

# The New Criterion

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## Albert Speer: the good Nazi?

by David Pryce-Jones

*On occasioned by Speer: The Final Verdict, by Joachim Fest, the author revisits his time with Hitler's favorite artist and wonders how Speer got away with murder.*

Albert Speer was Adolf Hitler's intimate and trusted friend. Throughout the Thirties, the two met on an almost daily basis in Berlin or Munich. When relaxing in the Berchtesgaden mountains, they went by themselves on afternoon walks, rejoicing in mutual fantasies mostly about art and architecture. Among the grandiose projects they actually achieved were the Reich Chancellery in Berlin and the Nuremberg stadium for staging the annual rallies which expressed the power of the Nazi party. Inventing for Speer the post of General Inspector of Buildings, Hitler steadily promoted him to the point where other Nazi leaders and rivals believed that he might well become Hitler's successor. Nobody else in Hitler's circle, not even Josef Goebbels, was shown such favoritism. The relationship will always amaze.

Abruptly appointed Minister of Armaments in February 1942, Speer revealed outstanding managerial skills. He succeeded continuously in raising the production of all types of weaponry even when the Third Reich was foundering under ever more massive bombardments on its factories and supply lines. But it was the use of forced labor which permitted Speer to achieve these goals, and Nazism to continue fighting to the very end. Several million unfortunate men and women were press-ganged from all over occupied Europe for Speer's purposes, and huge numbers of them died. Speer probably did more than any other single person to try to win the war for his master. The favorite architect had become a monster like the rest of them.

Fritz Sauckel, a particularly brutish Gauleiter, was in charge of drafting the forced laborers, virtually slaves. He reported to Speer. At the postwar Nuremberg trials he was sentenced to death, and hanged. The American judge, Francis Biddle, argued that as Sauckel's superior Speer should also receive the death penalty. But Speer's defence in court had been extremely agile. Hitler's regime, he now claimed to understand, had indeed been criminal, and in a blanket confession he accepted his share of responsibility for what had been done, but pleaded that he had never known the full facts. Facts were not his domain; an artist, he had lived in the realm of the imagination. After two days of fraught discussion among themselves, the judges concluded that Speer's

contrition at least was genuine, and they passed on him a sentence of twenty years in prison. His fellow-defendants, from Hermann Goering downwards, held Speer in contempt, partly for repudiating the Hitler on whom his career had depended, but more for what they were sure was flagrant lying. Most people have since suspected that he elaborated this strategy to save himself from the gallows he deserved.

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In prison and out, Speer was to spend the rest of his life writing about himself and his career, and giving innumerable interviews. His autobiography, *Inside the Third Reich* (1970), is the most closely observed portrait of Hitler ever written. Unprecedented in a Nazi of such high rank, it is also a work of skilful apologetics, a general confession of guilt which carefully refrains from complete descriptions of the motives and actions which have given rise to that guilt. The reader is left to make what he can of it. Speer's last service to the cause was to contrive in this way the alibi of the "decent Nazi," that is to say, someone who did not realize that his ideals were necessarily criminal. This was a tortuous exercise in make-believe. Midway between an emblem and a scapegoat, he dramatized in person the difficulties of conscience—often amounting to outright denial of reality—which so many Germans experienced in coming to terms with Nazism.

**C**lassical drama turns upon the responsibility of the individual for his fate. Perhaps the Furies are after him, and there is nothing he can do to be free from them. Or perhaps some fatal weakness of character impels him to make a choice which brings doom upon his own head. Immoderate love or hate, ambition, rage, jealousy may induce a fatal misrepresentation of reality. With particular skill Speer managed to play on all these high themes at the same time, varying the emphasis to suit himself.

Hitler, in Speer's postwar version, had been a magician, Mephistopheles to his Faust. On the eve of his trial at Nuremberg, Speer could still tell an American interrogator that he, the interrogator, understood nothing of the charisma of a man like Hitler. In his autobiography, he accused himself of weakness of character coupled with inordinate ambition: He had shone, he wrote, only in the reflected glory of Hitler's power, striving "to gather some of his popularity, his glory, his greatness, around myself." Whoever is in thrall to a magician's spell has by definition lost moral independence and can no longer help himself.

But it was in the misrepresentation of reality that Speer really outdid himself. He had stage-managed the annual Nuremberg Party rallies at which Jews were vilified and outlawed; he had driven through the shattered streets after the Kristallnacht pogrom; for years he had collaborated with Himmler and Goebbels; he had visited concentration camps and the underground caves of

the Dora rocket project where forced laborers under his control were dying of starvation in their tens of thousands, and on one occasion he had even prevented the summary execution of a prisoner; he had been a close friend of Dr. Karl Brandt who in the name of medicine had killed Jewish prisoners in grotesque experiments; he had at his finger-tips the figures of the rolling-stock needed for arms' production but diverted instead to deporting the Jews; he was privy to Hitler's inmost thoughts and had listened to his incessant racist rantings; and still he claimed to have known nothing about the mass-murder of the Jews which was so central a program for Hitler, his colleagues, the Nazi party, and the ordinary German soldiers and civilians participating in it.

