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SPEER ON THE LAST DAYS OF THE THIRD REICH

Following is the substance of a five hour interrogation of Albert Speer, Reichs Minister for Armaments and War Production, conducted by members of the staff of the USSBS at temporary headquarters, Flensburg, on May 22-23. Present were Messrs. Ball, Nitze and Galbraith, directors of the Survey, Majors Klein and Spivak and Lt. Sklarz of the Survey staff. This interrogation supplements more exhaustive interrogations on technical aspects of strategic air attack and was designed to develop the political backdrop for the late wartime economy of the Reich. Matters of general historical importance were fully developed. For this reason, and because of the extraordinary competence of the witness, the interrogation is of considerable general interest. The subject matter has been organized chronologically. Speer's statements and opinions are reported without comment on their presumed accuracy.

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Speer began by disclaiming any effort at self-vindication or justification. He was informed that such issues were irrelevant to the interrogation. He then explained that he felt it his obligation to the German people to report fully and accurately. The German people, he said, had worked hard and faithfully and had suffered greatly. They had won victory after two years and had been denied the fruits of the victory they deserved by the inadequacy of their leaders. That inadequacy he felt obliged to expose.

The fall of the Third Reich Speer attributed to the moral decay of its rulers. This decay was well advanced before the outbreak of the war. Its most spectacular manifestation was soft, expensive living. In some instances it took the form of extreme corruption. Speer cites Goering as the most corrupt of his colleagues. Goering's acquisitive looting and hoarding was unmatched by the other party leaders. But nearly all of the party leaders, Berlin ministers and Gauleiters alike, showed a penchant for a rich, easy, well-nourished existence and variety in wine and women. Speer explains the weakness of his colleagues as follows: most of them were poor men who came to positions of power rather late in life. They determined to concentrate in their remaining years the creature comforts and luxuries they had forgone in earlier and harder days. Hitler did not

intervene for two reasons: he was disposed to allow his associates to conduct their private lives in whatever manner, bizarre or otherwise, that they chose, and an entente existed between the sybarites to keep the news of each other's excesses from the Fuhrer. Speer notes, not entirely in passing, that he himself was the son of a rather wealthy family. Therefore, although he enjoyed a generous income as Hitler's architect, he was under no temptation to emulate his nouveau riche compatriots. Indeed he found their indulgence distinctly vulgar. During his period in office Speer contented himself with designing and building one very modest house.

The war was lost, according to Speer, after the battle for France. Thenceforth his compatriot rulers were convinced that victory belonged to Germany, that there remained but to extend that victory and extract the full measure of its yield. Because victory seemed certain and easy, his compatriots saw no reason for the kind of self-denial or diligence that victory would actually have required. And Germany, he points out, had no Dunkirk, no Pearly Harbor. The soft and the weak **were** never sorted out and discarded as they were, he thinks, in Britain and the United States. Instead they remained in positions of responsibility to the end. As the crisis deepened, a startling number took their escape in alcohol.

Apologizing to the "realists" who were interrogating him, Speer also allied Providence with the enemies of Germany. After the fall of France, he suggests, a wrathful God surveyed the misbehavior of the leaders of the Third Reich and decided that they were unworthy of world leadership. He provided unnaturally cold weather in Russia in 1941-2; He sent fog to Stalingrad to stop the re-supply of Von Paulus by air; He sent clear weather to the Ardennes so that Rundstedt might be punished by Allied fighters. Speer had no explanation for the bad weather immediately following the invasion of Normandy.

More seriously, Speer blames soft and well insulated leaders of the Third

Reich for a spectacular series of bad decisions. (Speer suggests that one of these was the war itself which he (now) believes to have been unnecessary.) The most spectacular error in Speer's judgment was the attack on Russia. Germany had stepped down its arms production following the defeat of France and was planning an enlargement of the Luftwaffe for the final attack on Britain after the Russian campaign was over. The leaders were sure they were invincible, had only to exploit victory to the limit. Speer, by the way, claims not to have known of plans for an attack on Russia, suggests that his first information came from the newspapers.

