



Demystifying Hitler's Favorite Architect. Review of: Magnus Brechtken, Albert Speer. Eine deutsche Karriere

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REVIEWS

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Demystifying Hitler's Favorite Architect

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Magnus Brechtken, *Albert Speer. Eine deutsche Karriere*, Munich: Siedler Verlag, 912 pages, 2017; ISBN: 978-3-8275-0040-3, with colour and b&w illustrations.

Albert Speer (1905–1981) undoubtedly occupies a special position in architectural history; his biography differs from that of all other 20th-century architects. The importance we attribute to him today is due not primarily to his work as an architect but to his role as one of the leading protagonists of the National Socialist regime, about which he spoke as a firsthand witness after World War II. At the Nuremberg Trials, Speer, despite his tireless commitment to the machinery of death and his central role in Nazi crimes, received only a 20-year prison sentence, which he served until 1966. In the Federal Republic, he became a bestselling author and one of the most cited witnesses of the Nazi era. Speer's portrayal of the Nazi regime and Hitler's circle shaped post-war historiography, a contribution that has been almost unchallenged. Even the authors of the two posthumous biographies of Speer, Gitta Sereny and Joachim Fest, could not detach themselves from Speer's point of view on all issues; the biographies are based on conversations with him and (Figure 1) to a great extent ignore archival documents and historical research (Sereny 1995; Fest 1999).

The new, comprehensive, modestly illustrated biography *Albert Speer. Eine deutsche Karriere*, is by Magnus Brechtken, the deputy director of the Munich Institut für Zeitgeschichte and a professor at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität. Brechtken says this biography originates from his interest in the questioning of political memoirs. It is the result of many years of meticulous archival research – the endnotes and bibliography alone comprise 324 pages – unlike the earlier biographies by Sereny and Fest, which rely primarily on interviews with Speer, and the more recent one published by Martin Kitchen (2015), which is mainly based on existing literature. The critical edition of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* by Christian Hartmann and others (2016), which has been extensively commented upon, was also researched at the Institut für Zeitgeschichte.

Brechtken's central thesis is that Speer exemplifies a 'type of bourgeois German who consciously became a National Socialist and after 1945 neither had the will nor the insight to render an *honest* account of what he had done' (Brechtken 2016: 14). Brechtken regards Speer the same way he thinks of Reinhard Heydrich (1904–1942); as role models of the 'uncompromising generation'. This term was coined by Michael Wildt to characterize the type of leadership elite of the Third Reich embodied by the leadership corps of the Reich Security Main Office – well-educated young men who not only joined the National Socialists but also crafted a career within that group, and whose uncompromising will knew no norms or limits (Wildt 2009). Brechtken says when they melded their 'ambition, the will to power, and personal greed' with the National Socialist 'Rassenkampf' ideology, it was 'not

