

albert speer: apolitical technocrat or skilled manipulator? essay sample

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Albert Speer was, arguably, the most complicated personality in the prominent Nazi officials. He began his career after joining the Nazi party as an architect; and his friendship with Hitler propelled his promotion to Reich Minister for Armaments and War Production. When Germany lost the war, Speer was one of the few Nazi officials to evade the death sentence. There are two historical viewpoints as to the role of Speer. The first is that Speer was merely a technocrat, with no political views- and this view is created by Speer in his post-war writings, as well as historian Joachim Fest. The second viewpoint, which is more widely believed than the first, is that Speer was a clever man who manipulated the Nazi party, the Nuremburg War Crimes prosecutors and also the world through his books after Spandau.

Historians Matthias Schmidt, Dan Van Der Vat and Gitta Sereny all provide historical evidence to support this thesis. Yet the speculation all comes down the ultimate question: Did Speer manipulate those around him to avoid the death sentence at the Nuremburg trials? After thorough research and much analysis, the answer is yes. At the Nuremburg War Crimes trials, Speer manipulated his prosecutors by putting forward a strategic defence. His defence was this: Speer accepted collective responsibility for Nazi war crimes and crimes against humanity, while simultaneously claiming to have had no knowledge of these atrocities or their details. American economist John Galbraith, who was present at the Nuremburg trials, said “Speer’s confession was part of his well-developed strategy of self-vindication and survival” 1. Also, historian Wesley Yang writes that Speer “seduced the Allies with his looks, charm and clever strategy” 2. Speer was primarily accused of utilising slave labour in his munitions factories. He distanced

himself from his advisor, and the ' official' recruiter of the slave labour force, Fritz Sauckel.

Sauckel became the scapegoat, and their relationship became very futile. As a result, Speer was sentenced to twenty years in prison, a comparatively light sentence. Film director Martin Davidson conveys in his documentary that " Speer gave the judges what they wanted most, penitence" 3. But where did this manipulative nature originate? Speer joined the Nazi party in 1931, and began to be commissioned architectural projects within the party. Prior to joining, Speer was persuaded to attend an address by Hitler, which he did, and he was deeply impressed by Hitler's appearance and speech. He writes in his memoirs that he felt that " it was time for something to be done about the state of Germany" 4, which shows that he entertained political views from the very start.

Speer had a very strong work ethic, which became known after he completed many architectural projects in limited time. His first contact with Hitler came when he viewed the plans for the Nuremburg Rally ground. They displeased him, and he wrote " the design outraged both my revolutionary and my architectural feelings" 5. He drew up some grandiose plans, and in trying to get them approved, he was sent to Hitler's office. Their friendship began from that meeting. Speer was promoted Architect of the Reich after the death of Paul Troost, a position he welcomed in view of increasing his own influence and power. When Speer was appointed the Architect of the Reich, he began to manipulate those around him to achieve what he needed.

Although Speer didn't join the Nazi party for its ideals and policies (in fact he

never read Hitler's 'Mein Kampf'), he very quickly adapted to the Nazi ideologies and incorporated them into his architecture. Speer developed the idea of 'ruin value', impressing the Fuhrer with his drawings of what the buildings would look like in many years to come.

His theory of 'Ruin Value' conveys to historians Speer's adaptation of the ideal that the Reich would last for a thousand years. Historian Benh Lieu Song writes in his article that the Ruin Value theory was a "classic sign of a cult of personality" 6. Also, historian Matthias Schmidt writes that 'Speer had only one goal in mind: to make history' 7, and by manoeuvring other individuals and societies, he certainly did just that. Speer claimed to lack knowledge of the Germania project, but this claim was evidently established solely for the benefit of the trials. The Germania project consisted of the rebuilding of Berlin. One element of this project was the deportation of Jews from Berlin to the concentration camps of Lodz, Riga and Minsk. Speer claimed not to have known about this, but much evidence points against his claim. Being a workaholic and a micromanager by nature, this denial of knowledge appears contradictory to his personality.

Also, one of his officials attended a meeting in which the expulsion of the Jews was discussed. Historian Gitta Sereny writes "It is impossible that Speer was not informed as to the substance of the meeting" 8. Speer's claim at Nuremburg that he knew nothing of this has visible defects. Speer was promoted to Reich Minister for Armaments and War Production and used this position to further manipulate the Nazi party and the war effort. He was appointed the position following the suspicious death of Fritz Todt. Many of

the other Nazi officials, especially Hermann Goering, were irritated by this appointment, and made an attempt to undermine his power. Speer consolidated his power by having those around him sign agreements, including permission to use non-political experts in his ministry. Speer also had all bureaucrats and army supply people sign a deed giving him full power over armaments decisions⁹. There is evidence that suggests that Speer prolonged the war for at least a year¹⁰. Speer achieved this by using strategies, including a shift to mass production, with factories specialising on one item.

He also increased the efficiency of manufacturing by drastically reducing the amount of machinery models produced. Historian Joachim Fest said “ He had scarcely achieved one success before he extended his tentacles towards a further accretion of power” ¹¹, and these words convey how Speer skilfully manipulated war production. The most controversial aspect of Speer was his role in the use of slave labour for the V2 rockets. Speer claimed to have had ‘ some idea’ as to the horrors of the camps and armaments factories. In contradiction, Speer visited the Dora rocket site, run by Hans Kammler, and was horrified as to the working conditions and the executions that occurred there. Historian Ken Webb asks the question “ Having seen Kammlers horror site, how could he have had ‘ only an idea?’” ¹². This evidence reveals the fallacy of Speers claims that he lacked knowledge, and also shows the ways in which Speer manipulated the party.

Historian Dan Van Der Vat also writes that “ he was responsible for some immensely wasteful diversions of scarce resources, such as the V2 project,

as well as for the sufferings of millions forced to work for him” 13, placing complete responsibility on him alone for all aspects of his role. The main opposition of Speer’s assertion that he lacked knowledge of the holocaust was the Posen conference, in 1943. During the four-day conference, Speer gave a speech, and Henrich Himmler addressed the audience with an unequivocal speech in the afternoon explaining in detail all aspects of the horrifying actions of his SS army. Speer has held to the stance that he was not there, and that he therefore did not know what was said. But Speer had more than one advisor at the meeting. Gitta Sereny writes that Speer was “ trying desperately to avoid facing the truth.

There is simply no way Speer can have failed to know about Himmler’s speech, whether or not he actually sat through it.” 14 The result of the After serving twenty years n Spandau prison, Speer began a career in writing, and wrote the autobiography ‘ Life in the Third Reich’, as well as three other books. He created a view of himself as an apolitical technocrat, and convinced the world that he had no knowledge of the Nazi atrocities. Historians have since presented evidence against his defence at Nuremburg and have argued that it was a result of his manipulation and dishonesty. Speer’s guilt was never overcome, and historian Wesley Yang writes as to his claim of naivety of the holocaust that “ He maintained this stance until the end of his life, and died a fearfully isolated man as a result.” 15 In conclusion, Albert Speer was not merely a technocrat without any political motives, but a clever man who manipulated those around his to achieve what he needed.

My evidence is his political intentions shown in his architecture and his consolidation of power once Minister for Armaments and War Production. Speer's manipulation of the prosecution and also the rest of the world through his post-war books are further evidence that this man influenced those around him to avoid the death sentence at Nuremberg.

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