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THE SQUIRE OF BERCHTESGADEN

The Making of a Myth in the Foreign Press

For more than thirty years, William George Fitz-Gerald, journalist and novelist, traveled the world and wrote about the political affairs and peoples of the nations he visited. From the creation of new roads in the Peruvian highlands to Haile Selassie’s armed forces in Ethiopia and Japan’s growing impact on overseas markets, the range of Fitz-Gerald’s interests and commentary seemed limitless.1 Under the pseudonym Ignatius Phayre, Fitz-Gerald delivered eyewitness accounts considered informed and insightful, earning him the trust of editors and readers across the political spectrum.2 Today he is remembered, if at all, for a series of glowing articles he wrote about a visit to the mountain home of his “personal friend” Adolf Hitler. From 1936 to 1938, Fitz-Gerald sold his Hitler story to at least seven publications with national or international audiences: Country Life (1936), Current History (1936), National Home Monthly (1936), Saturday Review (1936), Windsor Magazine (1936), American Kennel Gazette (1937), and Homes and Gardens (1938).3 It also circulated among Australian newspapers.4 Whether they were perusing Homes and Gardens in Leeds, Current History in Boston, National Home Monthly in Winnipeg, or the Sunday Pictorial in Sydney, English-language readers across the globe eagerly absorbed the details of Fitz-Gerald’s home visit with Hitler, whom he dubbed the “Squire of Berchtesgaden.”

With his international experience and curiosity, Fitz-Gerald seems, at first glance, an unlikely champion of Adolf Hitler. Fitz-Gerald was capable of writing with passion and sympathy for the oppressed. In a 1919 article entitled “Race-Hatred in the United States,” for example, he condemned the lynching of African Americans in the United States, documenting the sadistic brutality of the crimes perpetrated on innocent victims. He also reported on the abuse and torture of African American prisoners, the suppression of the black vote, and the arbitrariness of the color line.5 Some fifteen years later, he raised awareness about the continuing practice of slavery around the world, describing the marketplace auctions of women, children, and men. He argued that the demand for slave labor—“domestic, agrarian, and industrial”—and the profits to be made from human trafficking kept slavery alive. And he criticized the colonial powers that, looking after their own economic self-interest, turned a blind eye to these realities at home and abroad.6

A closer look, however, suggests that Fitz-Gerald’s global encounters only reinforced his belief in a profoundly divided humanity. Fitz-Gerald was born in 1873 in London to Irish immigrants. His youngest brother, Desmond, a poet and revolutionary, took part in the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin and was imprisoned by the English. Desmond later rose to prominence in the Irish Free State government, eventually becoming minister of defense—a connection his brother William undoubtedly would have found useful in securing a personal interview with Adolf Hitler.7 In 1923, following the establishment of the Irish Free State, Fitz-Gerald published an anthology entitled The Voice of Ireland: A Survey of the Race and Nation from All Angles.8 Despite assembling an impressive diversity of contributors, including Dublin’s chief rabbi, Fitz-Gerald made clear in the subtitle that Ireland was not a multiracial state.9 This exclusionary mindset was explicit in other writings, in which Fitz-Gerald claimed that nations with racial and territorial integrity were best able to compete on a global basis. He credited the foreign trading successes of the Japanese, for example, to their being “a clannish people . . . a true ‘Family’ in Burke’s definition of nationhood, and one weaponed for this peculiar fray as no Western polity can ever be.”10 In his 1933 book, Can America Last?, he argued that the United States could never establish itself politically “on a secure and enduring basis” because it lacked the unity of “older lands which are true ‘nations’ of homogenous race and limited boundaries.”11 Significantly, for Fitz-Gerald, strong nationhood rested not only on homogeneity of race, but also on the type of race. The following year, in an odious article on Liberia, he dismissed the very idea of a “Negro ‘nation’” as “a contradiction in terms.”12 Hitler’s rhetoric on German self-determination thus must have resonated with Fitz-Gerald’s own ideas on nation and race.

Moreover, Fitz-Gerald’s sentiments were profoundly anti-democratic. Like many others in this period, he hoped for the emergence of “the long-looked for Leader.”13 In the final pages of his 1933 book on America, he wrote that “all classes, from bankers to gangsters, are well aware that Democracy has broken down, and that only the stern τύραννος, or Master, can lift the United States out of its rut of ruin and decay.”14 Traveling in South America, Fitz-Gerald admitted he felt “something like veneration tingeing my admiration” for political strongman Augusto Leguía, Peru’s president. He credited Leguía’s success in modernizing his nation to his insistence on “public order,” but failed to mention the cost to political freedoms.15 When Fitz-Gerald turned to writing about Hitler in the mid-1930s, he seems to have judged him on similar terms.

The remilitarization of the Rhineland in March 1936 and the Olympic Games in Berlin the following August focused the world’s attention on Germany and its leader, and Fitz-Gerald capitalized on the interest by publishing multiple articles that year about his visit to Hitler’s mountain home. The personal connection between author and subject was a major selling point: “Holiday with Hitler: A Personal Friend Tells of a Personal Visit with Der Führer—with a Minimum of Personal Bias” read the large heading above Fitz-Gerald’s article in the July 1936 issue of Current History. The frontispiece photograph depicted a smiling Hitler outdoors, wearing a suit but seeming relaxed in the mountain landscape. The caption, “Adolf Hitler: A ‘different’ pose,” summed up the article’s intent in a nutshell. Situating his visit in the months following the events in the Rhineland, which had triggered international anxieties about another war, Fitz-Gerald pondered the difference between the dictator whom British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin claimed had the power to lift the “‘black shadow of fear from Europe” and the man who rushed to greet his plane as it landed on the Obersalzberg. “But was it really such omnipotence as this that hurried towards me with the same springy gait I knew so well, with that hearty smile of welcome, and a chubby hand raised in the salute? It seemed incredible.”16

Seeing his bareheaded host arrive, “the unruly ‘browlock’ broken loose,” Fitz-Gerald remarked that “Hitler might have been a hired gardener. Clad in an old tweed coat, tightly buttoned and too short for him, and shabby trousers that did not match, he was waving a crooked stick wrenched from a cherry tree.” Fitz-Gerald did not intend to argue that Hitler did not look like an omnipotent dictator who held the fate of Europe in his hands. Rather, he wanted to convince readers that Hitler did not act like one either—at least, not on the Obersalzberg, his “one and only ‘home.’”17 Here, Fitz-Gerald suggested, away from the admiring crowds and stresses of the capital, Hitler was able to strike a “different pose” and reveal another self—the “Squire of Wachenfeld.”