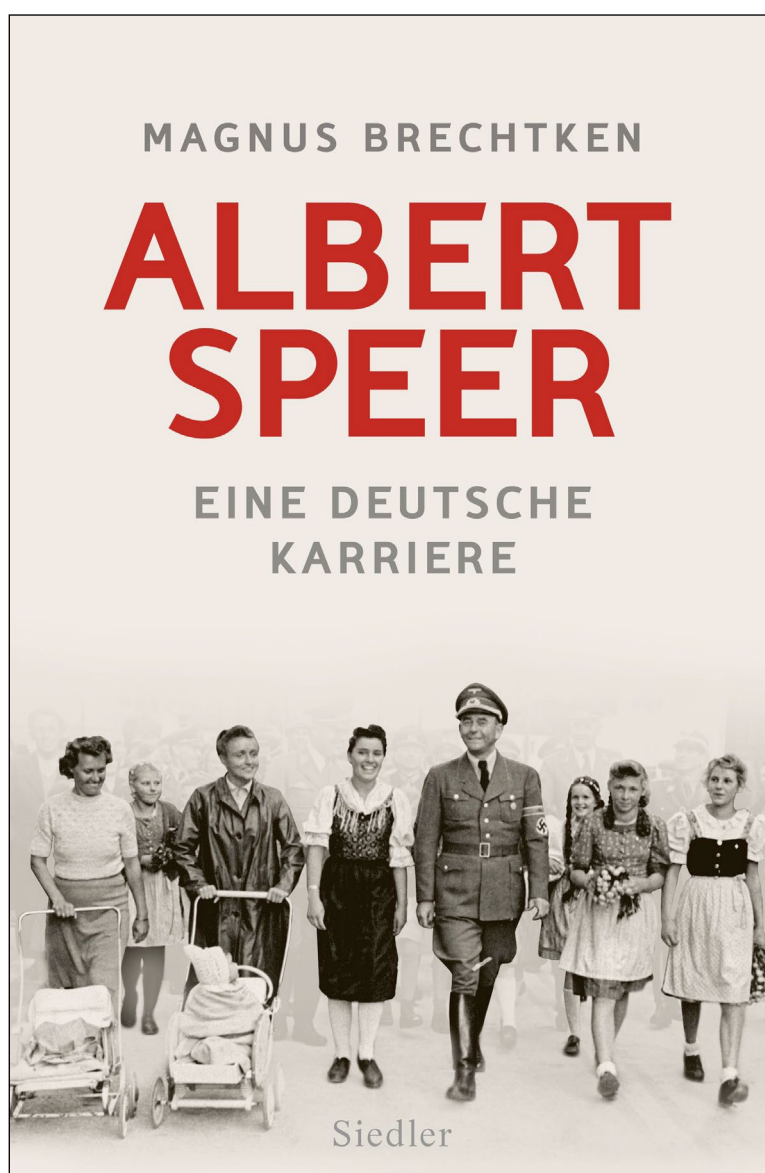


Figure 1: Cover of Magnus Brechtken's *Albert Speer. Eine deutsche Karriere*.

a coincidence, but ... a calculated consideration in life'. Brechtken concludes that for Speer, 'the will to gain power, to rule and to acquire money [was] a central pattern of his character that shaped his actions until 1945 and drove him on throughout his entire life' (Brechtken 2016: 45).

Brechtken's biography is divided into two long and more or less chronologically sorted halves that describe Speer's life before and after 1945. In the first half, the author very briefly recounts Speer's privileged youth in his affluent family home in Mannheim and later in Heidelberg. He talks about Speer's early studies in architecture at Universität Karlsruhe, Technische Hochschule München, and Technische Hochschule Berlin, and his work, from 1927 to 1932, as an assistant to Heinrich Tessenow (1876–1950). Brechtken takes care to show that Speer very consciously – rather than almost mistakenly or unknowingly, as Speer later claims in his memoirs – joined the National Socialists in 1930 and was aware of their murderous goals. Speer purposefully and relentlessly pursued his career. He focused on gaining proximity to Hitler and, after the

death of Paul Ludwig Troost (1878–1934), managed to become Hitler's favorite architect and 'master-builder of the movement'. Speer is responsible for the buildings of the Nazi Party Rally Grounds in Nuremberg, the New Reich Chancellery in Voßstraße, and, as the general building inspector for Berlin from 1937 on, for the monumental re-planning of the capital. After the fatal plane crash of Fritz Todt (1892–1942) in February 1942, Speer succeeded him as minister of armaments. Brechtken thoroughly refutes the perspective that Speer was ambivalent towards Hitler and National Socialism, as later was disseminated by Speer himself and others. He shows how, already as general building inspector, he acted as 'conquest-manager' and planner for the 'Endsieg', and was responsible for the eviction and deportation of tens of thousands of Jews and for forced labour in concentration camps. As minister, he ran the armaments industry, in cooperation with Heinrich Himmler (1900–45) and Fritz Sauckel (1894–1946). In doing so, Speer skilfully constructed his persona through morale-boosting slogans and alleged weaponry 'miracles',

and at times even as a potential successor to Hitler. In the end, he commanded about 14 million workers in the armaments industry – about half of the workforce controlled by Germany, which included several million forced labourers and nearly half a million concentration camp inmates. Even when it was apparent that Germany would lose the war, Speer continued to raise industrial production very efficiently, thus extending the war – and the murders in the death camps and the death of a millionfold people at the front.

