



Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth

Gitta Sereny, Peter Dimock (Editor)

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Albert Speer was not only Hitler's architect and armaments minister, but the Führer's closest friend--his "unhappy love." Speer was one of the few defendants at the Nuremberg Trials to take responsibility for Nazi war crimes, even as he denied knowledge of the Holocaust. Now this enigma of a man is unveiled in a monumental biography by a writer who came to know Speer intimately in his final years.

Out of hundreds of hours of interviews, Sereny unravels the threads of Speer's personality: the genius that made him indispensable to the German war machine, the conscience that drove him to repent, and the emotional wounds that made him susceptible to Hitler's lethal magnetism. Read as an inside account of the Third Reich, or as a revelatory unsparing yet compassionate study of the human capacity for evil, *Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth* is a triumph.

"Fascinating...Not only a major addition to our knowledge of the Third Reich, but a stunning attempt to understand the nature of good and evil."--*Newsday*

"More than a biography...It also constitutes a perceptive re-examination of the mysterious appeal of Adolf Hitler."--*San Francisco Chronicle*

B&W photos.

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From Reader Review Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth for online ebook

Anne says

Excellent! A very fine writer and sharp mind takes on one of the most intelligent and fascinating nazis. And much, much more. I especially like the parts where she interviews some of his contemporaries, it broadens the perspectives on both the man himself, the ideology and the ideas and minds of a lot of people of the era. I come closer to some understanding of how so many people could follow such an ideology and such a man as Hitler and how it could go so far and so horribly wrong.

A little funny to read semantic discussions about German words and expressions, and at the same time all names of German places are in English. She discusses the verb "ahnen", translated into "sense", to express what Speer could/should have known. It's the same in Norwegian, so I actually need no explanation :-) But Speers trial took place in "Nuremberg". I found myself thinking "that's Schlesien, isn't it?" every time I read about Silesia.

Melody says

This is a long haul, but I couldn't put it down. As someone who has not a shred of organizational ability, i found the author's attention to detail and execution of the book to be mind blowing. I can't even begin to imagine the work that went into its production. She's an excellent writer and very perceptive. I was never much of a student of WWII so a lot of the material was new to me which made this all that much more interesting.

I never dreamed I'd find a nazi to be a sympathetic figure but I have to admit I did find myself liking Speer early on in the book. He's a complex guy and I'm sure my previous statement would rightly strike some as blasphemous and horrific, but I am now of an entirely different opinion of how a person can be drawn into such situations. This is a fabulous book by any standard and I can see this appealing to a wide range of people.

Ashley says

It is a little long

It reads like a magazine interview. But has a bio mixed into it. I was happy for the author going the distance and keeping with the "Hard" questions! (For the time ALOT more people should have tried!!) but I was thankfull for the interesting writing and historical references as long as the book was it was not a dragged! (I was scared of that!! LOL)

But for what it's worth it's a great peice of history! And I'm very happy I got the chance to not only buy it (hardcover!) but read it.

Erik Graff says

Prior to reading this biography I read Speer's autobiographical books *Inside the Third Reich* and *Spandau*. Much of the material in this work repeats material found in those volumes, but it is framed within the context of the ethical issues involved and the final years of Speer's life.

My interest in Nazism is, in part, an interest in the beliefs behind it. These beliefs were openly parochial. The German nation adopted, by election(!), a arete ethic which rated excellence above individual human lives; which, in fact, understood virtue potential to obtain not only to persons, but to genetic (i.e. 'racial') groups. This is in contradistinction to other main schools of ethical philosophy, specifically the utilitarian and deontological, but has some relation to natural law ethics. Arete and natural law ethics, while no longer popular in philosophical faculties, have a pedigree going back to the ancients and the middle ages respectively. Clearly, the Nazi and Fascist movements, as well as much of modern conservatism and contemporary politics, demonstrate that those kinds of thinking are still relevant today. Genocide, racial and gender discrimination, and self-serving ethical double standards are still with us. Presumably most of those who countenance such behaviors do not do so with mind to the philosophical meaning of their acts. The Third Reich, however, actively and openly promulgated this viewpoint and many of its theoreticians--philosophers, scientists and ideological pundits--appeared to be quite certain that their policies were right in a moral sense. Indeed, it is possible to construe this to be a coherent ethic, even disallowing much of its supposed 'scientific' justification.

My question in this regard pertains to how one might weigh one coherent ethical system against another. Why not maintain, as some do, an American exceptionalism, associate it with Northern European Protestantism and lord it over the evidently inferior peoples of the southlands? This is, in effect, the foreign policy practiced by the United States and its clients, isn't it?

