One of the most captivating passages in Leo Tolstoy’s epic *War and Peace* describes the return of Muscovites to their ravaged city after the retreat of the Grande Armée in October 1812. Tolstoy grasps the complex connection between the destruction of the city and the challenges of the social bonds that held its citizens together. At the same time Tolstoy highlights their striking ability not only to reconstruct what had been destroyed, but to forge a community anew. The phenomenon of the phoenix city was, of course, not restricted to Moscow. In a recent study, the term «resilient city» is justified by the astonishing – if probably overly exact – statistical fact that between the years 1100 and 1800 only 42 cities were permanently abandoned following destruction. It is even more remarkable that in modern times almost no city has been completely extinguished, although threats to city structures and urban communities have increased immensely.

In spite of the relevance of the problem of urban devastation, historians of twentieth-century Europe have rarely lived up to Tolstoy’s account, not least, perhaps understandably, in terms of narrative style. To be sure, the history of Europe’s «dark» century, in particular World War II, always included records of urban devastation. Rotterdam, Coventry, Stalingrad, Warsaw and Berlin stand for military turning points of the war and mark the culmination of destruction. Moreover, urban reconstruction, in the technical sense of the word, has long been a popular topic of historical and architectural studies. This is less true, however, for urban reconstruction in a wider sense, i.e., the history of the loss and reinvention of the social fabric of urban communities, the *civitas*.

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1 The articles in this issue were first presented and discussed at a workshop at the Deutsches Historisches Institut Warschau (DHI). We would like to thank the DHI for hosting this workshop, the Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung Potsdam for its support in organising the event and the VolkswagenStiftung for granting a Dilthey Fellowship to Martin Kohlrausch. See also the conference report by Małgorzata Mazurek and Joanna Wawrzyniak at: http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/tagungsberichte/id=2912.


3 For example, the post-war re-establishment of...
So far, urban devastation has been predominantly approached from two perspectives. First, there are a few sweeping historical accounts, rather wide-ranging in terms of time and place, on urban resilience. These works also focus on urban reconstruction after natural disasters as part of the growing research on natural catastrophes in general. Second, there are a number of interdisciplinary studies that are primarily informed by the attacks on New York on 11 September 2001, but also by the civil wars in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. These studies deal with recent, very heterogeneous urban challenges and the general rebuilding of communities after a disaster. Although the spectrum of questions, methods and research objects has broadened considerably, these studies are predominantly concerned with «the city as target» (Ryan Bishop). Most of these works cover a very wide geographical and chronological range and do not aim to establish a systematic historical understanding of what we propose to call «post-catastrophic cities» for a particular time and region.

This issue therefore aims at inducing a twofold change in perspective. It intends to make the category «post-catastrophic city» plausible through a historical reevaluation of the urban devastation in the wake of the Second World War, while shifting the focus from Western to Eastern Europe, where destruction was most profound. But in using the term «post-catastrophic city», our aim is to bring about another shift from a top-down perspective on city planning and reconstruction programmes by nation states to a bottom-up approach. We are thus proposing a comparative social and cultural history of wartime destruction and post-war (and post-socialist) reinventions of the urban fabric in Central and Eastern Europe. While there is a remarkable continuity in pre-war, wartime and post-war modernist city planning, the discontinuity in urban life after «urbicide» – to use a term...
coined by Marshall Berman and Karl Schlögel – and the reinvention of cities as a social and cultural space is all the more surprising. The term «post-catastrophic city» tries to capture in a more systematic and historical way both the experience of wartime devastation and civic renewal, an experience that was fundamentally different in scale in Europe’s East and West.

While studies on the urban experience of World War I are still rare, research on the destruction of cities in Western and Central Europe during World War II is so rich and diverse that it is impossible to provide a comprehensive overview here. An essay collection on endangered cities by Marcus Funck and Roger Chickering has opened up the field for further research in many respects, in particular regarding the experience of both world wars. For our topic – the aftermath of urban destruction in Central and Eastern Europe since the 1940s – two strands of this research are of particular salience.

The first concerns the direct military effect on city life with the extreme form being when cities turned into battlefields. The most significant example is the Warsaw Uprising, in which the city became more than just a site of warfare, with some 150,000 military and civil casualties on the Polish side. Here one also finds a highly significant intermingling of military-strategic, political and symbolic aspects, such as the brutal tearing down of the city structure after the conclusion of fighting, with a focus on places of memory – notably archives and libraries.