The second half of the book deals with Speer's life after 1945: the Nuremberg Trials, the twenty years of imprisonment in Spandau, and his career in post-war Germany after his discharge in 1966. In court, Speer only selectively admitted to his crimes and, simulating atonement, assumed only an abstract overall responsibility in order to camouflage his personal responsibility. He constructed his life story anew, presented himself as a tempted artist and an apolitical technician, and positioned himself as a witness and authority on the perished Third Reich. After his release, Speer, thanks to numerous interviews and three autobiographical books – *Erinnerungen* (1969), *Spandauer Tagebücher* (1975 and 1976) and *Der Sklavenstaat. Meine Auseinandersetzungen mit der SS* (1981) – became a celebrated bestselling author; *Erinnerungen* alone has been translated into 17 languages. These memoirs, produced in collaboration with the publisher Wolf Jobst Siedler (1926–2013) and the historian and future editor of *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Joachim Fest (1926–2006), take Speer's mythmaking to a mass-media level. Speer, the 'good Nazi', provides with his lies an exculpation narrative that is perpetuated many times over by countless 'Mitläufer' ('hangers-on') in post-war Germany. To exonerate themselves, they all too readily believe that he was not aware of the regime's crimes.

With this biography Magnus Brechtken accomplishes a twofold success. First, thanks to his painstaking archival research, he effectively uncovers the last myths remaining about Albert Speer. His biography surpasses previous work by historians since the 1980s, though he acknowledges their achievements and builds on them. Matthias Schmidt (1982) and Susanne Willems (2002), for example, unearthed Speer's leading role in the persecution and murder of European Jews; Angela Schönberger (1981) has refuted the 'Reichskanzlei'-legend; Hans J. Reichhardt and Wolfgang Schäche (1998) uncovered the destruction of Berlin in the wake of Speer's monumental re-planning of the city; Adam Tooze exposed Speer's alleged armaments-miracle (2006: 554–579); and most recently, Isabell Trommer (2016) deconstructed Speer's self-mystification and his role in the justification- and apology-discourses in post-war Germany. Also of great importance was the TV-movie *Speer und Er* by Heinrich Breloer, which for the first time brought Speer's central role in the Nazi regime to the attention of a wide audience and also debunked numerous myths; the book accompanying the film reproduced numerous documents as evidence (Breloer 2005, 2006).

Brechtken also investigates the Speer memoirs and biographies. It has taken historiography a long time to unmask them as cunning apologies and to prove that

they cannot be trusted. Brechtken deconstructs their influence and meticulously uncovers them, almost sentence by sentence, as manipulation or fake. He shows how Speer even instrumentalized former employees to conceal his activities and to fabricate alibis after the fact. The influence of Speer's memoirs would not have been so disastrous if they – like the memoirs of other Nazis – had been only apologetic writings whose purpose was to obliterate traces and if they had not exerted such great power on the popular perception of the Third Reich as well as on scientific research. For example, Speer's alleged absence from Heinrich Himmler's Poznań speech in October 1943 as evidence of his ignorance of the Holocaust, Speer's alleged plan of a poison gas attack on Hitler in February 1945, and his alleged refusal of Hitler's 'Nero' order in March 1945 have all been picked up as historical facts and repeated many times – all of which, however, have been debunked by Brechtken as dubious stories or fairy tales, floated by Speer after the war. Brechtken mainly blames Wolf Jobst Siedler and in particular Joachim Fest for this ominous influence. How long Fest adheres to the lies fabricated by Speer can be seen from the fact that even in 2005, Fest – in total 'ignorance and remoteness from knowledge' (Brechtken 2017: 555) – maintains that 'only a few further works [on Speer] have appeared since the early 1970s' and that the 'level of knowledge' essentially hasn't changed much since then (Fest 2005: 11).