In the series of articles that he published on Hitler at home, Fitz-Gerald enticed readers away from the frightening and alienating image of a thundering, “messianic” Führer, and offered in its place a portrait of the squire, or country gentleman, a comforting and recognizable figure, especially for British and Commonwealth audiences. The “Squire of Wachenfeld,” according to Fitz-Gerald, was a “shy, retiring man” and “a very modest—even a simple, humble soul.”18 As the Führer’s “personal friend,” Fitz-Gerald claimed to have the insight and access necessary to introduce the reader to this other, private Hitler. Depending on the publication, Fitz-Gerald altered the details of the story to accommodate readers’ tastes. Thus, the text for Homes and Gardens described the Führer’s curtains and the food he served his guests, while that for Current History included stories from his formative years in Austria. Despite these minor variations, however, the articles covered largely the same material and developed common themes, with the aim of transforming the image of Hitler in the reader’s mind.

There was, to begin, Fitz-Gerald’s description of Hitler’s clothes. Away from the politics of Berlin and the mass rallies of the Nazi Party, the mountain was a place for civilian attire. As seen in the quotation above, Fitz-Gerald brought the reader’s attention to Hitler’s old tweeds, suggesting both the unkempt bachelor and the landed gentry.19 Further emphasizing the English sartorial connection, Fitz-Gerald noted that Hitler’s “coarse tweed” suits were “made by a ‘London’ tailor” in Munich.20 A certain jaunty tone was also struck by Fitz-Gerald’s mention of Hitler hiking in “plus fours,” a style of sporting breeches introduced in the 1920s and popularized by the Prince of Wales.21

Such clothing befitted the activities of the mountain, which, in addition to leisurely pursuits, encompassed—according to Fitz-Gerald—a working farm. Fitz-Gerald referred to the land Hitler had acquired around Haus Wachenfeld as an “estate.”22 He wrote: “A little farming is done here with well bred stock. The Leader also grows wheat and alfalfa; while his cherry orchards are famous all along the Austro-German frontier.”23 Around the house, Fitz-Gerald noted, “the gardens are laid out simply enough. Lawns at different levels are planted with flowering shrubs, as well as roses and other blooms in due season. The Führer, I may add, has a passion for cut flowers in his home.” He also kept in touch with his gardeners’ activities, speaking with them “every morning at nine” about the day’s work ahead.24

Fitz-Gerald further informed the reader that, in addition to his interest in farming and gardening, Hitler bred dogs on his estate. In his essay for Homes and Gardens, Fitz-Gerald stated that “all visitors are shown their host’s model kennels, where he breeds magnificent Alsatians” (fig. 54). It included a picture of Hitler relaxing on the lawn beside one of his “pedigree pets.”25 While Hitler did not hunt or shoot, Fitz-Gerald managed to allude to the latter through a reference to his dogs, one of whom (Muck) was misidentified as a retriever—a type of gun dog closely associated with the English nobility.26 Fitz-Gerald, moreover, claimed that Hitler was “never so content as when hobnobbing with the hunters.”27

Hitler’s dog breeding activities and relationships were explored more fully in a feature article, “Hitler Says His Dogs Are Real Friends,” published in the American Kennel Gazette in January 1937. The magazine, read widely by dog breeders and lovers, occasionally featured stories about “great men” and their canine pets, meaning that Hitler was placed in the august company of, among others, Abraham Lincoln. In this version of his Haus Wachenfeld story, Fitz-Gerald emphasized Hitler’s rigorous attention to the purity of his German shepherds. “From all parts of the Reich,” Fitz-Gerald noted, “Alsatian-lovers offer Hitler their best strains as an honored gift. But he prefers to follow his fancy and buy his own. Otherwise, Haus Wachenfeld might become an asylum for mongrels, much as the White House gardens were under President Theodore Roosevelt, who was offered dogs by the hundred during his political tours from ocean to ocean.”28 While President Roosevelt had, indeed, enjoyed a particularly pet-filled White House, with a wide assortment of animals and both pure and mixed breeds of dogs, the comparison here carried not-so-subtle racial overtones about the weakness of the United States as a heterogeneous nation.

Farming, gardening, shooting, and dog breeding were typically associated with the activities and interests of the English landed gentry. Moving beyond the active life, Fitz-Gerald also drew parallels between the landed gentry’s rooted identity in the land that they owned and worked and Hitler’s own deep bonds to his Obersalzberg estate. There was the proximity to Austria, his native homeland, upon which the German leader could gaze (longingly) from the vantage point of his mountain home. Memories of his revolutionary days and of old friends, such as Dietrich Eckart, also tied him to the place. Above all, Hitler felt emotionally connected to this land, Fitz-Gerald claimed, where he could be himself. “You love this place?” Fitz-Gerald asked him, “watching this very ‘different’ man with surprise, as he jested and told funny yarns to his friends out on the moonlit balcony after dinner.” Hitler replied, “I am happy here. . . . High up on these sunny slopes, I feel I can breathe and think—and live! The very thought of all that reek and rattle of towns often appalls me as I recall it here. So does all the fuss, all the guarding, and cheering, and flower-pelting with the tedious routine of bureau and official life. Besides, I fancy the folks esteem me. You see, I’m just ‘one of them’! They know I can enter into their joys and woes.”29

Hitler’s notion that the mountain brought him closer to “the folks” played into Fitz-Gerald’s makeover of the Führer as squire. In National Socialist propaganda, the Obersalzberg had been imagined as the meeting place of leader and nation. Fitz-Gerald took up the idea, but localized it in English terms, evoking the squire and his tenants. In the following passage from Current History, Fitz-Gerald described the “squire” setting out to visit his villagers: “A smiling Führer would tap on an open door. Entering—perhaps at meal-time—he would inquire what the brood of babes had to eat (four is the minimum family he likes to see). And of course, he must dilate on the vitamin-values of his own milk soups, cinnamon-rice, potato-pancakes and the rest.”30 Presented as gentle, caring, and mildly eccentric, Hitler was thus transformed in Fitz-Gerald’s hands into a nineteenth-century archetype of the kindhearted and charitable squire tending to his people.31