Only in the summer of 1944, he writes in his autobiography, did a good friend, Karl Hanke the Gauleiter of Upper Silesia, tell him about something so terrible occurring in the territory under his control that he could not bring himself to describe it. With hindsight, Speer conceded, this must have been an oblique reference to Auschwitz, but at the time "I did not query him, I did not query Himmler, I did not query Hitler." From that moment, he continues, "I was inescapably contaminated morally; from fear of discovering something which might have made me turn from my course, I had closed my eyes." With ingenious and self-serving prevarication, he had hit upon a strategy for taking blame not as one of the prime movers of the crime of mass-murder, but solely as an unwitting accomplice.

In further mitigation, he also claimed good deeds. Once the war was evidently lost, Hitler gave orders for a scorched earth policy. The German people had shown themselves weaker than their enemies; letting him down, they deserved to go under for ever. With a colleague, Speer apparently raised the possibility of killing Hitler by dropping poison gas down the ventilation shaft of his bunker. Here was an eerie and perhaps fantastic echo of the real gassing of millions of Jews.

More positively, Speer did what he could to save bridges, factories and other installations vital to survival. His conscience was aroused, then, only when Hitler's criminality victimized non-Jewish Germans themselves. In March and April 1945, in an atmosphere of the highest drama as the Allies were closing in, Speer at some danger to himself went to meet Hitler several times in the Berlin bunker. His intention, he records, was somehow to confront Hitler with the facts that the war was lost, and further resistance pointless. In the event, face to face, he instead expressed his loyalty and even offered to stay with him to the end. Whatever mutual deceptions were involved, whatever lies, tears came into the eyes of both men. Speer justified himself afterwards with the remark that "somehow it was desperately important to me to get a glimmer of human contact with Hitler." Which is the more striking, the vapidness of those words, or the vanity which impels them? The last of these extraordinary scenes was on April 22. A few days later Hitler was dead, and Speer in Allied hands.

Common sense must suggest that Speer's denial of any knowledge of the mass-murder going on all around him could not conceivably be true. It was 1974, and his autobiography had already been published, when I interviewed Speer. He had known Unity Mitford, the daughter of Lord Redesdale, and she had made a prewar exhibition of herself by working her way into Hitler's

close circle, hero-worshipping him and extolling Nazism. In the course of researching in order to write the life of this prototype of a fanatic, I had just found in Vienna some of her diaries, recording her days with Hitler and his cronies. As a rule, these cronies were crude and jumped-up street-fighters who knew no better, the *chauffeureska*, in Putzi Hanfstaengel's witty updating of the *soldateska* or military adventurers who had made life miserable in the Thirty Years War.

In almost every way, in mind and in appearance, Speer was a contrast to them. He was socially secure. Like Unity, he came from a civilized and prosperous background. His father had been an architect and property developer in Mannheim, who considered himself a liberal; his mother came from a successful merchant family. Thoroughly conventional, a little secretive, they may have repressed emotions in the way that polite people usually did at the time, but they did not neglect Speer's upbringing. Also like Unity, he had been in a position freely to develop artistic tastes and to strike out on his own. In fact he seems to have strayed almost haphazardly into the Nazi Party in 1931, the same year that his mother quite separately joined it.

When I saw it, the Speer house in Heidelberg was sepulchrally dark, with heavy carved furniture redolent of Kaiser Wilhelm's Germany. Speer himself was tall, and elegant in a well-cut suit. The cast of his face was sorrowful, his brown eyes lackluster, and his manner languid, quasi-aristocratic, indicating that he was putting up with being importuned by questions which he had already answered many times. But when we went over the details in Unity's diaries, he became a different person, suddenly vitalized by the return to the past. He could remember who had been present when and where, what had been said to Hitler, and what exactly Hitler had replied. His recall was phenomenal. His eyes were now bright. If he were to have the chance to live his life all over again, I was convinced, he would take exactly the same choices as before. Whatever the tongue might say, the heart was unchanged. I thought of him as Iago, honest Iago.

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Ambition, greed, opportunity, the joy of using brute force to have their way had no doubt galvanized the *chauffeureska*. In spite of his well-bred air, so it was with Speer too at the level at which he had operated, pushing aside rivals and furthering his career along with the rest. It is also a telling detail that he accepted a considerable sum of money from a fund at Goering's disposal, in order to buy a property not far from Berlin. There was a *chauffeureska* side to him after all.

According to the doctrines of nineteenth-century Romanticism, the artist supposedly owes allegiance solely to his inner vision. How is this species of individual heroics to be squared with

Speer's uncritical subordination to Hitler? The psychologist Alexander Mitscherlich was the first to detect an "erotic component" in the Hitler-Speer relationship; in less loaded language, Hitler saw in Speer the kind of artist he himself would have wished to become, an alter ego realizing a private vision in the face of a hostile world. Unhesitatingly and in public he described Speer as a "genius." What they recognized and admired—perhaps even loved—in one another, was this vision which so glibly allowed them to misrepresent crime as historic greatness. The undoubted sincerity of their mutual perceptions is what gives their relationship its sinister glitter.