My interest in Nazism also concerns how persons like Speer--or like myself for that matter--who do not subscribe to such a virtue ethic, who in fact would contradict it by claiming ethical equality between all individuals, come to countenance the policies of movements like the Nazis. Here the issue is immediately relevant as so many are killed and otherwise ethically disabled by the policies of 'my own' government. In a small way, compared to Speer, I contribute to this evil by my passivity and by my lordly lifestyle.

Michael says

Albert Speer remains one of the most fascinating men involved in the National Socialist regime, not least because of the two excellent memoirs he published after his detainment in Spandau for war crimes. Speer was in demand during the sixties and seventies as a speaker, and was the only war criminal to create for himself a successful media career after the war. This was not least because, rather than denying the crimes of the regime, he accepted them, accepted society's judgment of them as crimes, and even provisionally accepted his own responsibility for them. By writing from a standpoint of moral decency, Speer seemed to speak for a generation of decent Germans who had been duped by a criminal regime because of patriotism and political naivete. Hitler should be blamed for the Holocaust, Speer seems to argue, and not the German people, who were by and large not privy to the truth which was hidden even from the Minister of Armaments

and War Production.

Sereny's book, while to a large degree a sympathetic biography of a fascinating and likable man (she and Speer were friends until his death in 1981), nevertheless manages to challenge this standpoint. There is no doubt of Speer's direct involvement in the massive use of slave labor in the German war effort, and he is shown to have witnessed, more than once, the conditions under which these slaves worked. This is not to say that he was unaffected by it - a return from an inspection tour is directly linked to a sudden attack of illness that put Speer out of commission for several weeks and during which he claimed to have wished to die. However, this is far from a heroic stand against a criminal action, and can be seen more as an attempt to evade responsibility. Moreover, Sereny demonstrates that there is no real question of Speer being in complete ignorance of the mass exterminations in the East. He nearly certainly knew, but at the time did whatever he could not to think about it, and ultimately spent his life denying (not least to himself) that he had known.

The question of "the Jews" haunts the entire book, but does not dominate it. It manages to be the most complete biography of a man who spent the last 15 years of his life talking and writing about himself. Facts Speer was uncomfortable sharing about his childhood come to vivid life. His period of ascendency in the Third Reich is given much fuller treatment, including a fascinating time when Goebbels and Hitler appeared to be grooming him for succession as Fuehrer. His relations to his family and co-workers are examined through dozens, seemingly hundreds, of detailed interviews.

Sereny is a journalist by trade, and some aspects of her work will disappoint historians, although she does address issues such as the Historikerstreit and Daniel Goldhagen's revelations about Speer. Certainly her work could have been more focused if better informed by theory, and thereby several hundred pages shorter. Her use of citations is limited to a few notes at the back of the book, which do not specify the precise paragraphs being sourced, and one must check back and forth to confirm. Some assertions, and even quotes, have no citations at all. The book is not up to the research standards of a scholarly monograph, but it remains a useful account of a fascinating subject.

Cynthia Karl says

This fascinating book is more than a biography of Albert Speer. It explores his motivations and behavior; the author interviewed Speer extensively as well as many, many others including family that knew Speer. I'm glad I had read Albert Speer's memoir "Inside the Third Reich" first because it gave me a picture of how Speer viewed his participation in Nazi Germany. I was concerned that this book would be repetitive and the author does refer to his memoir but not too extensively; in some instances she points out discrepancies and/or omissions. After reading these two books I have a clearer understanding of how some people at least at the beginning could accept Hitler and the Nazis. Hitler emerges as more than the cardboard cutout person that I picture him as, although still an evil megalomaniac. Sereny ultimately answers the question regarding Speer's knowledge of the "Final Solution". Willem Visser 't Hooft's quote at the beginning of the book is excellent - "It is possible to live in a twilight between knowing and now knowing".

KOMET says

Late in 1989, when I was living and working on contract overseas, I read Albert Speer's book Inside the

Third Reich, in which he described, in extensive detail, the blossoming of his career, first as Hitler's principal architect throughout the 1930s and the early war years, and later as der Führer's Minister of Armaments and War Production from 1942 to 1945. He and Hitler (who fancied himself an architect given his lifelong passion for art and architecture) had a uniquely special relationship. I was utterly enthralled with that book because it provided me with a tangible sense of how Germany functioned under Hitler and his chief lieutenants (e.g., Goering, Hess, Bormann, Himmler, and Goebbels) ---- most of whom Speer knew very well.