Indeed, for his youngest villagers, the squire prepared special delights. At dinner, he announced to Fitz-Gerald that “tomorrow . . . we’re going to have a children’s party. So we’ll hunt the highland villages for guests and then go down Berchtesgaden to complete the list.” The next day, “at four o’clock or so, quite a crowd of his little friends came straggling across the upland meadows. Hitler was quite excited; never was there a middle-aged bachelor who so delighted in the company of children.”32 Perhaps to reinforce the wholesomeness of the children’s “Fun Fair,” Fitz-Gerald noted in the 1938 Homes and Gardens article that “Frauen Goebbels and Göring, in dainty Bavarian dress, arrange dances and folk-songs.”33 In the version published in Country Life, the duty of female overseer fell to “Frau Scholtz Klink (of the Women’s Labour Front),” who “will escort parties of young folk to greet the ‘Squire.’”34

According to Fitz-Gerald, Hitler was an equally generous and gracious host with his adult guests. Homes and Gardens readers, who were used to reading about the culinary tastes of the wealthy, learned that Hitler, although “a life-long vegetarian,” was “something of a gourmet” and “keeps a generous table for guests of normal tastes. Here bon viveurs like Field-Marshals [Hermann] Göring and [Werner] von Blomberg, and Joachim von Ribbentrop will forgather at dinner. Elaborate dishes like Caneton à la presse and truite saumonée à la Monseigneur will then be served, with fine wines and liqueurs of von Ribbentrop’s expert choosing. Cigars and cigarettes are duly lighted at this terrace feast—though Hitler himself never smokes, nor does he take alcohol in any form.”35 Once again, Fitz-Gerald chose his references carefully. The menu of pressed duck and wine-stewed trout testified to the sophisticated tastes and skills of the Führer’s household, while the type of food evoked images of the country squire shooting and fishing on his estate’s ponds and rivers.36 The references to liqueurs and cigars added a certain luxurious and masculine aura to the setting of Haus Wachenfeld, perhaps to balance descriptions of “that Nazi amazon, Frau Scholtz Klink” and the children’s “Fun Fair.”37

Beyond the refined pleasures of Hitler’s table, Fitz-Gerald reinforced the genteel image of “the squire” with a discussion of his artistic tastes and talents. Fitz-Gerald described Hitler as “his own decorator, designer and furnisher, as well as architect.”38 He credited Hitler with the early expansion of the Haus Wachenfeld, done “in harmony with the simple wooden lines of the original.” Fitz-Gerald admired Hitler’s “nice taste for eighteenth-century German furniture and pictures.”39 In his own guest room, Fitz-Gerald inspected the “watercolors by der Führer himself” who “still paints at odd hours—chiefly architectural subjects.”40 Given a tour of Hitler’s substantial library (Fitz-Gerald estimated the number of volumes at about six thousand), he noted “that quite half the books are on history, painting, architecture and music.”41

Through these multiple references to Hitler’s activities and possessions, the reader absorbed the image of a cultured man, an impression deepened by the company he kept at Haus Wachenfeld: “Hitler delights in the society of brilliant foreigners, especially painters, singers and musicians.”42 In the evenings, music filled the house as Ernst “Putzi” Hanfstaengl, Hitler’s Harvard-educated foreign press chief and friend (Fitz-Gerald noted that they were on familiar, du, terms), sat down to play the piano enthusiastically, if not with virtuosity, for his host: “Herr Hanfstaengl gave us delicate bits from Mozart, with terrific crashes of Liszt in between. It was a relief when the last Rhapsody was played, and we could listen to the plaintive flutes and strings of a party of guides and hunters who serenaded their Leader from the cherry-orchard close by.”43

In certain respects, however, Fitz-Gerald was careful to distinguish Hitler from possibly damaging associations with the landed gentry. He emphasized that Hitler was not the beneficiary of a family legacy, but rather a self-made man who had experienced “five years of misery in Vienna.”44 Haus Wachenfeld had not been inherited, but rather bought with the royalties from Mein Kampf: “‘This place is mine,’ he says simply. ‘I built it with money that I earned.’”45 Instead of a grand manor house, Hitler’s home was “a cozy but modest chalet,” with “cactus plants in majolica pots,” trilling “Hartz mountain canaries in gilded cages,” and presents from admirers—“furniture, china, silver, and rugs”—arranged in a bachelor’s clumsy manner.46 Not one of Fitz-Gerald’s articles mentions the massive expansion of Hitler’s mountain home between November 1935 and July 1936, which resulted in the Berghof. The 1938 Homes and Gardens article noted that Hitler was “constantly enlarging the place, building on new guest annexes” and included one photograph of the new interiors (Hitler’s study), but otherwise all the photographs and descriptions in this and the other publications were of the older Haus Wachenfeld, as it existed before the 1935–36 renovation.47

Fitz-Gerald’s retellings of his overnight stay with Hitler did not ignore political activities at the house, but framed these in ways palatable with the gentler image of the squire he wanted to construct. Thus, he wrote of Hitler leaving the house “soon after dawn, clad in plus fours, and with his retriever Muck, or else his trained Alsatian Blonda, trotting at his heels. One or the other of these will be carrying on his back a little hamper containing tomato sandwiches and fruit, with a couple of bottles of mineral water. Then amid the pines, or on some commanding knoll beside a cross and wayside shrine, Herr Hitler will sit down to ponder his problems and speeches.”48 Politics were thus reduced to abstractions and submerged into narrative distractions, leading readers’ attention away from the substance of those “problems and speeches” to the contents of a picnic basket. Fitz-Gerald had spent decades probing the actions of politicians and diplomats, but that analytic mindset is wholly absent in his account of the goings-on at Haus Wachenfeld, which reduced men such as Goebbels to a droll raconteur, Ribbentrop to a wine connoisseur, and Hanfstaengl to a piano player.49 In Fitz-Gerald’s hands, the noise and fuss of politics that Hitler claimed to dislike was left as far behind for the reader as it was for the Führer himself, both of whom were left in Fitz-Gerald’s narrative to enjoy the beauties and solitude of the mountain.