Historians have exposed Speer. On October 6, 1943, Himmler and assembled Gauleiters attended a conference in Posen. Himmler spelled out to his audience the mass-murder of the Jews, its implications, and its long-term significance for Germans. Erich Goldhagen was the first to discover that Speer had addressed this conference in the morning, while Himmler spoke in the afternoon, with a damning reference in his speech to Speer as "not one of the pro-Jewish obstructionists of the Final Solution." Goldhagen held that Speer had listened to Himmler's speech, which of course would have meant his definitive condemnation. Further research showed that Goldhagen was mistaken and that Speer had in fact left the conference at midday to call in on Hitler at his headquarters. Nonetheless it is inconceivable in the context that nobody discussed the gist of Himmler's speech with Speer.

Matthias Schmidt in 1982 proved that Speer was anxious to profit from the forcible "evacuation" of Jewish-owned apartments in Berlin, or what were even more euphemistically called "de-tenanting measures." In a memorandum of November 27, 1940, Speer inquired, "How is the action for the clearance of those thousand Jewish flats going?" More striking still, Speer afterwards tried to falsify the record in this matter. Then in 1995 the respected journalist Gitta Sereny published the aptly titled *Albert Speer: His Battle with the Truth*. During the long years in which she had worked on this book, she "grew to like" Speer. Fascination with that sinister glitter of his, and the complexity of his lies, injected into her account a sentimental tendency to excuse him, but all the same she put her finger on his familiar evasive technique of generalizing about specifics and "admitting a little to deny a great deal."

Joachim Fest is the author of one of the most authoritative biographies of Hitler, and in this judicious, comprehensive, and well-written (and well translated) new book<sup>1</sup> he now has the last word on Speer. He gives credit to the idea that Hitler and Speer saw in one another the fulfillment of their most profound aspirations. "I'll sign anything that comes from you," Hitler said to Speer, which, as Fest observes, was a *carte blanche* he gave to nobody else. They were two of a kind in their lack of ordinary human responses. So distant was Speer that his wife could bitterly remark that she intended to telephone him announcing that Frau Speer wished to speak to Herr Speer. He could not break through emotionally to his children. In Fest's words, he was a man of many abilities, but no qualities.

Carefully Fest steers his way through the career. Nazi ideology may not have meant much to Speer, but he was susceptible to its aesthetic side, "the new beginning, the grand gesture,

ostentation and self-glorification.” One of his closer colleagues handed in his notice after the Kristallnacht pogrom with the words, “I don’t work for people like that.” So heady was it to be catapulted by Hitler into power that Speer easily turn a blind eye to what was happening. Superior intelligence, and with it an odious sense of self-satisfaction, then enabled him to get the better of the *chauffeureska* and everyone else in his way, including Goering, Goebbels, Martin Bormann, and Himmler.

In Fest’s mind there is no doubt that Speer had the information about the crimes that Hitler and the regime were committing. “The weight of evidence about the extent of his knowledge of the crimes is indeed crushing,” he concludes after a thorough survey of this evidence. He goes on to make the powerful observation that at Nuremberg and afterwards Speer’s confessions and self-denunciations sounded “dutiful” because he had only “a superficial understanding of the fundamental norms against which he had offended.”

Had Speer been merely a member of the *chauffeureska*, his behavior would be readily explicable. Brutality speaks for itself. But he was an educated intellectual, suave and worldly, and that is what is so frightening about his example. The Furies were not pursuing him. In full control of his destiny, he subordinated himself to Hitler voluntarily and eagerly. Fest sees this surrender as typical in the troubled Germany after the First War, the Communist revolutions, and inflation. Speer was one among millions of Germans suddenly without clear values or purposes; Hitler was an experience waiting to happen to them, filling a void created by the general moral collapse.

Fest goes further. The German variety of Romanticism had popularized the myth that the artist was not subject to any norm or law; he could do as he pleased because the demands of his art freed him from morality and the mundanities that go with it. Considering themselves artists engaged upon the great *Gesamtkunstwerk* of “Germania,” Hitler and Speer arrogated to themselves the privilege of rearranging reality to suit themselves. In true German Romantic spirit, indeed, the fact that such art had led to destruction and death on an unprecedented scale served to certify its greatness. This doctrine, Fest concludes, “contributed hugely to the atrocities of the age,” and of course it trickles down into the present, where many an artist and writer continue to claim that they and their work rightfully should enjoy unrestricted privilege, no matter what the political or personal consequences. O Art! What crimes are committed in thy name.

## Notes

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1. *Speer: The Final Verdict*, by Joachim Fest; Harcourt, 432 pages, \$30. [Go back to the text.](#)
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