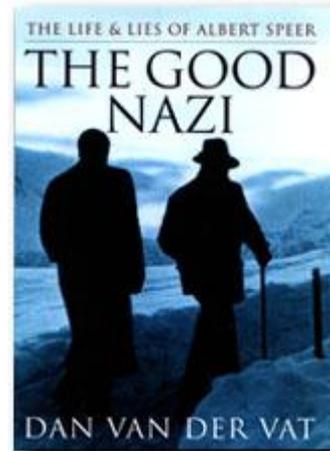


The Better Nazi

a review of

The Good Nazi: The Life and Lies of Albert Speer by Dan Van Der Vat

(London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997)



There is an old joke about two men out hunting in the American Rockies, when they disturb a grizzly bear which charges at them. One starts to remove his boots, and the other asks why. "I can run faster without my boots." When his companion points out that he will never out-run a grizzly bear, he replies "I don't have to out-run the grizzly bear; I only have to out-run you."

This is the situation which Albert Speer faced at Nuremberg: unable to escape the hangman's noose by avoiding moral culpability for the crimes of the Third Reich, Speer did so by establishing that his own culpability was less than that of his co-defendants. This was a smart tactic, not least because it was grounded in truth.

It also paid off. The Nuremberg Tribunal acquitted Speer of "Conspiracy to Wage Aggressive War" and of "Waging Aggressive War", but convicted him of "War Crimes" and "Crimes Against Humanity", for which he was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment. Significantly, the Soviet member of the Tribunal - Nikitchenko - did not dissent from the acquittal of Speer on the first and second counts, or in respect of his sentence, although dissenting in many other instances where defendants were acquitted or given non-capital sentences.

The title of Van Der Vat's biography - *The Good Nazi* - is obviously intended to be ironic. The sub-title, *The Life and Lies of Albert Speer*, is possibly for the benefit of casual readers who miss the irony in the main title. But there are two edges to Van Der Vat's irony: whilst the intended target of the author's irony is Speer's reputation as the most decent person amongst the Nazi hierarchy, this title may be seen as ironic in another sense. With the possible exception of neo-fascists and right-wing historians like David Irving, nobody - not even Speer himself - has sought to exonerate Speer from the evil committed by the Nazi regime of which he was a member: nobody has ever claimed that, according to objective standards, his conduct was that of a "good" person. By this title, Van Der Vat has given himself a "straw man" to attack. The negative case is an easy one, when the postulated positive case is non-existent.

There is no doubt, on the historical evidence, that Speer was intimately involved in appalling crimes against humanity. At Nuremberg, he was convicted - and sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment - largely on the basis of evidence showing his participation (as Minister for Production and Armaments) in the use of forced labour. The charges which he faced at Nuremberg did not include reference to his earlier involvement, as the architect responsible for re-planning Berlin, in the forced removal of Jewish citizens from their homes in that city, and Van Der Vat skillfully presents the evidence against Speer on this issue. But the unanswered question, as to which Speer was given the benefit of the doubt at Nuremberg, is whether he had any knowledge of the awful fate which awaited Jews who were "resettled".

Speer escaped conviction on the first and second counts on the (arguably technical) basis that his contribution to the Nazi war effort really only commenced when he became Minister for Production and Armaments in 1942, from which time the Third Reich's military position was entirely defensive. Yet it is arguable that nobody, with the possible exception of Field Marshall Erwin Rommell, did more than Speer to prolong the war. He might have done more, if it were not for the fact that, as Mr Justice Jackson, the chief US prosecutor at the Nuremberg Tribunal, commented during the course of Speer's cross-examination:

"[Y]ou were struggling to get manpower enough to produce the armaments to win a war for Germany.

And this anti-Semitic campaign was so strong that it took trained technicians away from you and disabled you from performing your functions. Your problem of creating armaments to win the war for Germany was made very much more difficult by this anti-Jewish campaign which was being waged by others of your co-defendants."

Like Rommell, Speer was, quite simply, good at his job - without the burden of being philosophically committed to Nazism. It is astonishing that the German economy was not fully committed to the war effort until Speer, in 1942/3, overcame Hitler's resistance to the privations which this produced for ordinary ("Aryan") Germans. He managed to convince the Nazi ideologues that German women should be permitted to work in munitions factories - as British women had been doing since 1939 - despite the Party's view that only women of "inferior" races should perform such work. He might even have ensured a German victory, if his proposal to develop a nuclear capability had not been met with Hitler's objection that atomic physics was "Jewish science", and his preference for "German science" utilising rockets to deliver conventional weapons. At his trial, this exchange occurred:

MR. JUSTICE JACKSON: And certain experiments were also conducted and certain researches conducted in atomic energy, were they not?

