<new page recto/verso>

<set drop folio>

9

WAR AND THE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE MEDIA’S REAPPRAISAL OF THE DOMESTIC HITLER

At the end of October 1939, as the American people nervously followed the German defeat of Poland and the spread of conflicts in Europe, readers of Life magazine opened their weekly issue to discover a lush color feature on Adolf Hitler’s paintings and mountain home (fig. 57). The October 30 issue offered the usual Life mixture of political reporting and more lighthearted human-interest stories, spanning the U-boat sinking of the British battleship Royal Oak to the athletic feats of glamorous Texan cowgirls. The article entitled “Paintings by Adolf Hitler: The Statesman Longs to Be an Artist and Helps Design His Mountain Home” sat awkwardly between these two journalistic approaches. Although Hitler continued to have his champions in the United States, a sympathetic portrait of the dictator who, a few weeks earlier, had threatened Europe with a devastating secret weapon would not have been well received by the majority of the magazine’s readers.1 The editors handled the tricky situation of writing about a warmonger’s love of art and interior decoration with a new weapon of their own: sarcasm.2

The article began with a remark made by Hitler to British ambassador to Germany Sir Nevile Henderson about his desire to one day give up politics and return to his youthful pursuit of art. If he were to do so, Life’s editors suggested, “the world would lose a very shrewd politician and gain a very poor painter.” Despite his rejection from art school, “Hitler’s ambition to be an artist was never dimmed by his lack of talent.” The young Austrian “tinted postcards and painted houses for a living,” haunting Munich’s cafés in the hope of being noticed by established artists. Demonstrating why they ignored him, the article turned to examples of Hitler’s early paintings, reproduced on two full color pages, that it claimed had been smuggled out of Germany and were being published for the first time. The strengths and faults—mostly faults—of Hitler’s work were assessed for readers, such as the crudeness of the technique and the obsession with “empty, desolate spaces.” A painting entitled Battleship Wien, an Austrian ship torpedoed in 1917, prompted the criticism that Hitler had hidden the “stern of [the] ship in [a] smudge of smoke” because he was “too tired or lazy to finish details.”3

Having largely dismissed the German leader’s own artistic skills, the article then addressed his impact on the nation’s artistic production. “As the defender of German art,” it stated, “he has purged it of modernism, handed it over to the academics.” The article featured two photographs of Hitler in the company of Gerdy Troost (who was not identified) and high-ranking Nazi officials visiting the Great German Art Exhibition earlier that month. The article also noted that the Nazis enjoyed nudes that were “literal and very explicit,” a claim accompanied by a photograph of Adolf Ziegler’s The Four Elements, which had become infamous when first displayed at the Great German Art Exhibition of 1937 for its attention to Aryan pubic hair.4 The article thus undercut the Nazis’ claim to protect the purity of German art with a reference to the salaciousness of its defenders.

When the article turned to Hitler’s involvement with architecture, both as patron and creator, the biting tone of the article began to subside. Hitler’s artistic impulses, it stated, were now mostly channeled into architecture, and he stayed up nights in his mountain home “furiously” pouring over architects’ designs. He personally approved all important public buildings, which “are being frozen into the decent but uninspired modernized-classic architecture that Hitler insists on.”5

Less ambivalent words of praise were reserved for the Berghof, “a huge mountain mansion” designed, readers were told, with Hitler’s help.6 Two full pages of color photographs, the first color images of the interior most Americans had ever seen, revealed the rooms with prismatic intensity. Burgundy and jade green hues predominated, with the eye being drawn to the richness of the red marble banister in the entrance hall or the warmth of the polished wood in Hitler’s study. To contemporary readers, who had heard much about Hitler’s simple and “soldierly” tastes, the vividness and complexity of the color scheme must have come as a surprise.7