The second and far better researched strand concerns the effects of aerial warfare and the ensuing urban reconstruction, which is viewed more and more from...
a comparative Western European perspective. Recent studies have stressed the traditions and continuities of reconstruction. But they also hint at the link between the hope for a radically redesigned city and the degree to which destruction was perceived as a chance to enforce pre-war visions of a «healed» city. In many ways, the mid-twentieth-century urban tabula rasa enabled the international community of planners and architects to «modernise» and fundamentally change the cityscape. This was a common experience in Europe’s East and West that could bring urban ruin even to regions that had not been touched by the war.

And yet, when walking in cities like Warsaw or Kaliningrad, one can immediately discern the specific pattern of these cities, the lack of connections between centre and periphery, and the difficulty in understanding their topography, which is so markedly different even from the heavily destroyed cities of Western Europe, which still, to a large extent, have kept their pre-war layout. Astonishingly, the Central and Eastern European cities that witnessed the actual war of extermination between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union have so far not been the subject of comparative social and cultural analysis. More people died during the German bombing of Warsaw in September 1939, for example, than in the bombing of Dresden in February 1945. And more people died during the Leningrad blockade than did British or American citizens during the entire Second World War. And yet, no systematic monograph on the Nazi urbicidal warfare against cities in Poland and the Soviet Union exists. And there is no comparative history of life after the urbicide in Central and Eastern European cities since the 1940s.

This is all the more striking because the connections between the German war of annihilation in the East and the fate of these cities are immediately apparent. Urban destruction was part and parcel of the Wehrmacht attack on Poland in 1939 and in the first wave of the war in the East from 1941 on. German military strategy combined genocidal warfare and urban destruction. It first targeted those parts of cities that were regarded as particularly important for Polish or Soviet/Russian
national consciousness, while sparing those which allegedly testified to German roots. German planning for the post-war order in the East often implied what could be called «cultural destruction», which entailed detailed designs for how to «shrink» cities like Warsaw or Kiev. Although the course of the war prevented these plans from being put into effect entirely, they nevertheless had immediate and catastrophic effects for respective cities.¹⁷

In their most radical expression, the connections between genocide and urbicide can be found in the destruction after the Warsaw Ghetto uprising of 1943 – the final step in the nearly complete extinction of Warsaw’s Jewish population, which accounted for about one-third of Warsaw’s pre-war population of about 1.4 million inhabitants. Furthermore, the particularly fierce suppression of partisan and resistance fighting in the East had dramatic effects on towns and cities – the best known example being again the Warsaw uprising of 1944.¹⁸ When in the months before the war Hitler announced that the cities of Eastern Europe should be razed as cultural centres and their populations deported, shot, starved or enslaved, this sounded like an empty threat. But by 1943/44 this threat had become a gruesome reality for Warsaw, Minsk, Kiev and Leningrad.

The specific experience of urban destruction in the East is the starting point for the contributions to this volume. They investigate the connection between urbicide and genocide, the wars of extinction of cities and peoples, and what this meant for re-establishing urban communities, in particular during and after Soviet-style state socialism.¹⁹ So far these connections have been predominantly dealt with in studies on the exchange of populations, for example in Königsberg/Kaliningrad,²⁰ Grodno,²¹ Breslau/Wrocław²² and Minsk.²³ The articles in this issue aim at exploring commonalities and differences more systematically, e.g., between the winners and losers of the war, without losing sight of the historically specific social and political context of each case. While the German and Allied bombing campaigns in the West have received much attention in recent years, we decided to focus only on cities that were directly affected by the fierce life-or-death struggle between Nazi

¹⁸ In view of the singularity of the case of Warsaw, Karl Schlögel has created a special category in his typology of urbicides for the Nazi effort to turn the city into an «uninhabitable, deserted site». Schlögel, Marjampole, 178.
Germany and the Soviet Union. This not only includes bombing, but also planned devastation (as in the case of Warsaw), the transformation of cities into battlefields (Berlin), starvation (Leningrad) as well as genocide and the forced exchange of populations (Lviv). Most articles present a long-term perspective on the trajectories of post-catastrophic urbanism and include an analysis of the visual representations and social memories of the profound cultural disruption of communities that the shattering of urban life by total warfare entails. The political transitions of the late twentieth century have dramatically changed the ways in which the deconstruction and reconstruction of cities in the mid-twentieth century is represented.²⁴ The contributions in this issue illuminate how, since the 1990s, recovering urban histories in Central and Eastern Europe entails remembering and forgetting the extent of their catastrophic past.

Martin Kohlrausch
Ruhr Universität Bochum
Historisches Institut
Universitätsstraße
D-44801 Bochum
e-mail: Martin.Kohlrausch@rub.de

Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann
Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung
Am Neuen Markt 9d
D-14467 Potsdam
e-mail: hoffmann@zzf-pdm.de