SPEER: We had not got as far as that, unfortunately, because the finest experts we had in atomic research had emigrated to America, and this had thrown us back a great deal in our research, so that we still needed another year or two in order to achieve any results in the splitting of the atom.

MR. JUSTICE JACKSON: The policy of driving people out who didn't agree with Germany hadn't produced very good dividends, had it ?

SPEER: Especially in this sphere it was a great disadvantage to us.

On the credit side, any objective analysis reveals that Speer was not only an exceptionally talented administrator and technocrat, but also a person whose devotion to the Nazi cause was tempered with compunction unknown to others in the Nazi hierarchy. Within his own offices, as Inspector-General of Construction for the Reich Capital, as Minister for Construction and Munitions, and ultimately as Reich Minister of Armaments and War Production, he actively protected members of his staff who were vulnerable under the Nazi regime for racial, religious or political reasons. He resisted the deportation of Jewish workers in his factories. Whilst his Department had no alternative but to use the forced labour made available by the SS, he insisted on these workers being given increased rations and improved living conditions - though, with disarming frankness, he readily conceded at Nuremberg that he was motivated principally by a desire to maintain their working capacity.

It was at the end of the war, when everyone except Hitler and those closest to him knew that the outcome was inevitable, that Speer displayed both cunning and courage in resisting Hitler's orders to adopt a "scorched earth policy". For some time, he succeeded in persuading Hitler not to implement this policy, using Hitler's own rhetoric to convince him that, when the tide of war again turned in Germany's favour (as Hitler was convinced it would), Germany would recapture the bridges, factories, etc., which were ordered to be destroyed. When Hitler was no longer open to rational debate, even on the terms of his own twisted logic, Speer blatantly countermanded the Fuhrer's instructions - thereby placing himself, as the Nuremberg Tribunal expressly found, "at considerable personal risk". There is even some evidence - though mainly from Speer himself - that, at a late stage in the war, he planned a coup and the assassination of Hitler, despite the torture and horrific execution of the participants in an earlier such plot.



Speer with Adolf Hitler

Moreover, it is to Speer's credit that, as a member of the interim government following Hitler's suicide, he co-operated fully with the Western Allies in the process of surrendering and handing over control of Germany, and that he willingly submitted to lengthy debriefings at a time when he had no expectation of being charged as a war criminal. His acceptance of moral responsibility for the atrocities committed by the Third Reich distinguished him from his co-accused at Nuremberg. And, perhaps more importantly, he never sought to recant, even after he was discharged from his 20-year sentence at Nuremberg. It is also the fact that, from the substantial profits produced by the books which he wrote after his release, he made very significant contributions to Jewish welfare organisations around the world, which were only disclosed by his publisher after his death.

The real mystery surrounding Albert Speer is the extent to which he had knowledge of the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime, and especially the Holocaust. In another recent biography, Gitta Sereny's *Albert Speer - His Battle with Truth* (London: Macmillan, 1995), this issue is addressed squarely, the evidence being presented fairly, without apparent bias or prejudice. By contrast, Van Der Vat adopts a prosecutorial position, pleading the case against Speer on what is essentially the same evidence as Sereny presented two years earlier.

Van Der Vat seems to regard as his strongest argument the fact that, on two separate occasions, Speer used the German word *Billigung* in acknowledging his moral responsibility for the Nazi atrocities: once in an interview with a highly respected intellectual journal (*Playboy*, to be specific); and once in an Affidavit which he furnished at the request of the chairman of the Board of Deputies of South African Jews, who had sought Speer's assistance in proceedings where a factual issue arose as to whether the Holocaust had actually occurred. Van Der Vat translates the word *Billigung* as meaning either "passive toleration/concurrence" or "active condonation/approval", and argues that "There is only one way to interpret this revealing remark: passively tolerant or actively approving, *Billigung* means Speer *knew*" [original emphasis].