What is more: unlike many of his contemporaries in the Nazi Party, Speer, upon being brought to trial for war crimes at Nuremberg, was the only one who freely confessed his responsibility as Minister who used slave labour to help sustain the German war machine, and thus prolong the war. He impressed me deeply because, upon being fully apprised of the enormity of Hitler's crimes in the weeks and months following V-E Day, Speer --- normally not a person given to introspection and displays of emotion --- accepted Germany's guilt and sought to atone for that. Thus, he served a 20-year prison sentence and spent the rest of his life trying to face up to his onetime devotion and faithful service to Hitler and his regime.

This particular book gave me a rigorous, more objective look at Albert Speer (during various stages of his life), both from the vantage point of those who worked with him before and during the war, as well as his critics and detractors in subsequent years.

For all his organizational brilliance and intelligence, Speer could, at times, be arrogant, abrupt, and emotionally detached. The latter trait he recognized in himself and sought to address, with a view to self-improvement. For it was during Speer's time in Spandau prison that he made the acquaintance of a young French chaplain, with whom he became especially close (the chaplain served at Spandau for about 3 years) and gave him the impetus to strive to become a different, better person.

I'd like to cite some of Speer's own words, which I hope will convey to the person reading this review, his struggle for truth:

"I have often asked myself what I would have done if I had come to feel a share in the responsibility for the things Hitler did in areas other than those in which I was directly involved. And unfortunately, if I'm honest, my reply has to be negative --- the tasks Hitler had confided to me, first in architecture, then in government, his 'friendship,' the passionate conviction he radiated, the power his favor conferred on me, all this was quite simply overwhelming and had become so indispensable to me that to hang on to it I would probably have swallowed anything.

"True ... much later I did oppose [Hitler] in many ways. But... that cannot serve as justification of my previous passivity.... The truth is that I only woke up to what he was doing --- what he was --- when I had to acknowledge to myself that he intended to pull the German people down into perdition with him. And really, all I did then was only in an effort to prevent that."

For anyone who wants to examine the life and times of a person who turned away from having once served so faithfully one of the world's most brutal dictatorships and spent the remainder of his life in atonement [Speer gave the bulk of proceeds from his best-selling books anonymously to various Jewish charities worldwide.] and self-examination, READ THIS BOOK. I think, by so doing, you'll come to share (as I do) the author's assessment of Albert Speer:

"I came to understand and value Speer's battle with himself and saw in it the re-emergence of the intrinsic morality he manifested as a boy and youth. It seemed to me it was some kind of victory that this man --- just this man --- weighed down by intolerable and unmanageable guilt, with the help of a Protestant chaplain, a Catholic monk and a Jewish rabbi, tried to become a different man."

Dylan Horrocks says

Fascinating in all sorts of ways, of course, but one aspect of this book that's stayed with me is Sereny's exploration of that grey area between knowing and not knowing. The main question asked is: how much did Speer really know about Nazi atrocities - and how much would he admit he knew? Sereny pursues those questions doggedly, with one eye on the hard reality and another on Speer's willful refusal to face up to that reality.

Only once in the whole book (if I remember rightly) does she expand the implications of the example of Speer to include all of us: recognising that to some extent we *all* inhabit that grey area much of the time, choosing what knowledge we will allow to shape our view of the world, and which things we will let slip off our minds like water. But by the time I'd finished the book, my understanding of humans' ability to lie to ourselves and each other was vastly enriched.

An extraordinary book.

Harry Smith says

I was born a generation after Speer but I fought in the Second World War, as a member of the RAF, and in its aftermath I was a part of the allied occupation forces stationed in Hamburg. I think I can safely say that I am familiar with the brutality and evil the Nazis wrought against their enemies. When the Nuremberg Trials were conducted I was in Germany, and when Speer was spared the death penalty by the court, I thought he had got off lightly, considering his orchestration of Germany's slave labour programs which caused the deaths of tens of thousands of innocent pressed ganged foreign workers.

After reading this book, my opinion hasn't changed about Albert Speer except that perhaps more good came from sparing Speer's life than if it had been taken. This book is so profound it should be required reading for all present day, bankers, politicians, technocrats or those that seek the power to rule other people's lives. Few books are as good as Gitta Sereny's thoughtful and brilliant analysis of a man who like Faust bargained with the devil and in the process lost his soul. After finishing the book, I am not sure if Speer redeemed himself, through his memoirs, twenty -year incarceration at Spandau or his spiritual search to find the right path in later life to atone for his Nazi past. But I am convinced that he was sincere in his pursuit to understand his guilt and prevent others from falling down the same rabbit hole. It is a shame that considering how much more evil has transpired since Hitler killed himself and the Nazi's capitulated to allied forces, that few have heeded the lessons he learned about the corrosive effect power has upon the soul or its deadly effect upon the innocent.

