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INTRODUCTION

The Power of Home

As Allied troops moved into Bavaria at the end of April 1945, soldiers and journalists sought out the places where Adolf Hitler had lived in an attempt to understand the man who had battered Europe and terrorized the world. Sergeant Harry Sions, writing for Yank magazine, peered into Hitler’s bathroom cabinet at the Berghof, the dictator’s mountain home, and pondered the bottles of castor oil and mouthwash he found there. Vogue correspondent Lee Miller, staying at Hitler’s Munich apartment, rummaged through his closets and noted the monogrammed linen and silver.1

Our domestic spaces and possessions, we believe, reveal our inner selves, and the deeper the closet or cabinet, the greater the secrets. Hitler’s homes had not only the conventional nooks and crannies but also whole underground bunkers and passageways, and reporters (and subsequently tourists) searched them thoroughly for clues. There were rumors of torture chambers as well as overflowing treasuries, and some went in search more for buried riches than for hidden truths. But journalists and sightseers were also drawn to those spaces precisely because Hitler’s domesticity had been so highly visible during the Third Reich. Especially in his mountain home, where he had often been photographed, Hitler’s “private” life had been carefully orchestrated for public consumption, with the images and stories broadly distributed at home and abroad. Millions of readers felt that they knew “Hitler the man” through this domestic performance, and when Allied soldiers and reporters arrived in Germany, they were drawn to the places where his ghost seemed to linger.

This book follows in the footsteps of these domestic explorers but seeks a different sort of understanding. The first major postwar biography of Hitler, published by Alan Bullock in 1952, dismissed the meaningfulness of the Führer’s private life as “meager and uninteresting at the best of times.”2 A wholly different attitude characterized the tell-all books that emerged in subsequent decades, which scoured Hitler’s body, family past, and relationships to men and women for anomalies on a personal scale that could somehow explain a cosmic catastrophe. Hitler at Home acknowledges the importance of the private realm without seeking to be a biography told through architecture. Instead, I am interested in how Hitler chose to present his domestic self to the public, and in the designers, photographers, and journalists who constructed and conveyed the image to German- and English-language audiences, who were all too eager to consume it.

By the mid-1930s, it was all but impossible to avoid images and stories about the domestic Hitler. The topic was not only covered by the German media with great—indeed, almost obsessive—zeal, but it was also embraced by an English-language press serving a global audience, from London to Sydney, Toronto to Phoenix, and Bombay to Shanghai. In Germany, a market quickly emerged for popular consumer goods bearing images of the Führer’s home or of its owner at leisure on the Obersalzberg. One could decorate with a Hitler house–themed porcelain plate or embroidered throw pillow, save pennies in a replica coin bank, play with a toy model, send a postcard showing Hitler feeding deer on his terrace, or buy one of the many photographic albums that documented his life at home, from the dictator entertaining children to hiking with his dog. For a time, Hitler’s mountain retreat was arguably the most famous house in the world.

This vast production of images of Hitler at home proved to be enormously seductive and continues to exert its power even today. Its appeal has largely gone unchecked by historians, who have insufficiently exposed and deconstructed the propaganda surrounding Hitler’s domesticity. Apart from a small body of articles, books, and catalogues, literature about Hitler’s homes tends to be uncritical and, in some cases, reproduces the ideological “charm” of Third Reich publications. Remarkably, given how much has been written about Hitler, the significance of his domestic spaces in the visual imagination of National Socialism has remained underexplored terrain.3

Compared to their high visibility during the Third Reich, Hitler’s domestic spaces rarely appear in political or architectural histories of the period. Those who have written about the many diplomatic meetings that occurred in these homes have had little to say about the settings, despite Hitler’s desire to use them as stage sets to perform his identity as a statesman and man of culture. Studies of the Obersalzberg as an ideological and political center of National Socialism have been more attentive to its structures, but architectural historians themselves have contributed little to this literature. In general, scholars of architecture and fascist aesthetics have focused on monumental building projects and mass spectacle, overlooking the domestic and minute. And yet one could argue that the aesthetics of the mass spectacle at the Nuremberg parade grounds or of the gigantic in the New Chancellery, both designed by Albert Speer and associated with the public Führer, correlate with the singular and detailed assemblage of Hitler’s private domestic spaces, a choreography of objects and space that enacts the private man. The Hitler who commanded thousands and moved mountains of stone induced awe; the Hitler at home with his dogs and tea inspired empathy. Both images were integral to the Führer’s seductive power, and each had its architectural manifestation. Reading the official and monumental together with the domestic and minute allows us to grasp their intended and productive interplay in the representation of the Führer as both beyond and yet of the people.