Thus, with care and craft, Fitz-Gerald transformed the dictator into the squire, creating a seductive, comforting image that soothed rather than inflamed his readers’ fears. Reassuring as it may have seemed, however, the story Fitz-Gerald told was riddled with inaccuracies. Some of these can be attributed to artistic license. Wanting to add a dash of modernity to the traditional portrait he drew, Fitz-Gerald gave Hitler an imaginary landing strip on his estate, which, he claimed, the Führer used to commute between Berlin and the Obersalzberg.50 Along more conservative lines, while Hitler favored Alsatian (or German shepherd) dogs, he did not breed or promote them in the manner of the English landed gentry, as Fitz-Gerald suggests. Perhaps to suggest a soft spot for Anglo-German royalty, Fitz-Gerald sometimes renamed Hitler’s dogs after German and English monarchs: Otto, Fritz, and Victoria.51 (The dogs’ actual names were far less illustrious: Muck, Wolf, and Blonda.) Similarly, Fitz-Gerald’s description of Hitler’s cherry orchards and wheat and alfalfa crops may have made him seem more like a proper squire, but the land was too poor and at too high an altitude to sustain such agriculture.52 And as invigorating as hikes at dawn or early morning chats with the gardeners may have seemed, Hitler’s routine in the mountains, where his days typically began around noon, did not accommodate either one. These are but a few of the many instances where poetic license trumpeted the facts.

Some of the more glaring errors, however, raise concerns that are harder to ignore. Most obviously, and as mentioned previously, Haus Wachenfeld had been swallowed by the construction of the Berghof beginning in November 1935. By the time that Fitz-Gerald’s articles appeared, the place that he so loving described no longer existed. Moreover, the massive fortification of the Obersalzberg and the forced removal of its inhabitants at about this same time meant there were few neighbors left for the “squire” to visit.53 The notion that Hitler might leave his heavily guarded compound to knock on villagers’ doors and discuss the vitamins in milk soup was hardly plausible in 1936, if ever. Hanfstaengl, furthermore, far from being on du terms with Hitler, had fallen out of favor in the fall of 1934 and never met with him again, at Haus Wachenfeld or anywhere else.54 Indeed, by the time the Homes and Gardens issue appeared in 1938 and its readers learned of Hanfstaengl’s piano serenades of the Führer on the Obersalzberg, Hanfstaengl was living in England, having fled Germany the previous year in fear for his life. Hanfstaengl’s fall from grace was known outside Germany before Fitz-Gerald began to publish his stories in 1936, and newspapers reported on his exile in England in 1937 following the attempt on his life.55 In other words, despite what was widely known, Fitz-Gerald insisted on an older, more charming story—like a fairy tale that transcends time. Most damning of all these inaccuracies, however, is Fitz-Gerald’s claim in Current History to have visited Haus Wachenfeld in the spring of 1936, when the house was a large and thoroughly unlivable construction site and Hitler was not in residence. Fitz-Gerald, in short, could not have possibly visited Hitler or been his houseguest on the Obersalzberg when he claimed to have been there.

Digging deeper, it becomes apparent that many of the narrative details are copied—sometimes verbatim—from other sources. Fitz-Gerald records an anecdote that he says Hitler recounted over dinner at Haus Wachenfeld in 1936, supposedly based on an event that happened earlier that day; in fact, Fitz-Gerald took the story from two Time magazine articles published in 1934.56 His brief description of Hitler’s Munich apartment, which he claimed to have visited, is based on a 1935 article in the Daily Telegraph.57 But the most troubling appropriations are from Heinrich Hoffmann’s propagandistic works on Hitler, particularly his 1935 illustrated book, Hitler in His Mountains.58 While these books targeted German audiences, they were also known abroad. Hitler in His Mountains even received a positive review in The Observer, which noted that the book “gives a picture of the Nazi leader as a simple country gentleman”—a remark that may have inspired Fitz-Gerald to take up his pen.59

Fitz-Gerald mined Hoffmann’s books as a source for anecdotes, picking up details or references and elaborating them into stories. As a result, reading Hoffmann and Fitz-Gerald together produces a strange echo effect in the reader’s mind, as the images of one are returned in the words of the other. For example, Hoffmann included a photograph of a girl, about six years old, standing beside a seated Hitler (see fig. 50). In one hand, he holds a pen, and in the other a card, which she is in the process of giving to or taking from him. The caption reads, “And again: ‘Please, please, an autograph!’”60 Compare this to an anecdote told by Fitz-Gerald about the children’s party he claims to have attended at Haus Wachenfeld. He begins by describing how somber and uncomfortable Hitler had seemed when Fitz-Gerald had seen him at work in Berlin:

But here in his hill-perched eyrie, Hitler is wholly changed and calmed. He can laugh heartily as he grabs up a tiny tot to show her all the fun that is going on in the aerodrome. Or again, some rustic maid of six or eight plucks up courage to creep up and pipe, “Eine Autogramme, Mein Fuhrer!” Out flashes that golden pen, and in a moment Hitler’s name is scrawled in a way to defy the handwriting expert. They say his autograph is negotiable anywhere in the Reich for ten marks or so. It is certain that scraps of paper with “A. Hitler” on them have already built orphan homes and hospitals from here to the far marches of East Prussia.61

The reader assumes Fitz-Gerald witnessed the exchange between Hitler and the girl and is here personally testifying to the Führer’s kindness. Our narrator then spins the alleged event further, transforming Hitler’s scrawled signature into a network of charitable institutions. Fitz-Gerald thus managed to outdo even the Führer’s propagandist.