Martin Empson says

This is a stunningly well researched, detailed and readable account of one of the key figures in Hitler's Germany. Sereny attempts to explore the very notion of culpability. What did it mean to be part of the Nazi leadership? How much did any individual know about what was happening?

The book itself is over-flowing with information. Many of the pages force you to stop and think. The subject matter itself is difficult and painful. By examining the consequences of Hitler taking power, through the life of one figure, Sereny illuminates much more than that individual.

Full review: <http://resolutereader.blogspot.com/20...>

Davida says

For all of you out there who are fascinated by the mystery surrounding the character of Albert Speer, this is definitely the book to read.

I consider myself as one of those people who cannot think of Speer as the cunning Nazi who got away with it. Neither could Gitta Sereny the author of this book. It is a fact that this book will not provide you with answers, it will give you a lot of details, based on actual documentary evidence, and you will have to reach your own conclusion.

I obviously refer specifically to Speer's involvement in the holocaust. The one question he always had to answer in hundreds of interviews he gave following his release from Spandau. Did he know what was happening to the Jews? He always said that he had an inkling, he knew something was wrong but he never brought himself to see with his own eyes. Yet he was the only person who could consider himself as Hitler's friend, and his Minister for Armaments from 1942 onwards. He denied knowledge of the death camps to his dying day.

This book explores the circumstances around Speer's life and lets the reader judge whether such a denial is possible. It also deals with Speer's sense of guilt, the main source that shaped his life after the end of the War.

In order to provide all this information Sereny includes a lot of information acquired through interviews with Speer's family, friends and also enemies. Instead of just being a biography starting from Speer's childhood up to his death in 1981, it also contains a painstakingly detailed and documented account of the main episodes of WWII. Sereny tackles her subject whilst having the context of WWII ever present. Thus Speer's activities are seen against the backdrop of Hitler's rise to power, the onset of WWII and its duration, followed by the destruction and punishment in the end.

Interviews are not the only tool in delivering such a powerful book. Sereny was given access to Speer's archive and provides details of the Spandau draft, that is the draft version of the Spandau Diaries, quoting excerpts that did not make it in the final cut of Speer's publication. That is also, extremely interesting. As I argue in my review for the Spandau Diaries, Speer's book is only what he and his editor wanted the readers to see, Sereny's account gives the reader a much more real look at different circumstances in his life. I do not mean to say that Spandau Diaries is a fake, because it certainly isn't, but at times it is quite obvious that it

only just scrapes the surface of things rather than delving into them. That is one thing Sereny does not do, as there is a deep analysis of most of Speer's main episodes in life. The section on Speer's attendance in Posen's conference is one of them.

The book is also a very private account of the man's life, and I believe some of her admiration of him does come through when reading it. I did not mind it, seeing that I also seem to be greatly infatuated by this man. Well, Speer's charisma is another trait that comes through reading this book. Seeing any recorded interviews that he gave to various TV news shows and documentaries are an attestation to his incredible charisma.

Another interesting aspect of this book is the insight into Speer's family, who have indeed suffered greatly through the deeds of this man. I was especially fascinated by his daughter Hilde, a strong woman who has to be greatly admired for the help she gave to her father and her activities in trying to do right by those slighted by him. I am sure it is not an easy life to be the daughter of one of the most powerful man of the Nazi regime, but she dealt with it in such an admirable way.

As I state in the beginning of this review, this book gives you all the evidence and awaits your own judgement. Sereny does draw conclusions but she refrains from judging. It is also, after all, a very interesting account of this mysterious man. I'd recommend it to all WWII history buffs who do not hold the simplistic view of good versus evil.

Toby says

One of the best books I have ever read. I dip into it each year. Speer's battle with 'truth' is everyone's because Sereny is interested in very human question and goes after the answers with heart, intelligence and devastating patience.

Campbell says

What to say about this book? 24 hours on from completing it and I'm still no closer to a coherent thought process regarding it.

Or rather, that's not true, I know the book was brilliant in both conception and execution; I'm still no closer to knowing what to make of Speer himself. Did he know of the mass murder of the Jews of Europe or didn't he? Was he present during the speech which Himmler made (and in which he addressed Speer, present or not, directly) at the Posen conference in 1943, in which he unequivocally detailed the mechanics of the Final Solution, or had he (as he maintains, with questionable alibis) left for a meeting with Hitler? I'm still not sure. It seems unlikely that he was as ignorant as he always claimed and yet, doubt remains.