The declaration of war on the United States Speer believes was the result of a previous arrangement with Japan. It is his firm judgment that Hitler did not have prior knowledge of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Had the United States declared war on Germany, Speer believes it would have stimulated the German people to greater efforts, brought Germany closer to "total war". The mobilization that was reached in 1944 might have been achieved much earlier.

The declaration of war on the United States which Speer naturally considers another error he also considers to have been of a kind with errors in strategy. Policy with reference to the United States was made by men who knew little of the United States, whose horizons instead were the boundaries of Germany. Similarly, military decisions were made by men who knew nothing of war and who saw little or nothing of the front line. In the last months Hitler relied on Goering, Bormann, Keitel, Himmler and Jodl. None of these men knew anything of war - or at least of this war. To Speer's certain knowledge neither Keitel nor Jodl never visited the front. Keitel made one alleged inspection trip to the west but never got beyond an army group command post. Neither Keitel nor Jodl ever visited the Russian front even when it was but an hour's drive from Berlin.

Hitler's headquarters were in East Prussia while that bastion was being defended in 1944. Thereafter in the same year it was briefly in Berchtesgaden

and hereafter in Berlin except for a brief period during the winter offensive in the west when Hitler was at Bad Nauheim. Meetings in Berlin were held in the bunker beneath the Chancellory and appropriately (in Speer's view) divorced from the outside world. "There were no windows or doors - even the air was pumped in". The tendency ^(was) to make decisions in a vacuum intensified by the massacre of junior officers after July 20. These junior officers had been a source of information on operations and active criticism of tactics. They were silenced by the massacre if not actually killed. Toward the end not even the strength of divisions was admitted in Berlin. The maps showed the position of divisions which were, in fact, but skeleton forces. When the U.S. Army attacked Coblenz, Wodl received an order to throw in two additional divisions to stem the attack. The two divisions ordered up had only a few hundred men, only twenty-odd tanks and no gasoline whatever.

Much time of the men in the bunker was spent searching for scapegoats. One was the civilian population - the generals never tired of alleging that German civilians wanted no defense lest their towns be destroyed. Field commanders were also scapegoats. During the last few months they were changed every two or three weeks. These changes often extended as far as commanders of divisions. Throughout the war Speer believes that Germany's leaders were victims of their own propaganda which, he says, was inevitable sealed off as they were from all sources of criticism or free comment. Toward the end a major controversy developed over the scorched earth policy. Speer was deeply involved in this controversy. He was determined to elaborate on it and his own role in the controversy at length.

A large group of leaders believed that the German people could not survive defeat (the propaganda line) and hence there was no reason to leave them the means for survival. This conviction Speer submits was not completely rational - to some extent it had an emotional basis in spite of desire for a Gotterdammerung. Nor was it universal. Goering (whom Speer repeatedly characterized as a traitor)

felt that as far as he was concerned he had only to surrender himself to the Americans. There he would soon be accepted as a friend. Himmler was of the opinion that he was indispensable to law and order in Europe. But Bormann, Goebbels and a good many of the Gauleiters took what Speer considers a realistically dim view of their future. It was easy for them to follow the official propaganda and hence they were ardently for a scorched earth policy. Speer pictures himself as a leading opponent of the policy.