One drawback of this biography is the brevity with which Brechtken investigates Speer's work as an architect. It is reduced to a secondary discourse, in the shadow of the rest of his biography. While a number of studies have explored Speer's architecture as a product of the regime (for an overview see Reichhardt and Schäche (2008: 9–22) and Tesch (2016: 2–8)), investigating it on its own terms represents a historiographic dilemma: either separating it from its historical context or pursuing 'Täterforschung' (perpetrator research), which has been rather uncommon in art history. As Winfried Nerdinger and Raphael Rosenberg point out in the preface of the first volume of their series *Hitlers Architekten: Historisch-kritische Monografien zur Regimearchitektur im Nationalsozialismus, Paul Ludwig Troost (1878–1934)* by Timo Nüßlein (2012), 'Täterforschung' has become an indispensable tool for historic analysis in 'Zeitgeschichte' (Longerich 2007), but for good reason it is little known in the realm of art history:

Monographs on bad artists are not written, books about the life and work of criminals are shunned in the art world. That is why for a long time there have been no historic-critical monographs on the most successful architects, painters and sculptors under the Nazi regime. (Nerdinger and Rosenberg 2012: v)

The publication of Speer's architectural work, which he initiated in 1978 and which became known to an international audience through Léon Krier's 1985 edition, is based *mutatis mutandis* on myths similar to those in Speer's memoirs (Speer 1978 and Krier 1985). The

attempt to consider Speer's architecture as a continuation of classicism and completely detached from its political implications is based, as critics have pointed out, on deliberate euphemistic retouches and crude historic simplifications (for an overview of the criticism, see Reichhardt and Schäche (2008: 19–20)). The art historical classification undertaken in the same volume by the art historian Lars Olof Larsson (incidentally the son-in-law of Speer's collaborator Hans Stephan) and the comparison with the Nordic classicism of the time were both systematically refuted by Winfried Nerdinger (1986). Tracing the origin of Speer's architecture back to Schinkel and other classicists proves on close examination to be another fable that was invented by Speer in collaboration with Siedler and Fest in the memoirs.

In addition to the studies already mentioned, Sebastian Tesch recently investigated Speer's architectural work and published the monograph *Albert Speer (1905–1981)* (2016) as part of the *Hitlers Architekten* project, which documents the architects of Hitler's regime. This extensive examination, for the first time, of archival source material yields a differentiated picture. Architecturally, Speer first adopts the simple 'Heimatstil' of his teacher Heinrich Tessenow; after 1933 he orients himself to the reductionism of his predecessor Paul Ludwig Troost; then, around 1936, emancipates himself from this with an austere eclecticism; and finally, after 1938, proceeds to a richly decorated monumentalism. Speer's architecture can only be categorized as eclectic, since he mixes the design principles and the formal vocabulary of different epochs without any discernible system. Tesch concludes that Speer's work is from the beginning closely linked with politics and a product of the specific structure of the Nazi dictatorship. Speer's importance to Hitler was based on the fact that the latter found in Speer a loyal and administratively gifted architect to implement his wishes. Tesch goes so far as to state that 'the plans made between 1933 and 1945 more clearly [reflect] Hitler's ideas than Speer's' (Tesch 2016: 225–227). In this sense, Speer is rightly remembered not so much for his work as an architect as for his close connection to Hitler and his role as minister of armaments, as well as for his obfuscating exculpation strategy as a war criminal after 1945. From a contemporary point of view, Speer's disastrous moral transgression should be a thought-provoking warning to architects who offer their services to dictators.

Magnus Brechtken has produced a superbly researched and brilliantly written biography. Thanks to intensive use of archival material, he not only succeeds in unmasking the remaining myths about Albert Speer, but also in deconstructing the disastrous influence of the Speer memoirs and biographies. One can only hope that more architectural historians will follow Brechtken's methodological example and pursue a similarly critical approach. He sets standards not only for critically investigating an architect's life and work from a contemporary 'Täterforschung' perspective; his biography also is an important lesson in critically revising architectural history, especially oral history, by scrutinizing memoirs and self-portrayals.

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