Whatever the answer, this is a fascinating deep dive in the shadowy abyss of one man's guilt and attempts at redemption. Sereny does a marvellous job of shining light into the darkest corners, methodically and insightfully peeling back the layers of meaning in a search for Truth.

William2.1 says

This book is a masterpiece of intellectual biography. If you have an interest in WWII or National Socialism--especially the operational aspects of the war for Speer was head of war materiel toward the end--this is the book for you. If you have an interest in the twisted mind of Hitler, with whom Speer was about as close as another human could be, this is the book for you. There's also a critical review of Speer's architecture; much of it overscale and ghastly but with a few successes such as the Cathedral of Light. Sereny worked closely with Speer on the book, though he had no input into its content or structure. Her prose has great moral weight. She readily exposes Speer's rationalizations and half-truths, his prevarications and denials in the most direct and meaningful way. Speer squirms under her scrutiny. He is plainly a doomed man. He can know no repose in this life, only the final release of death. There is the sense that he knows he has to cooperate, that he knows his Spandau memoirs lacked crucial insight and rigor. *Albert Speer: His Battle With Truth* may be the finest biography I have ever read. I will re-read it soon.

Mikey B. says

Page 718 my book

This was a man who knew more about that bane of our century, Hitler, than anyone else.

This is a very powerful and probing biography of Albert Speer. Speer was an architect who became interested, as probably most Germans, in the Nazi party in the early 1930's. It was seen at the time as an enthusiastic, vital response to the future of their country. Somehow they saw the Nazi Party as positive; not noticing the anti-Semitic vitriol and all the other "hates" (communism, democracy, liberalism...) contained in the speeches of Hitler. They called him "Mein Führer", meaning "my leader". It would be difficult to imagine using the same words for the leader of a democratic country.

In his younger days Hitler had interests in architecture and was naturally drawn to the younger Speer. There were mutual feelings of admiration between the two; and unlike most of Hitler's other relationships this was not a political one. The author speculates that this may have been similar to a father-son relationship. The infatuation between the two continued until their deaths. For Speer this lasted until he died in 1981.

With the death of Fritz Todt, Minister of Armaments, in 1942, Speer was assigned by Hitler to take his position. This was totally removed from anything that Speer had been doing previously - up until then he had been Hitler's architect - designing and making buildings in Berlin. By becoming Armaments Minister Speer entered into a new realm – a political one where his relationship to Hitler and his cronies changed dramatically.

Speer became highly effective in his new role – production of all armaments increased tremendously. To accomplish this he used millions of slave labourers from Nazi occupied Europe. The author hypothesizes (and I think correctly) that Hitler intuitively recognized in the 1930's when he first met Speer, that he would have an ability to function well in new positions – and kept him for the day he would be required. Speer in charge of a vast munitions enterprise was an excellent manager and overcame red tape to increase production and distribution. He thus, became directly responsible for prolonging the war.

Page 463 – Albert Speer

"I was inescapably contaminated morally; from fear of discovering something which might have made me turn my course, I had closed my eyes."

This book provides us with an inner view of Nazism and its leaders. The author spent months interviewing Speer and many who knew him throughout his life – his wife, secretaries, fellow architects and theologians such as George Casalis. Above all this book perceptively examines personalities – it scrutinizes their behaviour during different stages of their lives. Those surrounding Hitler were all drawn into a paradigm (a world view) from which they could not extricate themselves – at the center and key to this paradigm was Adolf Hitler. We are given searing and human portrayals of all the leading Nazis – Hitler, Himmler, Goebbels, Bormann and many of their underlings and even their children. I use the word “human” - as I do not like terms like madman to describe the Nazis – for this implies that they could not function in society. They functioned very effectively with disastrous results for all.

Speer was convicted and sentenced at Nuremberg to twenty years imprisonment. I feel he was lucky in this – he could have been executed like some of his peers. Speer often showed a unique ability to adapt and adjust – when he became Minister of Armaments – and then again at Nuremberg.

He did show contrition and searched for redemption for the rest of his life. During his imprisonment he spoke to a left-wing theologian, Georges Casalis. They worked together for a few years (in the early 1950's) and Casalis prompted Speer to search internally for his responsibility.

Speer carried guilt about his role and more so about the Holocaust. He admitted his guilt in a general sense, but never specific. For instance he blocked out a meeting at Posen in October of 1943 where Himmler gave a speech about the liquidation of the Jews. He visited “work camps” at Dora where thousands were underfed and brutalized. Speer's visit to Dora was unknown at the time of Nuremberg. He continually denied seeing anything during his frequent visits to Eastern Europe where millions died. Somehow or other he blocked this out within himself. But interestingly Speer was more shocked, and possibly awoken as to the regime he was working for, when many of his contemporaries were executed after the July 1944 attempt on Hitler's life.

