

by Duncan J. D. Smith

Western Allied bombers first appeared in the skies over Vienna on 17 Mar. 1944. Fifty more raids followed, during which 20 per cent of the city was razed. Each time the sirens were sounded, instructions were orchestrated from today's 16th District, from the Schirach-Bunker on the Gallitzinberg, named after Baldur von Schirach, Gauleiter of Vienna.

The stuff of legend

Wild rumours have long surrounded the Schirach-Bunker, a ruined Second World War military command centre (*Gaugefechtsstand*) beneath the Gallitzinberg in Ottakring. It has been variously claimed as a luxuriously appointed, ten storey-deep bolt hole for Nazi grandees, a secret weapons' dump and treasury, even a home to Adolf Hitler's private collection of weaponry – but none of this is true.

In reality the Schirach-Bunker was used primarily by the *Wehrmacht* as a bomb-proof command and control centre (*Kommandozentrale*), from where air raid alarms and the aerial defence of Vienna could be coordinated. No less than 26 telephones were once located here, enabling the bunker staff to keep in regular contact with Vienna's anti-aircraft batteries, the *Luftwaffe*, *Wehrmacht* headquarters, and even the German navy.

Building the bunker

Between 1942 and 1945 forced labourers were made to dig a 25 metre long staircase into the hillside near the Jubiläumswarte on Johann-Staud-Straße, an observation tower erected in 1889 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Franz Joseph I's coronation as Austrian emperor; the present tower was erected in 1956. The workers then excavated a 100-metre-long tunnel, at the end of which was the command

STONES OF VIENNA

In amongst the trees of the Wienerwald in Ottakring lie the shattered remains of a WWII bunker long shrouded in mystery

In the 16th: A Mysterious Wartime Command Center



The entrance to the former Schirach Bunker in today's 16th District Photo: Duncan J.D. Smith

centre itself. Marked on plans as the “*Großer Stollen*” (Large Tunnel), it was sixteen and a half metres long, five metres wide and high, and two storeys deep.

Elsewhere in Vienna were a variety of air raid shelters. Civilians living close to the city's six colossal anti-aircraft towers (*Flaktürme*) could seek protection there. Others could use specifically designed shelters such as those on Gerichtsgasse (Floridsdorf), Arne-Karlsson-Park on Spitalgasse (Alsergrund), and beneath Friedrich-Schmidt-Platz (Josefstadt). The rest made do in the cellars beneath their homes and apartment houses.

At the sound of the cuckoo

Whenever incoming Allied bomber raids were detected, a radio alert would be broadcast to the Viennese people from the first floor of the bunker: “*Achtung, Achtung, hier Luftschutzsender Wien*”. The words were preceded by the seemingly innocuous but much-feared sound of a cuckoo (the more familiar sound of air raid sirens were activated as a result). The lower level of the bunker was noticeably better furnished and

contained the quarters of the Gauleiter – hence the name, although in reality von Schirach visited rarely. Renowned for his fear of air raids, he ordered that the cellars of the Hofburg also be strengthened against aerial bombardment.

Prior to being made Gauleiter of Vienna, von Schirach was head of the Hitler Youth. It is a little-known fact that through his American mother he was descended from two signatories of the United States Declaration of Independence! In 1932 von Schirach married the daughter of Heinrich Hoffmann, Hitler's personal photographer, and thereafter became a part of the dictator's inner circle. Although at Nuremberg he denounced Hitler and claimed ignorance of the Nazis' extermination camps, his involvement in the deportation of Vienna's 65,000 Jews was unquestionable, a crime for which he was sentenced to 20 years in Berlin's Spandau Prison.

What little remains

On 4 Apr. 1945, with the Red Army barely three kilometres away in Hütteldorf, the *Wehrmacht* abandoned the Schirach-Bunker. Vienna was liberated shortly afterwards, and six months later the entrances to the bunker were blocked.

Little remains to be seen of the bunker today, and none of it can be entered by the casual visitor. There are, however, on the hillside surrounding the Jubiläumswarte some tantalising remains: Bricked-up entrances to the bunker's drainage canals, foundations of barracks, and most impressively, three cylindrical guard towers, which once protected the entrance to the bunker. Here in the woods the only cuckoos to be heard these days are real ones. ◇

Duncan J. D. Smith is the author of *Only in Vienna* (Christian Brandstätter Verlag)
www.duncanjdsmith.com