Spandau, The Secret Diaries – BOOK REVIEW

- **TITLE:** Spandau, The Secret Diaries
- **YEAR:** English Translation, 1976; German, 1975
  PUBLISHER: Macmillian Publishing Co., Inc., New York (English); Verlag Ullstein GmbH, Frankfort (German)
- **PAGES:** 451
- **GENRE:** Non-fiction
- **INTENDED AUDIENCE:** Serious students of topics relating to the Second World War.
- **MAIN POINTS (non-fiction):** Albert Speer was one of the major war criminals, tried for various crimes committed in the German prosecution of World War II. Speer was sentenced to twenty years imprisonment in Spandau prison, in Berlin. This book is his diary, smuggled out in portions, with the help of prison guards. He covers the mundane details of everyday prison life, such as the details of his gardening work. He also travels back in time to share information from his time on the inside of the leadership of the Third Reich. Speer's own observation is, *"[d]iaries are usually the accompaniment of a lived life. This one stands in place of a life."[3. Speer, Albert, 1976. Spandau; The secret diaries. New York: Macmillan, p. xii.]*

- **REVIEW:** The first part of Speer's life was his education, preparing for his work in the Third Reich. The second part of his life was serving in the Third Reich. The third part of his life was apparently spent trying to favorably explain his role in the Third Reich. This book falls within that third part.

I first read Speer's other book, "***Inside the Third Reich***," about 40 years ago. At that time, I was prepared to give him

the full benefit of the doubt. After all, the judges at the Nuremberg trials had given him the benefit of the doubt as well. That is, he was sentenced to 20 years in Spandau prison, rather than the hangman's noose, as many of his co-defendants, with seemingly parallel crimes.

In the years since the Nuremberg trials, many arguments have been put forward claiming Albert Speer should be given credit for accepting responsibility for his role in the atrocities of the Third Reich. Speer said that as part of the leadership of the Third Reich, he bore part of the responsibility for its sins.

Still, his admission of any guilt is harder to pinpoint. Speer's apology (if indeed it is an apology at all) is along the lines of *"I'm sorry if you were offended."* Or, in this case, more precisely, *"I'm sorry if you were offended by the war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide, and other assorted atrocities of the Third Reich."* As noted by historians more qualified than me, Speer falls short of actually admitting that he had a personal any hand in any of the war crimes. He maintains that although he was a minister of armaments for the Third Reich, and made use of slave labor, he had no idea of the war crimes committed in connection with the exploitation of this slave labor. Speer pointed out that when he learned slave laborers were literally being worked to death, he intervened on their behalf.

But, back to book itself. First of all, I want to confess that I mistook the name of the title for about four decades. That is, after I read ***Inside the Third Reich***, I wanted to read the other book whose title I mistook for ***"Inside Spandau."*** In fact, the title is simply "***Spandau,***" with the subtitle, "*The Secret Diaries*." My title made perfect sense to me, since the book was about Speer's existence inside the prison walls of Spandau for 20 years.

Spandau is a personal look at Speer's day-to-day life while

incarcerated for war crimes. In the beginning, Speer believed in many things that seem incredible a few years into the 21st century. For example, he thought it was plausible—even likely—that German people would call on him and other former key Nazis to take leadership roles in the post-war administration of Germany. In fact, the Nazis had so thoroughly embedded themselves in the government that, in the years immediately following the war, it was hard to find anyone who had not had some connection with the Nazis. Even with some Nazi influence being inevitable, the official stance of post-war Germany was to distance itself from Nazi influence. Speer argued that the antisemitism of the Nazi party was understandable and even forgivable, given the strong record of hatred for the Jews throughout Europe. That is, he maintains almost everyone in Europe was antisemitic at that time.

Speer also thought the German people would forgive and admire Hitler's accomplishments after a few years had passed, as had been the case with Napoleon.

On August 24, 1960, Speer wrote:

> *"I often recalled Napoleon, who with his insatiable hunger for power likewise plunged Europe into a bloodbath and who nevertheless was the hero of his nation twenty years after his death. Would anything similar happen with Hitler? This is the question I asked myself. The misdeeds committed in the attaining and consolidating of its power, the murders of Röhm and others, the breaking of so many treaties, the war, and even the determination to subjugate Europe—all these things were in the tradition of European history. Desire for power and lack of scruples cannot surprise anyone really acquainted with conditions on this continent. Even the regime's antisemitism was nothing unusual… [S]omething like "official" antisemitism existed even in Western Europe. In all these matters Hitler remained within the norms of European tradition."[2. Wait! Go back and read Speer's*

quote. He just said that Hitler's hatred of the Jews was normal for Europeans of the time. Could this be true? Source: Speer, Albert, 1976. Spandau; The secret diaries. New York: Macmillan, p.353.]

Speer argues that Hitler's problem, in regard to his antisemitism, is that he took the whole thing too seriously and simply pressed his point too far.

"Where he really did go beyond the norms was the way he took seriously his insane hatred of Jews and made that a matter of life and death. Like almost all of us, I thought Hitler's antisemitism a somewhat vulgar incidental, a hangover from his days in Vienna. God only knows why he can't shake it off we thought. Moreover, the antisemitic slogans also seemed to me a tactical device for whipping up the instincts of the masses. I never thought them really important, certainly not compared with the plans for conquest, or even with our vast project for rebuilding the cities.

"Yet hatred of the Jews was Hitler central conviction; sometimes it even seems to me that everything else was merely camouflage for this real motivating factor. That perception came to me in Nuremberg when I saw the films of the death camps and became acquainted with the documents; when I learned that Hitler was even prepared to risk his plans of conquest for the sake of that mania for extermination."[3. Speer, Albert, 1976. Spandau; The secret diaries. New York: Macmillan, p.353.]

So writing his account after Speer viewed the full body of evidence that sent many of his colleagues to the gallows, and after a full 15 years of reflection, Speer seems to not consider the Holocaust too serious. To him, it was not outside of "normal" antisemitism.

In the end, I had to ask myself whether someone in Speer's

position—minister of armaments, responsible for the war production of Nazi Germany—could really NOT know the life-and-death conditions of the slave labor being used to accomplish his. Speer's position is too incredible to accept.

Personally, I choose to not give this war criminal the benefit of the doubt. Speer may have been less morally reprehensible than some of his co-defendants at Nuremberg. Not a very high bar for comparison.

- **RECOMMENDATION:** this book is a shocking juxtaposition of mundane prison life and some of the worst war crimes in history. I highly recommend this book to anyone who has a serious interest in World War II history. The diary format is compelling. **But don't accept everything Albert Speer writes at face value.**
- **RATING (out of 5 stars):** ★★★★★