I do not cavil with Van Der Vat's translation of *Billigung*; nor with his contention that even passive toleration implies some knowledge, or at least a suspicion. But it is hardly a revelation that Speer knew or suspected that Jews were being ill-treated; after all, Speer was using forced labour, mostly Jewish, in his munitions plants. A logical quantum-leap is required to transmogrify this into actual knowledge of the full scope of Nazi atrocities.

In any event, one does not need to speculate as to Speer's intention in using the word *Billigung*, for he explained exactly what he meant for the German magazine *Die Zeit*, which in 1978 published Gitta Sereny's interviews with Speer: Speer explained his intention in using the word *Billigung* as meaning "connivance through looking away, not through knowledge of an order or of [its] execution".

Van Der Vat dismisses this as if it were an attempt by Speer to recover from a stumble: that his use of the word *Billigung* revealed more of the truth than he intended, and that his explanation of *Billigung* as "connivance through looking away" was an *ex post facto* attempt to dissemble this Freudian slip. Yet the notion of guilt

through "turning a blind eye" is neither semantically nor logically far-fetched: our own legal system recognises a similar basis of liability - "constructive knowledge" - where one is aware of circumstances which would raise doubts in the mind of a reasonable person, but one chooses not to make further enquiry for fear of learning the truth.

Van Der Vat's other major piece of evidence against Speer is his connivance in suppressing the original chronicle of his wartime office. It is not suggested, however, that anything in the chronicle actually contradicts Speer's repeated denials of any knowledge about the so-called "final solution". What the chronicle does reveal is the extent of Speer's personal involvement in evicting Jews from their dwellings in central Berlin, at an early stage of the war: a very serious matter, no doubt, but no more serious than his involvement in the use of forced labour at a later stage of the war, for which he was duly tried and punished. Nor does it add to the very limited evidence concerning Speer's direct knowledge of the Holocaust.

Van Der Vat's so-called "Epilogue" - "Peroration" might be a more accurate term - throws in one final grain of evidence, which Van Der Vat describes as "a hitherto unpublished confession by Speer" which, "Should any doubts remain on the matter ... is enough to see them off". This is a letter from Speer's friend of many years, Dr. Rudolph Walters, who turned against Speer, apparently because he disagreed with Speer's willingness to accept collective responsibility for Nazi war crimes. (This falling out is treated by Van Der Vat as reflecting poorly on Speer, though it is hard to see why. True, Speer owed to Walters a great debt of gratitude, for looking after his family and affairs during his 20 years' imprisonment; but this hardly entitled the unrepentant Walters to expect that Speer would renounce his admission of collective responsibility at Nuremberg.)

The grain of evidence which is cited from this correspondence - between Walters and a third party - is Walters' claim that Speer used the word "tricks" in reference to his confession of collective responsibility, and his shows of repentance. Even accepting the accuracy of Walters' account, it is hard to see how such an equivocal remark can be regarded as the "confession by Speer" that is "enough to see ... off" any doubts concerning the extent of Speer's guilty knowledge.

Certainly there was an element of "trickery" in the tactics adopted by Speer at Nuremberg: alone amongst the major war criminals, he recognised that by admitting to the lesser wrong of "collective responsibility" for Nazi war crimes, and showing repentance, he stood a much better chance of escaping a capital sentence than if he shared the intransigent refusal of his co-accused - Goering, von Ribbentrop, Keitel, and the rest - to acknowledge any wrong-doing. This "trick" succeeded; but to describe it as a "trick" is in no way tantamount to a confession of greater guilt.

In the relevant context, there is a much more obvious reason for Speer's choice of the word "tricks". Walters was furious with Speer for continuing, even after his release from gaol, to admit "collective responsibility" for Nazi war crimes. One can understand why: if Speer was subject to a "collective responsibility", then so were all (including Walters) who contributed to the Nazi war effort. It is not hard to imagine Speer's attempting to placate his old friend's anger, by using the word "tricks" to describe the strategy which had saved him at Nuremberg.

In the final analysis, Van Der Vat fails in his objective to prove that Speer had a greater complicity in Nazi war crimes than he explicitly admitted during his lifetime. Of course, Van Der Vat's failure does not prove Speer's innocence; far from it. No-one who has read the evidence could disagree with the conclusion that there is still a large question-mark over Speer's knowledge of Nazi atrocities, as Gitta Sereny's earlier biography demonstrates. Despite Van Der Vat's efforts, the question-mark remains no more than a question-mark, and it is therefore doubtful whether his polemic represents a significant contribution to the Speer bibliography.