Beginning with the architecture itself, the article described the “combination of modern and Bavarian chalet” styles as “awkward but interesting.” The interiors, “designed and decorated with Hitler’s active collaboration, are the comfortable kind of rooms a man likes, furnished in simple, semi-modern, sometimes dramatic style. The furnishings are in very good taste, fashioned of rich materials and fine woods by the best craftsmen in the Reich.” The ingenuity of repeating the colors of the Gobelin tapestry hanging in the Great Hall in the room’s furnishings was also carefully noted. The main stairway leading up from the ground floor was particularly commended for being “a striking bit of modern architecture.” This admiring assessment of design ability was balanced by a jibe at the type of paintings hung on the walls: “Like other Nazi leaders, Hitler likes pictures of nudes and ruins.” Nonetheless, the article concluded that the success of the design indicated that “in a more settled Germany, Adolf Hitler might have done quite well as an interior decorator.”8 With their backhanded compliment, the editors thus insinuated that the man reordering the map of Europe had missed his true calling of rearranging furniture.

Not all of Life’s readers were amused. In the November 20 issue, a number of letters to the editors defended Hitler’s artistic tastes. A group of readers in Canton, Ohio, took the magazine to task for its snobbishness: “Let’s not confuse personal opinion with art criticism!” Referring to the comment that Hitler had been “too tired or lazy” to finish the stern of the Battleship Wien, they countered that the rest of the painting was done well enough and that the “smudge of smoke” critiqued by the article “shows a fair amount of thought and work.” A Mrs. Seefried, writing from Pontiac, Michigan, wrote: “Adolf certainly scores one up on the Roosevelt family when it comes to decorating a home. Maybe there are too many women in the Roosevelt household.” Mrs. Seefried’s suggestion that the White House had been spoiled by a domineering female presence (a comment directed at the president’s outspoken wife, Eleanor, and his mother, Sara) would surely have pleased the bachelor Adolf. Finally, a reader in Chicago complained: “A preference for nudes plus ruins indicates a normal, male romanticism. . . . Architectural preferences, be they for the elaborate or the simple, indicate nothing beyond a normal inclination to create, cause, impress, possess.” In that reader’s eyes, the magazine’s efforts to psychoanalyze Hitler through his artistic or decorative tastes amounted to a blasé, “So what?”9

Other readers, however, took the magazine’s analysis a step further. Examining his paintings closely, several readers observed that “all the lines in his pictures slant definitely to the right,” thus implying a link between his ideology and his brushwork. A reader in Portland, Oregon, believed that on the basis of the Berghof, Freud might diagnose “not only claustrophobia but a Hitler aversion to any close physical contact with others, expressed even to the point of separating the chummiest grouping of chairs by an intervening table.” Several other readers inadvertently revealed the anxieties taking root in the country when they believed that they recognized the Statue of Liberty in a tiny, blurry detail of the Battleship Wien, thus seeing in the painting, presumably completed decades earlier, an ominous portent of Hitler’s plans to invade New York Harbor.10 Their fears were likely not quelled by the photograph of Hitler’s study. In the caption, the editors brought the reader’s attention to the world atlas placed prominently on his desk, with a magnifying lens lying on top for ready consultation.11

By introducing critical and even sinister tones in its reporting on Hitler’s domestic spaces, Life magazine began the shift away from the positive assessments that had appeared in the mainstream English-language press since the mid-1930s, and that had culminated in the fawning portrayals in Homes and Gardens and the New York Times just months earlier. While such admiring accounts had seen in Hitler’s artistic endeavors the charm and abilities of the gentleman-amateur, those same activities now evoked the embarrassing foibles of an untalented and pompous dilettante—a person tinting postcards and house-painting while imagining himself a Vermeer. Yet the change in tone did not entirely displace feelings of appreciation, even if these were now expressed more grudgingly and with defensive wit. And since Life’s readers were particularly attuned to its photographs, which were at the core of the magazine’s journalism, the publication of such appealing color images of Hitler’s home must also be seen as contributing to a favorable presentation. The text may have poked fun at the (absent) occupant, but the elegant interiors stood as a substitute for the man, proclaiming his taste and sophistication.