Hitler himself cared deeply about the production of his domestic spaces, discussing them at length with his interior designer, Gerdy Troost. After the war, she recalled the enthusiastic interest he had shown in even the smallest detail. In his memoirs, Speer admitted that Hitler had devoted a level of personal attention to the design of the Berghof that was unequaled by any of his other building projects.4 It was Hitler’s favorite place to be—about a third of his time in office was spent on the Obersalzberg. In July 1944, Joseph Goebbels confided to his diary that he was relieved that the Führer had decided to transfer his military headquarters from his mountain home to the Wolf’s Lair on the eastern front. While Hitler had spent months planning battle strategies from his living room, the Allied armies had pushed ever closer to Germany’s borders.5

Perhaps if Speer had been involved, historians might have paid more attention to Hitler’s domestic spaces. Women architects and designers have only recently begun to receive their due in architectural history books, and little is known about their involvement in the Third Reich. Gerdy Troost has likewise slipped beneath the historian’s radar, despite the fact that she was once the tastemaker of choice for Hitler and other prominent National Socialists. This book hopes to raise awareness of a neglected but powerful female figure in the Third Reich, who deserves far greater scholarly attention than she has received. Her work also suggests that we need to consider more generally the role of interior design in the self-representation of the Nazi regime, to which many of its architects, including Speer, eagerly contributed.

Ultimately, the reasons for the neglect of the dictator’s homes and their creators may have more to do with scholars having all too readily accepted the propaganda of the Third Reich: namely, that Hitler’s domestic spaces existed outside the world of politics and ideology. I believe, to the contrary, that they were profoundly ideological spaces, which demonstrably lay at the heart of some of the most successful propaganda about Hitler produced by his regime. Representations of Hitler’s home life played a critical role in the early 1930s, when his public image as a screaming reactionary needed to be softened. The attention and care lavished on Hitler’s domesticity by his propagandists also transformed a potential liability—the perceived oddity of a stateless man living without deep connections to family, place, or lovers—into an asset by creating a domestic milieu that grounded and normalized him. Hitler’s domestic spaces struck just the right balance with the public of heterosexual masculinity, refined but not ostentatious taste, and German roots. Thus, his publicists and designers killed two birds with one stone, making Hitler seem both warmer and less queer. And all of this was carefully crafted and communicated to German and foreign audiences through a media eager to sell the story and images of the domestic bachelor.

The book is divided into two sections. The first half addresses the physical design and construction of Hitler’s three residences: the Old Chancellery in Berlin, his Munich apartment at 16 Prince Regent Square, and his mountain home on the Obersalzberg. Hitler occupied all three places throughout the period of the Third Reich, although he owned only the latter two. Chapter 1 examines Hitler’s transition from a prolonged period of marginal domesticity to the setting up of his first independent households in the late 1920s, as he approached his fortieth birthday, and the reasons for his lifestyle change. When Hitler became chancellor in 1933, he insisted on remodeling the official residence before he moved in, and Chapter 2 investigates how this was used to frame a new narrative about a leader with the ability to put his house in order. Having been bitten by the home renovation bug, Hitler then turned to reinventing his private residences. Chapters 3 and 4 chronicle the wholesale renovations of his Munich apartment in 1935 and, as soon as it was completed, the massive expansion of Haus Wachenfeld into the Berghof in 1935–36 by the architect Alois Degano. These projects demonstrate how Hitler used domestic architectural makeovers in the mid-1930s to shed any vestiges of his image as rabble rouser in order to emphasize his new status as statesman and diplomat. The associated high costs reveal how much Hitler was willing to invest to get it right and also contradict his regime’s propaganda, which continued to present the German leader as a simple man unspoiled by fame and power. While Hitler’s new domestic facades outwardly proclaimed the leader’s maturation and confidence, a cache of unbuilt drawings of the Berghof exposes Hitler’s struggle with how to position his domestic self in relation to his public identity. Chapter 4 also briefly considers Eva Braun’s photographs of the Berghof and what they suggest about her role as both mistress of the house and its privileged prisoner. Gerdy Troost was central to all three design projects, and Chapter 5 is devoted to her life and work, drawing on her personal papers at the Bavarian State Library in Munich, an astonishingly rich collection that opens officially to scholars in 2019.