In France, Italy and in Upper Silesia Speer's view prevailed. The German armies retired without destroying the installations by which the people lived. (These installations were destroyed in the Donets Basin, but here Speer believes the military reasons were good and sufficient.) If the installations were spared in the countries occupied by Germany why should they be destroyed in Germany and to the obvious hardship of the German people? In September, when the Allied armies reached Germany, Sudermann, the responsible editor of the V-B came out for a complete scorching of the earth - factories, farms, communications and livestock. Speer went to Hitler with an alternative plan calling for removal of vital parts from plants and machinery, these to be buried, but calling for no general destruction. Hitler approved this plan partly because Speer argued with deliberate speciousness that one day soon the German armies would reconquer lost territory and would need those installations. Speer was given charge of the administration of the plan. However, when the Allied armies reached the Rhine, Jodl issued an order calling for the ruthless destruction of everything before the advancing foe. The inappropriateness of this policy, Speer again emphasized, must be apparent to any man who realized as he did that the war was irretrievably lost. So violent was Speer's opposition to Jodl's order that he dispatched a memorandum to Hitler, (we have a copy) so firmly worded that his secretary was convinced that Speer would surely and literally be axed. This memorandum was delivered by Speer in person to Hitler in the bunker. Hitler read the memorandum at Speer's request and said there would be a written reply. On March 19

Speer was at Jodl's headquarters on a tour of the front. The reply came in the form of an order for complete destruction of everything of value. By the same order Speer's authority over the destruction of installations was revoked.

Speer proceeded on his tour of the front and he asserts to sabotage Hitler's order. He spoke generally of conversations with Gauleiters, of having his ministry withhold the necessary explosives for demolition, and of forging orders countermanding high command orders. Details were not obtained. At this stage also Speer have coal for nitrogen production a priority above coal for hydrogenation. Speer's sabotage, by his account, was performed without attempt at concealment; he fully expected it to come to the attention of Hitler. Indeed he expected Bormann to play informer for Bormann and Speer were bitter enemies. Speer comments that he resorted to subterfuge to carry out this policy because of his greatly weakened position in the government quarters. In 1943 after his great initial success with the armament program Hitler had commented: "There is a man growing up in the shadow of Goering." This was a hint that Speer might become first in the succession. Goering and others were in no mood for rivals. By 1945 his clique had so weakened Speer's position that he could no longer be certain of winning his point on issues of this kind.

Upon completion of his tour of the front Speer returned to Berlin to face the music. On March 28 he was called before Hitler. Said Hitler, "I have reports you are no longer in harmony with me. It is apparent to me you no longer believe the war can be won. I am forced to send you on leave." Speer replied that he could not accept the proposal for a leave. It was, he explained, conventional subterfuge, one that had been used a few days before on Guderian. Speer offered to resign. He explained to Hitler that should a successor make a temporary success of the ministry, there would be no occasion for him ever to return to Berlin. Hence the absurdity of a leave of absence. Hitler said that were Speer an officer he would have no choice in the action (presumably lethal) he would have to take. But, he added, he would spare his old artist. Speer replied that this

made no difference. Then Hitler said bluntly he couldn't do without Speer and couldn't accept his resignation. So Speer agreed to go on leave. There followed a discussion of how Speer's work might be taken over, and by whom, and Hitler was obviously impressed by the enormous range of functions involved. Hitler asked Speer if he still believed the war could be won and Speer said he did not. Hitler said that it was impossible to deny the hope of final victory and referred to the disappointments of his own career. He demanded and then advised Speer to repent and have faith. He gave Speer twenty-four hours to decide whether or not he could bring himself to believe in victory.

Before the ultimatum had expired Hitler phoned Speer at the Armament Ministry on Pariserplatz for a decision. Speer told him he couldn't give the decision over the phone and it wasn't a matter to which he could reply Yes or No, as Hitler requested. Thereupon Hitler invited Speer over to the bunker at the Chancellery where Speer on an impulse told Hitler, "I am unconditionally behind you." This formula satisfied Hitler. He revoked the March 19 order for a scorched earth program and restored power over the destruction to Speer. Speer had handbills printed announcing the reversal of the policy.

Under the new policy bridges and railway line demolition was continued.