Fitz-Gerald illustrated his Hitler articles almost exclusively with photographs taken from Hoffmann’s 1935 book. Relying on Hoffmann’s work was not unusual for journalists at the time, since he had a virtual monopoly on photographing the Führer. However, Country Life and Homes and Gardens credited Fitz-Gerald with the images, further lending credibility to his role as intimate observer. Fitz-Gerald sometimes altered the original captions in a misleading manner to support his narrative. For example, to illustrate the “squire’s” friendly relations with the local villagers, Fitz-Gerald employed a photograph identified by Hoffmann as Hitler greeting General Karl Litzmann (on a visit to the Obersalzberg) and changed the caption to: “Neighbors: Hitler Says ‘Hello.’”62 The unreliability of Fitz-Gerald as a narrator recalls a criticism made in a Times Literary Supplement review of his 1933 book, Can America Last?: “Mr. Phayre has a free and easy way with names, quotations and dates.”63

Even allowing for the artistic license so abundantly taken in these articles, the extent and scale of the inaccuracies and plagiarisms in Fitz-Gerald’s accounts of his visit to the Obersalzberg make the question of authenticity unavoidable. Could it be that Fitz-Gerald, who had begun his career as a novelist, was never Hitler’s guest at Haus Wachenfeld? Indeed, could the entire account be an elaborate fabrication? Former Irish Prime Minister Garret FitzGerald, writing about his uncle William George, stated that “the latter part of his life was spent as an invalid in London, where he died in 1942.”64 Perhaps Fitz-Gerald had been well enough in the mid-1930s to travel to Germany, or perhaps he fantasized the story about his country holiday with Hitler from a sickbed in London. Whatever the case may be, the fact remains that Fitz-Gerald plagiarized sources, including Nazi propaganda, for his reports and passed it off as his own firsthand experience. The editors of highly trusted and respected publications then passed on these lies to tens of thousands of readers as serious journalism.

How could so many reputable journals and newspapers have missed the warning signs? Even if the editors had failed to recognize the inaccuracies and plagiarism, some of the ludicrously flattering anecdotes about Hitler should have set off alarm bells. By the mid-1930s, the pathological violence of the National Socialist regime was well known, and it is hard to believe that editors did not notice the whitewash in Fitz-Gerald’s pen. Indeed, the article’s subtitle in Current History acknowledged the story’s “personal bias,” but ascribed it to the author’s friendship with Hitler, as if this made it acceptable. Fitz-Gerald’s thirty-year career in journalism may have played a role in alleviating doubts as to the slant or veracity of his story. As noted above, his political reporting was often admired for its insights. Nonetheless, his reputation was not without its holes. According to Garret FitzGerald, his uncle “edited the magazine Wide World, which was supposed to publish only true stories of travel but which strained its readers’ credulity with a story of an intrepid explorer crossing the Pacific on the back of a dolphin, as a result of which Punch published a cartoon showing my uncle, shipwrecked on a raft, spying a vessel in the distance and crying ‘A sale! a sale!’”65

In certain cases, the politics of the editor publishing Fitz-Gerald’s story may have come into play. Under the guidance of the archly conservative Lady Houston, for example, Saturday Review became a voice for the extreme right and lent its support to fascism. The accuracy of Fitz-Gerald’s pro-Hitler story was unlikely to be questioned by a journal that proclaimed the need for a dictator in England.66 But not all the editors who published Fitz-Gerald’s work shared his politics. Perhaps most importantly, Fitz-Gerald had a highly marketable commodity—an insider’s peek at the home life of the dictator casting the “black shadow of fear” over Europe, a man who both alarmed and fascinated people outside Germany. If editors had their doubts, they were willing to put them aside to publish Fitz-Gerald’s “scoop.”67

Alternately, we may ask why English-speaking readers would have been interested in Fitz-Gerald’s stories about the “Squire of Wachenfeld.” Many, no doubt, were anxious for the comfort that Fitz-Gerald offered: the hope that the seemingly peaceful Hitler on the mountain would be able to control the warmongering Führer in the Reich Chancellery. This hope was shared by people both within and beyond Germany’s borders. Not a few foreign readers, moreover, were sympathetic to Hitler and must have been content to have their positive views reinforced by Fitz-Gerald’s portrait. Indeed, 1936, when the majority of Fitz-Gerald’s accounts were published, marked the high point of Hitler’s popularity in Britain.68 On the whole, however, very significant differences—cultural, political, and historical—existed between audiences in Germany and elsewhere. National Socialist propagandists drew on existing national myths or created new ones in order to foster powerful associations between Hitler and the mountains for German audiences. But the legend of the sleeping King Barbarossa or the unity of Führer and Volk, among others, held little appeal for a broader global audience. Why, then, would our reader in Leeds, Boston, Winnipeg, or Sydney have been interested in hearing about Fitz-Gerald’s holiday with Hitler?

Fitz-Gerald owed his success in selling the story in part to the growth of celebrity culture in the 1920s and 1930s. The advent of new technologies in broadcasting, recording, and film brought entertainers and politicians into the everyday lives of people. Celebrities were both larger-than-life and a part of the family, creating a voracious market for information on the lives of these intimate strangers.69 In the mid-1930s, Hitler may have been the dictator casting the “black shadow of fear” over Europe, but he was also a celebrity. His image-makers, including Leni Riefenstahl, adeptly used the machinery of celebrity culture to increase the popularity and exposure of their “star.”

English-speaking audiences were keenly interested in Hitler’s private life. When Angela Raubal, Hitler’s sister, remarried in February 1936, it made the front page of the Daily Express. The gossipy story, which covered details of the wedding and honeymoon, noted that “Herr Hitler has lost the sister . . . who for years has mothered him, ‘bossed’ him, cooked his meals, and darned his socks at Haus Wachenfeld, his Alpine retreat. He has lost her to tall, dark, handsome Professor [Martin] Hammitzsch of Dresden. . . . Haus Wachenfeld . . . is today very empty. Blonda, the dictator’s faithful favorite will be there to greet him. Blonda is an Alsatian sheep-dog.”70 Other stories sought to associate the bachelor with glamorous women, even if they were other men’s wives. Milton Bronner, for example, London correspondent for the Newspaper Enterprise Association, wrote an admiring article on the close and trusting relationship between the “good-looking Frau Goebbels” and the “confirmed bachelor” Hitler.71

Curiosity about celebrities’ homes dominated the public’s desire to see beyond the mask of fame to the “real” person within. Since the nineteenth century, American and European middle-class cultures had come to focus on the domestic milieu as the site of the authentic self.72 Hollywood fan magazines and newspaper gossip columns gushed about what the famous did at home—“what they ate, what their beauty secrets were, what pets they pampered, what cars they drove, what they wore.”73 Articles on movie stars’ houses typically blended details about the architecture and interior decoration with details about the occupant’s personality, thrilling readers who believed they were getting to know the actor on more intimate terms.74 Beyond fan magazines and gossip columns, the mainstream media also embraced the popularity of celebrity homes. In the 1930s, for example, Architectural Digest began to run a regular feature on the homes of Hollywood movie stars and directors.