Page 223

But you cannot “sense” in a void; “sensing” is an inner realization of knowledge. Basically, if you “sense”, then you knew.

Page 465

Speer's generalized acknowledgement of a moral mandate had only been an elegant ploy; behind it lay a nightmare of unavowed knowledge.

At times he could be extremely glib – but yet he changed, while many of his generation did not acknowledge their responsibility. After the Nuremberg trials Speer became open to new people and ideas – but Hitler's persona still resided within him until the day he died.

This book is essential for an understanding of Nazi Germany. We are provided with insight of this mysterious devotion that many had for Hitler. It is a tribute to Gitta Sereny that she unearthed so much vital psychological information from Speer and so many others before they passed on.

Page 10

What I felt neither the Nuremberg trial nor his books had really told us was how a man of such quality could become not immoral, not amoral but, somehow infinitely worse, morally extinguished.

Lissa says

Albert Speer, "Hitler's architect" and the Minister of Armaments and War Production (after his predecessor's death in 1942), is the only high-ranking Nazi official who accepted, really, any blame for the Third Reich's systematic slaughter of the Jews, Poles, Romanis, Russians, political dissidents, etc. Somehow managing to escape with his life after Nuremberg, he spent twenty years in relative solitude, writing his memoirs (which were published as *Inside the Third Reich* and *Spandau: The Secret Diaries*) and proclaiming that, although he was a high-ranking official in the Nazi Party and admittedly one of Hitler's closest acquaintances (Hitler, according to many, never had "friends" in the traditional sense of the word), he had no idea what was going on in eastern Europe.

I mainly read this book because I "enjoyed" (I find it difficult to say that I "enjoyed" reading a book about the near-eradication of European Jews, but I can't think of another word at this time to describe how I felt about this book) Gitta Sereny's "Into that Darkness," which I read for a college course about the Shoah (Holocaust) in 2002 (and I really must reread at some point in the future, since my knowledge base has increased dramatically since then). She had no problems putting Franz Stangl's "alternative facts" (to use a more modern term) to examination, and I was expecting something similar here (she was, I would argue, a bit "softer" on Speer, at least partially, I believe, because she developed a genuine fondness for the man).

The book is huge - 720 pages of text, not including picture inserts and the author's notes in the back - and it's dense. There were times that I could only read a few pages before setting the book aside to digest what had been discussed or revealed.

Of course, I have a vested personal interest in Nazi history; my grandmother was the only direct family member to survive the Shoah, and that is because her mother scrounged up enough money to send her to England in 1938 to live with a host family there via the *Kindertransport*, where she would live until 1946 (when she married my American grandfather). My great-grandparents, great-aunts, great-uncles, their children, etc - entirely gone, and to this day, we do not know what happened to all of them exactly - all killed because they were Jewish, except for my great-grandfather, who was primarily killed (and early - 1933) because he was a Communist (although I am sure being Jewish, although a secular Jew, did him no favours). All of this colours my perceptions and how I interpreted this book - you are forewarned. ;)

I suppose, approaching this, my question was - why? Why did this man - who was from a well-to-do family (although he had a bitterly unhappy, unloving childhood) and well-educated and, by all accounts, well-spoken and intelligent - fall in with Hitler? Why did so many like him follow Hitler into fascism? I believe this is especially important at this time in history, because it looks like other countries (including my own America, unfortunately) are tipping closer to fascism in this modern era.

And the book doesn't answer this. Speer himself cannot answer this, really - he just saw Hitler speak and found him very charismatic, so he signed up without much thought. And considering how, well, thoughtful Speer was, this seems strange. It almost feels as if there WAS some other reason that Speer either does not wish or CANNOT discuss - because, as Sereny demonstrates throughout the book, Speer had constructed in his mind the type of man he was and wanted to be, and nothing that interfered with this construction could be examined. Much of Speer's "battle with truth" is Speer battling with himself, trying to make his past conform to this idealized version of himself that he held until his dying day.

And what was this version of himself that he wanted to present to the world? He was primarily an architect, interested in creation and not destruction (this, at least, is believable). He was a Minister in Hitler's government, but he knew NOTHING about what was happening to the Jews. He knew little about the horrible conditions that the "foreign workers" were held under, even though his Cabinet oversaw the forced labour, which was used in war production (these two things I find unbelievable, as does, I am certain, Sereny, who says as much in the last full chapter, entitled "The Great Lie.") And he was repentant of his role, whatever it was, in the deaths of millions - which, even at Nuremberg, he stated that he accepted co-responsibility for, as a member of Hitler's government (none of the others on trial did that).