Speer claims also to have sabotaged this. He established two classes of bridges, one class (apparently of immediate tactical significance) which the Wehrmacht might destroy on its own initiative. Another class it might destroy only on ^{indorsed} orders/by Speer, the Reichsbahn and the Gauleiter. This was complicated enough Speer believed so that few bridges would get the necessary indorsement. However, the subterfuge failed because communications were so broken the order could not be transmitted widely. Also because aerial bombs could be used for demolition and many were available, Speer proclaimed a shortage of explosives for demolition. He had the aerial bombs sent back to the factories to be converted into demolition charges. This took them out of circulation. And explosives shipped on the Reichsbahn for demolition has the code word "snail". The Reichsbahn, according to

Speer, took the hint.

The early weeks in April were, according to Speer, a period of fantastic plans in the isolated air of the bunker. One of the plans was to shoot all available ammunition and tanks (about 600) at the U.S. Third Army which early in April was headed towards Erfurt and Weimar. It had a long exposed flank which was to be attacked near Wurtzburg. Speer argued against this project. Some fanatics during this period also argued for chemical warfare. Speer also indulged in some plans - the Winnetou plans he called them, after a legendary Indian who was once a Superman of German adolescent literature. The most interesting project called for delivering the so-called "nodding donkeys" to the Allies. The nodding donkeys - (such yes men as Keitel, Himmler and others) - were to be loaded aboard a plane and sent across the lines. It was hoped that the offering would appease the Allied armies, make them take a gentler view of the German people. And during this period Speer met with General Kinzler to discuss the withdrawal of the Army Group Visutla to positions west of Berlin and so save the city. This latter plan, though many knew of it, was never communicated to Hitler or the top politicians for the reason that most would-be informers by that time were in favor of it. There was no chance that Hitler would have approved - his conviction that defeat meant the annihilation of the German people closed his mind to every suggestion of compromise.

On April 20 Hitler's birthday there was a staff meeting in the bunker. (Goering, Goebbels and Doenitz were among those at the meeting. Himmler was not present.).

At that meeting, to the surprise of nearly everyone present, Hitler announced that he would stay in Berlin to the last minute and only then fly to the south. One reason for the surprise of the entourage was that discussion of evacuation had been general. Also earlier in the day Hitler had ordered the Volkssturm out of Berlin. It was accordingly assumed that they would fight in the outskirts and when overrun, Berlin would in effect be an open city.

Goebbels, whom Speer concedes showed courage at the end, endorsed the bitter-, or near-bitter-end plan. He announced that he would stay in Berlin, for which he had been Gauleiter and which had been the scene of his great successes.

Few of the high figures of the regime shared Goebbels' enthusiasm for staying to the end; immediately after the meeting all manner of excuses were invented to get out of Berlin who had done no official outside Berlin for years. (Parenthetically it would be mentioned that Speer repeatedly emphasized the urge for self-preservation in the Nazi high command.) At the end of the meeting Goering told Hitler that it was most urgent that he (Goering) proceed south at once to organize defenses there. Hitler coolly shook hands with Goering and said goodbye. He had no private word with him, was obviously disappointed by the cowardice of Goering and the others. Hitler was always convinced that his followers, however reliable or devoted, were unquestionably men of courage. He was, according to Speer, quite wrong.

At this time the decision had been taken to divide the ministries in two parts - as the Reich was about to be divided - and establish one government in the north and one in the south. Speer went the next day or the day after (April 21 or 22) to Hamburg to set up the northern branch of his ministry. There he recorded his radio speech stating that the war was lost and urging the protection and restoration of transport.

On April 23 or 24 Speer returned to Berlin. He proceeded by car from Hamburg to Nauen where he learned that the Russians had already cut the road. He returned to Baechlin, experimental field of the Luftwaffe, and obtained a Focke-Wulfe 190 converted to a trainer. He flew to Wannsee near Berlin where he changed to a reconnaissance plane and with another reconnaissance plane accompanying him he landed at dusk near the Brandenburger Tor on the East-West Axis. Thence he proceeded to the bunker. The streets were under shellfire but it was not heavy.