The publication of photographs of celebrities’ homes responded to and stimulated the desire to visualize their private lives. In Germany, such images had become an integral part of the political effort to broaden Hitler’s appeal starting in 1932. By 1935, the English-language press had also begun to offer “candid” and sympathetic images of Hitler’s home life to its audience. In March 1935, Newsweek claimed to have “secured first publication rights in America for these exclusive candid camera shots of Adolf Hitler. They constitute the only informal record of the Reich Leader in private life.”75 In the two-page feature, Hitler was shown at Haus Wachenfeld, hiking in the snow, playing with his dog Muck, reading in the solarium, and sharing “a bowl of stew with neighbors,” among other “candid” shots. Most of the images, created by Hoffmann, also appeared in Hitler in His Mountains, published that same year for German audiences. By 1936, in part due to the self-promoting efforts of Fitz-Gerald, a broad spectrum of English-language publications had familiarized their readers with Hitler’s home life through such ostensibly informal, behind-the-scenes images.

The growing interest in visualizing the domestic spaces of the rich and famous also had a physical dimension. Specifically, the 1920s and 1930s witnessed a dramatic rise in the popularity of house museums, where one could experience firsthand the homes of history’s “great men.”76 In a 1932 essay, Virginia Woolf noted that “London, happily, is becoming full of great men’s houses, bought for the nation and preserved entire with the chairs they sat on and the cups they drank from, their umbrellas and their chests of drawers.” The owners of these houses, she continued, may have had little artistic taste when it came to decorating, “but they seem always to possess a much rarer and more interesting gift—a faculty for housing themselves appropriately, for making the table, the chair, the curtain, the carpet into their own image.” Here, amid their possessions, Woolf contended, one could get to know the great men of history far better than from any biography.77

In August 1936, the American edition of Vogue magazine took its readers, attuned to the worlds of fashion and style, on a virtual tour of the houses of three “makers of foreign policies”: Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, and British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden (fig. 55). “All of these rooms are obviously characteristic of man and country—Anthony Eden’s London house, British and reticent, impersonal as British diplomacy; Hitler’s chalet, German, jumbled, and gemütlich; and Mussolini’s villa, decoratively violent, magnificently proportioned, the home for a nation’s impressive pride.” Going beyond Woolf’s belief that individuals mirrored themselves in their home environment, Vogue suggested that one could also read the psychology of nations in the domestic decor of its “great men.”78

The article illustrated the interiors of the three men’s houses with photographs and simple captions tying the occupant to a function appropriate to the room: “Where Hitler dines,” “Where Mussolini plays his violin,” “Where Eden sleeps,” and so forth. Hitler’s domestic space was represented by the dining nook in the ground-floor Stube at Haus Wachenfeld, pictured as it existed before the 1935–36 renovation. “On the side of a mountain, the chalet has a suburban neatness, with a sun porch and canaries, and its rooms, like this one, a cozy podge of clocks, dwarfs, and swastika cushions.” True to the description, the accompanying photograph (by Hoffmann) reveals dwarf figures lurking in the corner, a grandfather clock, and a prominently placed swastika cushion. One wonders what Jewish readers might have thought of Vogue’s insistence that this interior, with its swastika-accented decor, “is obviously characteristic of man and country,” thus rendering as alien and “uncharacteristic” Germans who stood outside this racially coded definition of home.79

By contrast to the “gemütlichkeit” of the German leader’s home, Mussolini’s “flamboyant rooms” in the Villa Torlonia embodied for Vogue an “imperial floridity.” The magazine illustrated Mussolini’s “enormous oval dining room,” with its “famous collection of Roman statues,” and his bedroom, executed “on a grand terminal scale, all curves and the splendour of gold.” Eden’s rooms, possessing “a hotel’s bleakness and a shorn good taste,” provided yet a third way in domesticity, different from the coziness of Hitler and the augustness of Mussolini. According to Vogue, they “reveal with their bright chintzes, their careful translations of the eighteenth century, only an oddly expressionless, but aristocratic good taste.” Accompanying photographs depicted Eden’s parlor and bedroom. Taken as a whole, the illustrations for the article seem to have been chosen with an eye to reinforcing stereotypes about national character. Thus, Hitler’s bedroom, characterized by a simplicity that would have been difficult to present as “jumbled” or “gemütlich,” was not illustrated alongside those of Mussolini and Eden (although it is also possible that the magazine failed to obtain an image).80

Vogue thus justified the voyeuristic pleasures of peering into the hidden lives of these famous men with its stylistic analysis of the national character of these “makers of foreign policies.” Compared to Fitz-Gerald’s wildly romantic and barely disguised pieces of propaganda, Vogue’s treatment of politicians’ domestic spaces seems relatively innocuous. But even here, the magazine trod a dangerous line. In August 1936, when Vogue published the article, the Olympic Games took place in Berlin, despite the threat of an international boycott. The Nazi regime, sensitive to its international image and eager to secure the foreign currency of tourists, countered allegations of racial discrimination by allowing one Jewish athlete to participate on the German team and by temporarily removing anti-Semitic materials from the capital’s streets and public spaces.81 Vogue’s article, with its comparative approach, aided in this normalizing effort by placing two fascist dictators and an elected member of Parliament on the same footing, blurring the political differences among them and shifting the reader’s attention instead to issues of interior design. Here differences among rival nations in Europe were grounded in national stylistic temperaments, rather than in the more immediately relevant conflicts over political ideology. Furthermore, the focus on comfort and beauty distracted from the extreme brutality of Mussolini’s and Hitler’s regimes. At the end of the war, when Vogue would carry Lee Miller’s photographs of the concentration camps, the magazine was prepared to expose its readers fully to the consequences of those ideologies. But in 1936, for Vogue, swastikas remained pillow decorations.