As a biography, I think this does a good job of showing Speer's life, from birth to his untimely death. As an examination of his culpability, however, Sereny, as I already mentioned, allows her friendship with Speer to colour her perceptions at times, and she is quite kind and delicate with her approach to asking the "hard questions." I am not calling for this to portray Speer as a one-dimensional war criminal; he wasn't, and I would never argue that he was, one-dimensional. However, I wish that she would have pushed him a bit more with the tougher questions, which he often attempted (rather successfully) to sidestep. Perhaps it was impossible for Speer to admit, even to himself, that he acted as anything other than exemplary; he seemed very invested in portraying himself as quite the perfect gentleman.

In the end, although few believe him, Speer states that he was never aware of what was happening in eastern Europe (in his own words, he didn't WANT to know, and so he didn't) and he spent a great deal of time and energy trying to disprove those who would present any evidence to the contrary. And he also stated that he never held any antisemitic views; in comparison to the rabid antisemitism held by Hitler and his followers, Speer's antisemitism is quite muted, although he stated in a letter that he "really had no aversion to [Jews], or rather, no more than the slight discomfort all of us feel when sometimes in contact with them" (p. 90).

But no one apparently played a role in the Shoah, at least according to most of the statements and memoirs pumped out by former Nazis. No one in Germany knew (even though the Allies knew by 1942 what was happening in eastern Europe); no soldiers knew; no one in the SS knew; no one in leadership knew. When presented with evidence to the contrary, then everyone was "just following orders." So Speer's denials give a false ring, because nearly everyone denied their involvement in the Shoah to save their own skins. Speer's denial, therefore, sounds like more of the same.

The parts of the book I found most interesting were the ones that dealt with Speer's time in Spandau prison; how he got along (or didn't) with his fellow prisoners. He seemed to "watch out" for Hess, which was a little surprising, considering that Hess was a devout Nazi. It was also interesting to read how Speer spent his time; he read quite a bit, wrote over a thousand pages in a year (the draft for *Inside the Third Reich*), smuggled out letters to various friends and family members, etc.

It was also interesting to see how Speer's family viewed him. His wife, Margret, whom he married when they were both young and with whom he had six children, stuck by him through everything - but there was a huge block between them, almost feeling as if they were two strangers. And Speer's reserved nature and penchant for becoming a workaholic distanced himself quite a bit from his children, who didn't know how to relate to this virtual stranger. It was actually quite sad to read about Speer's loveless childhood, in which neither his mother nor father particularly cared for him, and to see that he, although he didn't wish it to be so, visited the same on his own children. He cared about them, in his own way, but he just couldn't quite convey that to them, leading to the complete emotional estrangement from his children.

And the children and Margret are the ones I feel sorry for most in this book (besides, of course, the innocent victims of Hitler, but I mean on a personal level). Margret, especially, stood by Speer through everything -

twenty years of worry with him in Spandau, raising six children virtually on her own (although with monetary support from Speer's friends - many of whom would also become estranged from him in later years, because Speer insisted on calling Hitler a criminal and defected from the latent Nazism of that generation) - only to have him take a mistress in England, which he didn't bother to hide from her, and to be informed of Speer's fatal stroke from said mistress, who was with him at the end. What a slap to the face for her.

As for Speer, I have no doubt that he knew, at least partially, what was happening in the east. He saw the conditions at a forced labour camp, which upset him greatly; surely he didn't think that the Jews, who were blamed for anything and everything, were faring any better in their camps. There was a speech at Posen, delivered by Himmler, which Speer may or may not have been present for (he argues, of course, that he was there earlier in the day but NOT during Himmler's speech) - but even if he wasn't present, surely he heard murmurings about things later. Even in the most dictatorial states there are whispers, unrest, secret information passed along the vine - I find it completely impossible that he didn't, at least, hear SOME of this.

Speer battled with truth for the entirety of his post-Hitler life, but truth did not win out in the end. Speer, with his regimented self-control, triumphed, even telephoning the author about how he did fairly well with his life, considering. He did give a good portion of his earnings from his memoirs to Jewish charities (anonymously). He did form friendship with religious men (Catholic, Protestant, and yes, even Jewish) and tried to become a better man. He did give numerous interviews, both televised and in print, talking about his collective co-responsibility for what Hitler did. But, in the end, Speer could not face the complete truth and admit that, yes, he knew; he couldn't bear facing THAT truth, and so he never did.

