

History of the Third Reich: Hitler's Armaments Minister Albert Speer's Complicity in the Nazi Genocide

Hitler's war minister consistently denied knowledge of the Holocaust.

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One summer day in 1944, the Nazi armaments chief Albert Speer had a visit from his old friend Karl Hanke, the Gauleiter of Lower Silesia. Twelve years before, Hanke had "discovered" Speer when recommending the precocious architect to Joseph Goebbels, in order to refurbish the Nazis' ill-decorated Berlin headquarters.

Hanke now cut a desolate figure before Speer. The Gauleiter had just returned from an "invitation" to see a concentration camp in Upper Silesia, located in Nazi-occupied Poland. The death camp Hanke saw was Auschwitz, where prisoners were being systematically killed from September 1941, as Hitler's war machine marched towards a seemingly certain victory in the USSR.

When Hanke visited Auschwitz in mid-1944, hundreds of thousands had already been murdered there by the SS. Sitting opposite him, Speer wrote that Hanke "seemed confused" and "spoke falteringly", advising the war minister "never to accept an invitation to inspect a concentration camp in Upper Silesia... He [Hanke] had seen something there which he was not permitted to describe and moreover could not describe".

What the Nazi official may have observed were rows of corpses, or perhaps he had witnessed the gassing of innocent victims. When the Soviet army finally liberated Auschwitz on 27 January 1945, over one million people had been killed there. About 90% of those murdered were Jewish peoples, while also among the dead were Poles, Soviet POWs, along with ethnic groups like Roma and Sinti.

Following Hanke's warning, Speer wrote a quarter of a century later that,

"I did not query Himmler, I did not query Hitler... I did not investigate - for I did not want to know what was happening there. Hanke must have been speaking about Auschwitz".

All is not as it appears, however. It is unimaginable that, during Speer's many years at the core of the Third Reich, he was somehow unaware of the Nazis' crimes until summer 1944.

In reality, Speer had knowledge at least months before the Hanke meeting that killings on a vast scale were being committed in Upper Silesia, and in other Nazi-occupied regions. Historians such as veteran author Martin Kitchen have asserted that Speer, and his team, were involved in concentration camp construction alongside the SS, and therefore had a role

in implementing the “Final Solution”.

During the postwar Nuremberg trials, Speer denied being present at the Posen Conference of October 1943, where SS Reichsfuhrer Heinrich Himmler said of Jewish populations that,

“The grave decision had to be taken to cause this people to vanish from the earth”.



Adolf Hitler and Albert Speer in 1943. (Source: Wikipedia)

It is in fact certain Speer was in attendance at the Posen Conference. Himmler addresses him personally during the speech and, crucially, it was discovered that Speer [wrote](#) in December 1971,

“There is no doubt; I was present as Himmler announced on October 6, 1943 that all Jews would be killed”.

Previously, on 20 January 1942, a separate notorious meeting was organized in Wannsee, south-west Berlin. It was chaired by the SS commander Reinhard Heydrich [who said](#) that

“Europe would be combed of Jews from east to west”.

Speer was not in attendance at the Wannsee Conference – yet it is likely he was informed of this order for genocide, as Speer was well acquainted with some of those present at Wannsee like Heydrich himself, the Gestapo’s Gerhard Klopfer, Reich Minister Georg Leibbrandt and Gauleiter Alfred Meyer.

Hitler had in 1937 assigned Speer as General Building Inspector of the Reich. In the late 1930s and early 40s, the architect was at least partially culpable in the eviction of Jewish

tenants in Berlin, to be replaced by “Aryan” dwellers. Speer even inquired as to how the expulsions were progressing, with 75,000 Jewish tenants eventually evicted.

In early February 1942, Speer was appointed as armaments minister by Hitler at the Wolf’s Lair headquarters, following the mysterious death of Fritz Todt in a plane crash. From 1942 onward, Speer was directly complicit in sustaining Hitler’s increasingly criminal dictatorship. He poured all his energy into the challenges ahead, quickly becoming one of Nazi Germany’s most powerful men.

Speer had no experience in the field of armaments, he had not even fired a gun before. Regardless, Speer was remarkably adept in his new role, using his organizational skills and intelligence to produce weapons on a massive scale – despite the indiscriminate Allied bombing from above. The results Speer achieved saw his stock rise even further with Hitler, who was soon addressing him as “My dear Speer”.