The bunker (as Speer described it) was the scene of one of history's more

powerful and improbable dramas. Those present were the few who had remained loyal to Hitler - the ones who were prepared to see it through to the end. Among them were Krebs, Burgdorff of the Army or OKW, four or five junior officers who were acting as adjutants (able chaps, Speer remarked), Bormann, Goebbels and Frau Goebbels and their six children, and Eva Braun who had come up from Bavaria in spite of express orders to remain away. Hitler, said Speer, was composed and in "harmony with himself". He was much like the Hitler Speer had known before the strain and worry of the war years.

Hitler was greatly moved by Speer's appearance. Few if any of his followers were returning to Berlin in those days, nearly all were going the other way. A debate was in progress. Bormann was advising Hitler to leave Berlin and continue the fight from Obersalzberg. Others were supporting Bormann. Goebbels argued that he should stay in Berlin and die as Goebbels intended to do. Speer (who parenthetically showed mild passion for martyrdom for his fellow leaders) gave similar advice and offered a plane to Frau Goebbels and her children to get out. She declined. After talking further with Hitler, sometimes in the group, sometimes alone, Speer departed at 4:00 A.M. Hitler, Speer thinks, had then made up his mind to stay; he was composed because he knew his life was over. Hitler, in his conversations, was much concerned over what would happen to his corpse. He knew what had happened to Mussolini's body and was agitated lest something similar happen to his. Accordingly, he had decided not to die on the barricades where the Russians might get him. He had decided if the end came to commit suicide instead. He had given firm instructions that his body was to be cremated. Speer does not doubt that this is what happened.

Speer's advice to Hitler to stay and get killed (or to kill himself) in Berlin was based on his desire to see Hitler preserved in history as a legendary or heroic figure. Had he been killed or captured at this week-end resort in Bavaria, he told Hitler, the legends would have been hard to create. Death in shell-torn Berlin (not Speer's words) would be easier to sell. However,

Speer is not now entirely happy about the future of the Hitler legend. Hitler's end was satisfactory. That of his immediate subordinates Speer considers most unsatisfactory. History, he points out, always emphasizes terminal events. The historians, he fears, are likely to neglect the glorious days of the NSDAP; instead they will tell at length of how the rats fled the sinking ship.

On his way back to Hamburg, Speer saw Himmler. Himmler he described as "completely fantastic". Himmler told of the position he was taking or about to take in conversations with Bernadotte, i.e., that he (Himmler) alone would maintain order in Europe. Speer told Himmler he should go to Berlin and consult Hitler and offered his plane; Himmler refused saying it would only precipitate a renewal of an old argument about the loyalty of the SS. (An SS division in Hungary had behaved badly in battle, perhaps mutinied, and certain stripes of distinction for valor had been removed from the members' arms. This had precipitated an angry row between Hitler and Himmler. Later, Speer asserts, he sent word to Montgomery through a neutral source advising Montgomery that if Himmler approached the British in any negotiations Montgomery should forget the **conventions** of war and remember what happened to the British secret service men at Venloo. In other words, Montgomery should arrest Himmler forthwith. Speer saw Himmler again after this first meeting (apparently a day or two later) and advised him at the pistol point, Speer stated, that he should surrender himself to the Allies, answer for his crimes and spare the German people the penalty they might otherwise pay. Himmler was not convinced.

Hitler made a will. It was entrusted to Major John Meyer on April 28 or 29, 1945 after Berlin was surrounded or all but surrounded by Russians, Meyer was to board a reconnaissance plane on a golf course near Wannsee and fly to the north. He succeeded in getting a plane, took off and was never heard of again. A radiogram on April 30 to Doenitz, signed by Bormann, informed Doenitz he headed the succession in the will. Another radiogram from Bormann to Doenitz on May 1 said that the will was in effect.