The second half of the book explores propaganda about Hitler’s homes and their reception, focusing on his Munich and Obersalzberg residences. Chapter 6 begins with the “discovery” of the “private Hitler” by Nazi publicists in 1932 in the midst of a crucial election battle. Chapters 7 and 8, respectively, survey the media’s coverage in Germany and abroad of Hitler’s homes. In Germany, Hitler’s mountain retreat became a site of pilgrimage, and Chapter 7 looks at the hold it exerted on the National Socialist imagination through written accounts and the photography of Heinrich Hoffmann. While one can understand the appeal of journalistic accounts of Hitler at home for German audiences in the 1930s, it is surprising to discover a similar fascination reflected in the pages of foreign newspapers and magazines. Chapter 8 investigates the whitewashing of Hitler’s reputation for violence in the English-language press through its depictions of the domestic bachelor as the kind of gentle, cultured man one would be blessed to have as a neighbor. Views of the house-proud Hitler changed from admiration to ridicule when England, and later the United States, entered the war, and Chapter 9 traces the turn in the English-language press’s representation of the domestic Hitler from a gentleman-artist to a megalomaniacal housepainter and effeminate dilettante. The close of World War II marked both an ending and a new beginning for Hitler’s homes. Chapter 10 chronicles the bombing of the Obersalzberg, the arrival in Bavaria of Allied troops and journalists and their inspections of the Führer’s apartment and mountain retreat, and the extensive looting that took place by neighbors and soldiers. Chapter 11 brings the histories of these two residences into the present and explores the headaches that they have created for Bavarian authorities. On the Obersalzberg and in Munich, different strategies have been employed to compel people to stay away from these sites and to encourage forgetting. Yet decades after their owner died in an underground Berlin bunker, these homes continue to exert an unsettling magnetism. Moreover, fragments of Hitler’s domestic surroundings—ranging from silverware to bathroom tiles—continue to circulate and fetch astonishingly high prices among collectors of Third Reich memorabilia. Today, bits and pieces of the Führer’s domesticity are scattered on bookshelves and coffee tables across the globe, further contributing to the curiously long half-life of this history. The book ends by considering the problem such “relics” create for museum curators, who find them among their own collections, as well as the reluctance of the press in the United States and England to confront its own role in having disarmed its readers in the 1930s with depictions of Hitler at home.

Even as I have set out to analyze and deconstruct the production and power of Hitler’s domestic spaces, I remain ever aware of their seductive danger. Today, the vast industry of house decorating magazines and home renovation television shows thrives on the same human attraction to images of handsome interiors, happy children, well-groomed dogs, and stunning landscapes that Hitler’s publicists cannily employed to make the Führer seems likable and approachable. When these homes belong to mass-media celebrities—a phenomenon that Hitler’s regime helped to forge using new mass communication technologies and marketing techniques—the appeal is even greater. The Nazis knowingly manipulated the interest in Hitler’s private life to create a disconnect between the man on the patio feeding deer and the force behind the gas chambers. As Susan Sontag and others have argued, seduction and terror went hand in hand during the Nazi regime.6 By remaining attentive to broader contexts, both within Germany and abroad, I hope to make clear the political intentions behind the making of Hitler’s domestic image and reveal the horrors clinging to the underside of its coziness.

Victims of Hitler’s violence still feel keenly the danger of such allures. Over the years, I have spoken about my project with those who bear these personal scars, and I am grateful to all of them for their advice and wisdom. I owe the greatest debt, however, to my mother, who experienced Nazi brutality as a child in occupied Kefalonia and who will never be free of it. When I told her about my plans for this book, she remained silent for a while and then asked me for one thing: “Please do not make Hitler look good.” I have kept those words in mind throughout.