From 1935 to 1941, the New York Times Magazine grappled repeatedly with how to present Hitler’s domesticity. Time and again, it returned to the subject of his mountain home, publishing four articles that probed his domestic life and spaces through the eyes of different reporters. It began in October 1935 with a short but admiring article, “Hitler His Own Architect: He Practices His Art on a Simple Chalet.” Noting that Hitler had once wanted to be an architect, the article credited him with the renovations to the house (still minor at that point), which it lauded for its modesty and tastefulness: “Haus Wachenfeld . . . differs in no way from thousands of other Bavarian chalets except for the enlargements and the fact that it is furnished more simply and in rather better taste than the average home of the Bavarian peasant.” Readers learned of the green color scheme chosen for the interior and the “tasteful” furnishings as well as the exotic gifts given to him by admirers. “In Hitler’s bedroom there is a portrait of his mother, who died when he was 18, along with a jeweled hunting horn presented to him by some unknown follower and a magnificent rug of silver fox skins sent him by some friend in the Argentine.” The article also commented evocatively on the beauty of the natural surroundings and explained the history of the Nazis’ relationship to the mountain. Thus, in its first detailed report on Hitler’s home, the New York Times left its readers with an unequivocally positive and even poetic impression.82

On May 30, 1937, the cover of the New York Times Magazine featured a large and stunning photograph of the town of Berchtesgaden above the words: “Where Hitler Dreams and Plans” (fig. 56). Otto Tolischus, the newspaper’s Berlin correspondent, contributed the three-page illustrated feature. His report began with a clear-eyed assessment of the significance of Hitler’s mountain residence:

Germany is administered from Berlin, capital of the Third Reich. It is inspired and spurred onward from Munich, capital of the National Socialist movement. But it is ruled from a mountain top—the mountain on which Fuehrer and Reich Chancellor Adolf Hitler has built himself a lofty country residence where he spends the larger part of his time and to which he always retires to ponder events and to make those fateful decisions that so often startle the world.

Der Berghof, as this residence is now called, is rapidly becoming a place of German destiny.

Going on to describe the changes that had transformed Haus Wachenfeld into the Berghof, Tolischus suggested that this destiny might not be a happy one.83

Picturesque little Berchtesgaden, Tolischus informed the reader, “is rapidly turning into a miniature national capital.” Improved transportation systems provided rapid access by automobile and air, and new buildings accommodated growing government functions, including a Berchtesgaden branch of the Reich Chancellery. Such a branch was needed, head of the Reich Chancellery Hans Lammers explained at its dedication, because “the Fuehrer is always on duty, even when on vacation.” Alongside the construction, the atmosphere was changing as well. “The presence of the head of a mighty nation,” Tolischus noted, “is already transforming the rustic and unsophisticated simplicity of the place and is giving it—more sensed than seen—a formidable and a martial air.”84

On the Obersalzberg, these changes were visible in the creation of new barracks for the SS men who guarded Hitler. They were also evident in the measures taken to protect Hitler’s residence, which had transformed from rustic cottage into “an impregnable fort.” Mystery surrounded the Berghof: “Nobody is authorized to talk about it; no publication about it is permitted except for a few official photographs and some lyric but vague explanations of them; even the workers who constructed it have been pledged to silence.” Rumors circulated that the Berghof was now equipped with gas-proof bomb shelters and was “girded by anti-aircraft guns” that could bring down a “fleet of planes long before they had any chance of doing damage.” Around the wooded estate, “little turrets which look quite romantic” were, in fact, guard posts, and the “entire mountain side, covering several square miles” had been enclosed with a high barbed-wire fence. The Nazi elite had homes within the protected perimeter, “but everything else, including a children’s sanatorium and a score of peasant homes, has been removed from it.” Berchtesgaden itself was “reported to have been cleansed of all ‘unreliable’ elements,” and tourists were required to answer a battery of police questions. All of these precautions were “so elaborate . . . as to convince the native populace that Berchtesgaden is destined to become the real national capital in case of war.”85

With surprising accuracy, given the shortage of information, Tolischus thus became one of the first reporters to alert English-language audiences to the transformations occurring in and around Berchtesgaden. He also described the expansion of Hitler’s residence “from a little mountain chalet into a stately manner house.” Tolischus did not particularly warm to the design, calling it “a modernistic mansion of indefinable architecture.” But he displayed a chatty enthusiasm in describing the details, including the “thrill for the guest in the automatic self-connecting house telephone which has one button labeled ‘Der Fuehrer.’ The guest may luxuriate in the feeling that all one has to do in order to talk to his host is to press the button. But, of course, he doesn’t.”86

On the whole, Tolischus did not offer readers a comforting or traditional image of Hitler’s domesticity—framed, as it was, in the context of modern transportation systems, military defenses, and communications technology—until, that is, he began to write about the host. The change in tone began with the following sentence, which came toward the end of the second page, after lengthy descriptions of the newly militarized Obersalzberg region: “With safety and privacy thus assured, Hitler is able to relax, and to his visitors he shows himself here from his most charming side.” In exploring this side of Hitler, revealed only at home, the article took a turn and drew closer to the narrative and tone familiar from Fitz-Gerald’s stories. Like other writers, and despite the evidence he offered to the contrary in his description of developments in Berchtesgaden, Tolischus maintained that, as much as possible, Hitler liked to minimize “the work and cares of office” at home. Accordingly, readers learned about his mostly nonpolitical daily routine, the “Bohemian” nature of which was more accurately portrayed than it had been by Fitz-Gerald. A leisurely breakfast of “milk, bread, oatmeal, honey and cheese” was followed by a walk in the mountains. Only then did the official workday begin, which ended again by lunch. Like Fitz-Gerald, Tolischus paid attention to the Führer’s vegetarian habits; he also introduced readers to his sweet tooth, particularly his love of chocolate. After lunch, he told readers, Hitler retreated to a “special studio built at the Berghof,” where he indulged in “his favorite hobby—architecture.” Evenings were spent “around the fireplace in the big hall in the company of his guests” and might include a musical performance or, more often, an informal discussion about current events. The latter helped Hitler to gauge the public mood in making his decisions.87

In exploring the Führer’s “charming” domestic side, Tolischus was keenly interested in how it affected those who encountered him at the Berghof. “Even those who come with a certain reserve,” he noted, “are captivated by the Fuehrer’s complete naturalness in these surroundings.” Tolischus quoted at length from the published testimonial of a Czech critic who had had a change of heart after meeting his down-to-earth and “comradely” host: “He sat among us. It seemed to me as if I had spent at least two years with him in the trenches. He repudiated the word ‘dictator’ for himself.” While Tolischus admitted that most visitors to the Berghof did not experience such a dramatic turnabout, he insisted that encountering Hitler at home rather than at the Reich Chancellery in Berlin left a very different impression.88

Returning to the dreams referred to in the title, Tolischus ended the article with the following anecdote:

While Hitler and [Max] Amann [his publisher] were climbing about in these mountains early in their careers, before they always knew where their next meal was coming from, the latter jestingly remarked: “When we get rich, we’ll build our homes here.”