Tom says

I thought Sereny did an admirable job of walking a very careful line between creating a complex, human portrait of Speer, as opposed to a one-dimensional image of an evil war criminal, and yet not letting him off the hook regarding his own "general" but less than forthcoming "confession" of complicity in the Holocaust. She gently but insistently prods him to admit he knew more than he let on at Nuremberg trials, creating a gradually building narrative tension equal to any excellent novel. This important book prompted me to read Speer's memoir, "Inside the Third Reich," a fascinating, if disturbing, insider's view of how an intelligent, urbane man such as Speer, and so many others, came to "accommodate" themselves to Hitler's barbaric vision of the world.

Jane says

What an extraordinary book! This is a biography of Albert Speer, architect to Hitler and government minister in the Third Reich, but it is a particular sort of biography. You could say it is a psychological or intellectual biography, but even those words don't do justice to its uniqueness. I see it as a moral biography, set within a conversation between Speer and the author, Gitta Sereny, who came to know Speer in the final years of his life. She became friends with him and she liked him. But her portrayal is a constant, unflagging challenge to Speer, and a challenge to which he consents. The topic of this challenge is, as the subtitle states, Speer's battle with truth. Sereny is well equipped for this task, as a person of great empathy and thoughtfulness and as a German who lived through the Nazi years.

Early in the book, and throughout, I marveled at her ability to deal with Speer sympathetically without ever

tipping over into rationalizing or excusing his actions, motives, and experience--which was both a counterweight to his rationalizations as well as, I think, what allowed him to stay with their inquiry all the way to the end.

The portrait of Speer is highly personal, even intimate--this in spite of his tendency to evade the personal and intimate at all times. He comes across as a greatly talented man, sophisticated, naive in some ways, with a gaping hole in his soul. Then the stunner is that to a greater and lesser degree at different stages throughout his life, he recognizes this. All individuals are complex and finally ineffable, but what unites Speer and Sereny is their commitment to try to give as full an accounting of him as possible. Necessarily they fail, but not without coming a great distance in that effort. It should also be said, that Sereny never approaches Speer with a pre-set theory based in psychology or anything else, even though she is smart enough to look at all the various aspects that can shed light on a man's life.

Reading this book, I was constantly back and forth with Wikipedia familiarizing myself with the many other characters discussed. When I felt myself feeling too much sympathy with Speer, I watched a holocaust film to remind myself of what was at stake. Because the Holocaust is at the heart of it--Speer's guilt, his excuses, and his courage.

Speer, as a favorite of Hitler, describes "loving" Hitler and being totally committed to him. He was not alone in this. I don't see it as a fault of the book, but Hitler himself remains a cipher, a black hole, in my mind. I never had any experience of seeing something human, humorous, attractive, compelling in him, although many did. So even though I felt I came to know Speer to some extent, that he became an intelligible, flawed human being, I could never get the contour of the spell Hitler cast over others. I wonder why. I wonder if anyone can ever make sense of a Hitler, or a Charles Manson. It's not necessary, perhaps, but I do wonder about it.

After Nuremberg, Speer was sentenced to 20 years in Spandau Prison. He served that entire time, entering at 41, exiting at 61. During that time--and in some ways, I found this the most interesting period of his life--he read 5000 books and dedicated himself to becoming "a new man." I think, again, that he failed at this, but the effort was fascinating as were the people who mentored him (both at Spandau and after). These included Georges Casalis, Father Athanasius, and Robert Raphael Geis, all of whom Sereny was able to meet and speak with. Perhaps this counts as a spoiler, but Sereny ends her book with this sentence: "It seemed to me it was some kind of victory that this man--just this man--weighed down by intolerable and unmanageable guilt, with the help of a Protestant chaplain, a Catholic monk and a Jewish rabbi, tried to become a different man."

Highly recommended.

Veni Johanna says

I've always been fascinated by Albert Speer's enigmatic persona - I absolutely love Spandau Diaries, but I feel that he's 'painting' a portrayal of himself that I don't quite buy in that book. This book does a wonderful job in framing Speer's two other books in terms of his own moral questioning, but it doesn't give much more factual information about Speer if you have read Inside the Third Reich and Spandau Diaries. However, excerpts of Sereny's conversations with Speer alone make this book worthwhile to read. It is these conversations that show us Speer as a person, the way Sereny sees it (and not the way Speer himself paints it). Very interesting read.

Nigeyb says

a c600 page account of Speer's life from youth to death via WW2 and Nuremberg. Absolutely fascinating and heartily recommended. Speer is one of the more interesting Nazis in that he acknowledged the evil that he had perpetrated. Read this and the two Antony Beevor books: Stalingrad + Berlin and you'll start seeing echoes of the past everywhere you go
