation through the American Forces in the 1st half of April, an agile transfer took place within the Soviet Army during the beginning of the invasion.

The situation was only consolidated, after the Soviet military administration for the 'Bundesland Thüringen' (SMATH) brought the civic/local administrations of the territory under its control and replaced the local forces and their military commands on July 9.

The authorization to the administrative activity of the province government Thuringia through the Soviet military authorities in Weimar on July 4, 1945, gave the Thuringian territorial administration (Landesverwaltung) the opportunity to continue the reconstruction-work of the 'Land', without any further delays. On July 16, however, the work of the government under Dr. Hermann L. Brill, appointed by the American military administration, was ended.

The Soviet military administration installed a Thuringian 'state administration' that was dependent on it, under Dr. Rudolf Paul (before 1933, DDP member, 1945 not party-affiliated, and since 1946 member of the SED), which was brought into line, in terms of its structure and working processes, with other provincial administrations under Soviet rule. The 'Province Thuringia' that was constituted under the Americans, disappeared and was replaced by the 'Bundesland Thüringen' of the Soviet occupation zone.

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