Hitler is said to have replied: “I shall never get rich, but some day, perhaps my people will build a house here for me.”

That dream, like so many others that Hitler dreamed, has come true to a degree surpassing dreams.89

On this narrative tour of the Berghof, then, the reader is led away from a disquieting fortress being prepared for war to a gentler place of gifts and dreams. The shift in how we view Hitler at home enacts the very process of seduction Tolischus described, resulting in a mixed and confusing message. Tolischus offers two polar views of Hitler’s domesticity: from outside, we see the fortress, with its repressed freedoms and military secrets; from within, we see the home, with its “comradely” warmth and fireside chats. Are we supposed to fear the fortress or hope for an invitation to the home? Tolischus leaves unreconciled the dissonance between the inner and outer worlds of the Berghof, which ultimately reflects the confusions engendered by Hitler’s inhumane politics in the public realm and the sympathetic image he could project at home.

Mixed as it may have been in its messages, Tolischus’s article nonetheless had begun to steer the New York Times’s coverage of Hitler’s domestic spaces away from the uncritical stance it had initially adopted in 1935. It comes as a surprise, then, to witness a complete reversal in the third article on Hitler’s home to appear in the New York Times Magazine. “Herr Hitler at Home in the Clouds” appeared on August 20, 1939, and was authored by Hedwig Mauer Simpson, reporting from Munich.90

The article began with a brief history of Hitler’s mountain house, acknowledging that its transformation from Haus Wachenfeld to the Berghof reflected the Führer’s “consolidated” powers and an accommodation of governmental and diplomatic functions, making the residence “less private” in nature. “Yet this does not mean that Hitler has given up the privilege of retiring when he likes,” Simpson contended. And as if following the Führer’s lead, Simpson then shifted her attention away from the outside world to the spaces and routine of “ordinary life” at the Berghof.91

The author admired the interiors of the house, which had been “furnished harmoniously, according to the best of German traditions” and boasted “beautiful common rooms,” including “a sitting room facing west and overlooking the deep bowl amid Alpine heights in which the quaint old market town of Berchtesgaden is situated.” In this setting, the Führer’s daily routine played itself out, a narrative by now familiar to readers of the Sunday magazine—the late breakfast, walks in the mountain, and vegetarian meals. What Simpson’s account lacked in originality, she made up for in the details, such as the quality of the tomatoes on Hitler’s table or his love of not only chocolate, but also gooseberry pie. Similarly, she offered a glimpse into some of his official work duties—attending to private petitions from the “widows and orphans of party martyrs.” Such business took “about two or three hours” in the morning, after which Hitler received callers. Then host and guests gathered for a “leisurely” lunch, and after taking a nap, Hitler might invite guests to go for a walk to the nearby teahouse. In the afternoon, the gates of the house might be opened up to the pilgrims who came to see their leader. Simpson described a typical scene at these encounters between Führer and Volk: “a particularly pretty child with a mop of fair curls attracts his attention, and then Heinrich Hoffmann takes those photographs of the Fuehrer bending over a little child which touch Nazi hearts.”92 (In fact, the “walk by” had been discontinued years before.)

An elegant dinner, with the ladies in evening dress and Hitler in a “dark lounge suit,” was followed by coffee “in front of a blazing log fire.” Hitler’s guests came “from all kinds of German circles, as well as from foreign countries.” As coffee was passed around, Hitler used this time to collect impressions. “Hitler can be a good listener and seems to gather a good deal by letting American solo dancers or German film stars talk to him. Non-political-minded persons will often tell him inadvertently, or by implication, things which his trained staff usually keep from him.” And on this image of Hitler by the fireside, conversing with dancers and movie stars, Simpson concluded her article.93

This idyll about Berghof life was far removed, to put it mildly, from the world captured on the front page of the New York Times on August 20, 1939, the day Simpson’s article appeared in the Sunday magazine. A third of the stories described the growing unrest in Europe. About one hundred thousand German troops had massed on the Polish border as the Slovak army, which had pledged its cooperation to Hitler, began its own mobilization. “Squads of police” had been sent to Bratislava’s Jewish ghetto to protect the inhabitants from repeated beatings and vandalism by the German minority. A front-page editorial in the Bratislava German-language newspaper Grenzbote (Frontier Courier) called for “the Jews [to] be quickly and thoroughly punished this time for their evil provocations.” Pope Pius XII, speaking to pilgrims in Italy, made a “fervent plea for peace” and expressed hope that Europe’s statesmen would succeed in avoiding war. Lord Halifax, then the British foreign secretary, cut short his vacation and returned to work at the Foreign Office in London, increasing apprehension among the British people. Switzerland began to strengthen the garrisons along its German and Italian borders.94

It is difficult to imagine what readers thought as they paged through the newspaper and arrived at Simpson’s article in the magazine. Nothing in her happy and harmonious fable reflected the realities of the front page. The article was accompanied by recycled photographs of the Berghof and Hitler hiking as well as by an editorial cartoon drawn by the London-based artist David Low. The latter depicted Hitler, looking pensive, seated at a table at the Berghof between the lovely female figure of Peace and an ominous, shroud-covered figure of War. While the cartoon, probably added by an editor, made sense in relation to the front page, it bore no relationship to Simpson’s story.

Without knowing anything about Simpson’s identity, we can only guess at her intentions in writing a highly misleading account of Hitler and “ordinary life” on the Obersalzberg. This article appears to have been her only contribution under that name to the New York Times or any other publication. But it is not only the writer’s identity or intentions that raise questions. One also has to wonder about the New York Times’s decision to publish at this highly fraught moment what amounted to an ode to life at the Berghof. Portraying Hitler as a lover of orphans and gooseberry pie made it perhaps just a little easier to hope that the stories on the front page were exaggerated. Twelve days later, when German forces invaded Poland, New York Times readers, along with the rest of the world, discovered that they were not.