In the time ahead, Speer cast away further scruples by extensively exploiting slave labor, with the final aim of turning the war around and preserving the Third Reich. Speer’s policies prolonged the global conflict by many months, thereby allowing the extermination camps to remain in existence for longer, while Hitler’s military could continue fighting across various fronts.

As Soviet and Allied forces closed in from east and west, the discovery of the death camps sent waves of horror across the world. Yet on 30 January 1939, Hitler had explicitly remarked during a Reichstag speech of “the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe” should Germany enter “once more into a world war”.

Britain and France may have declared war on Germany two days after Hitler’s invasion of Poland, but it was almost a token gesture. British and French elites cared little for the fate of Poland, as the country was dissected by Nazi Germany and the USSR.

Almost three decades after the war, Britain’s Conservative MP Robert Boothby candidly commented that,

“We’d gone to war for the defense of Poland. In the event, we did nothing to help Poland at all. We never lifted a finger... we confined our war efforts [in 1939] to dropping leaflets on the German people”.

This dismal inaction had major consequences for millions of people. At the start of hostilities in September 1939, Poland’s Jewish population was 3.3 million, the second largest such community in the world (behind the Soviet Union’s Jewish populace). Hitler’s address the previous winter outlined precisely what fate lay in store for them.

By 1945, over 1.8 million Polish Jews would be killed, about half of whom were murdered at the Treblinka extermination camp in eastern Poland. Altogether, about six million Poles lost their lives at the hands of the Nazis.

During Speer’s collaboration with Hitler, which included their enacting of vast architectural aims and ambitions, he claims that

“scarcely any anti-Semitic remarks of Hitler’s have remained in my memory...

Hitler's hatred for the Jews seemed to me so much a matter of course that I gave it no serious thought. I felt myself to be Hitler's architect. Political events did not concern me".

Political events may not have concerned Speer in the Reich's early years when he was a naive, reserved young architect "completely under the sway of Hitler". As time moved by, however, Speer's character was inevitably corrupted by the all-consuming nature of Hitler's dictatorship, along with the personalities that surrounded him.

From late 1933 onward, Speer was in close contact with Hitler on an almost daily basis. The relationship included morning walks and conversations, dinner outings and tea parties. This incredibly intimate association with the Nazi leader - who was 16 years older than Speer - must have profoundly impacted the latter's still developing disposition.

Hitler was known for his remote nature with people, yet he spoke of "the warmest human feelings" for Speer who represented a "kindred spirit" for him. Speer later admitted that, "All I wanted was for this great man [Hitler] to dominate the globe".

Speer was, in the meantime, increasingly in the presence of figures like Hermann Goering, Joseph Goebbels and Heinrich Himmler. Sustained relations with nefarious men such as these was bound to have further detrimental effects upon him.



Speer had been a latecomer to the Nazi Party having applied for membership on 1 March 1931, when he was aged almost 26. Speer had only seen Hitler for the first time four months previously, when the aspiring dictator was delivering a speech in Berlin at a dilapidated beer hall. About five thousand people were in attendance that evening, mostly students, and Speer [wrote](#) that Hitler "spoke urgently and with hypnotic persuasiveness" which "swept away any skepticism, any reservations".

Despite hailing from an upper class background in Mannheim, south-west Germany, Speer had lived through challenging times. In his late teens, he struggled through the hyperinflation years of the Weimar Republic, which reached crippling levels in the early 1920s. By 1929 and the early 1930s Speer's architectural dreams lay in apparent ruins, with the Great Depression resulting in unprecedented hardship in Germany.

Overlooking his travails, Speer's driving force remained finding a master who would bestow upon him the architectural tasks he desired. He confessed that, "For the commission to do a great building, I would have sold my soul like Faust".

Capitalizing on his contact with Hanke, Speer finally met Hitler in person during July 1933, when he was invited to the Nazi leader's modest apartment in Munich.

Having impressed Hitler with his architectural style, speed and efficiency, Speer was [admitted](#) to his inner circle by the autumn of 1933, and soon sat beside the dictator at dinner. Some years later Hitler informed Speer that,

"You attracted my notice during our rounds. I was looking for an architect to whom I could entrust my building plans. I wanted someone young, for as you know these plans extend far into the future".

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