While Life gently mocked Hitler’s artistic ambitions and taste, the New York Times adopted a more neutral tone. In mid-March 1941, it published a two-page illustrated feature in its Sunday magazine that attempted to give readers a behind-the-scenes account of Hitler’s Berghof. Written by its correspondent C. Brooks Peters, the article “In Hitler’s Chalet” promised to explain the workings of a new hybrid: a residence that also served as a workplace—and, in this case, a military center. Peters thus picked up on the lead developed by Otto Tolischus in 1937, but subsequently abandoned by the newspaper.12 Whereas most earlier accounts represented the Berghof as a retreat for Hitler from the hustle and bustle of political life, Peters alerted New York Times readers to a quiet, but profound, change: “for, in a chalet on a mountain slope near this once slumbering Bavarian village, meetings both publicized and secret take place which may have the most profound importance for the future political alignment of Europe and the world.”13

Peters seemed concerned that his contemporaries, used to democratic and open forms of political discourse, might miss the significance of what was happening at the secluded mountain chalet. “But the historian of the future, in chronicling the events of this time, will no doubt examine the comings and goings at Berchtesgaden, the Obersalzberg and the Berghof, the Fuehrer’s private and personal domain, where, at a distance from the war fronts and the diplomatic bustle of the Reich’s capital, he strolls with his three sheep dogs along majestic mountain trails or sits before an open fire with his closest advisers, discussing events far into the night.”14 Peters was thus one of the first to bring political activity squarely into the picture of the house itself, and not simply treat it as something that the Führer dealt with before lunch.

Yet having begun the article with this tantalizing thread—the double life of the Berghof, a place where dogs and generals were a routine part of daily life—Peters then dropped it for a more conventional narrative of the house. He began with a brief history of Haus Wachenfeld, drawing on the 1934 account of Otto Dietrich, Hitler’s press secretary.15 He then discussed the renovations, credited to Hitler’s designs, and described the interiors of the expanded Berghof. From the spaces of the house, Peters shifted to writing about its occupants—although, interestingly, not about Hitler himself. Instead, we learned about the young male adjutants and young female secretaries whom Hitler liked to have around him. We were also introduced to Arthur Kannenberg, Hitler’s majordomo and a bon vivant who ran the household and amused the Führer in the evenings with his accordion playing and singing. The article closed with a list of the Berghof’s regular guests, including Heinrich Hoffmann, Hitler’s court photographer; Albert Speer; and the Führer’s doctors, Theodor Morell and Karl Brandt. The essay ended without conclusions, but the reader could draw his or her own about the lack of a “real” domestic life, with Hitler’s house being filled with his pets, officers, and employees.16

Peters’s account was not particularly vivid and divulged little that had not already been reported by others.17 The flattering photographs of Hitler and his home, too, had been recycled. Already in 1937, Tolischus, writing in the New York Times Magazine, had exposed the secrecy surrounding the Berghof; in 1941, the situation could only have been worse. The blandness of Peters’s reporting, however, suggests less a lack of information (which, after all, hardly impinged on the purple prose of William George Fitz-Gerald’s earlier accounts) than a desire to avoid overtly praising or criticizing Hitler, and the house itself was described in pleasant but measured terms. Writing about the people around the Führer rather than about the owner of the house himself may have been another strategy to achieve a sense of neutrality—and to avoid the dangers of seduction evident in Tolischus’s writing. The resulting tone is considerably more respectful than that of Life magazine, but also far less colorful (and, in 1941, less objectionable) than the glowing report published in the New York Times Magazine two years earlier by Hedwig Mauer Simpson.18 Whether Peters was concerned about offending the newspaper’s readers or the German leader is not clear. The article alluded to the Nazis’ censorship of dispatches sent by foreign correspondents, who risked reprisals for offending the regime.19 But Peters gave an inkling of his true feelings in the caption for a photograph of the Berghof nestled in the hillside: “Peaceful birthplace of Blitzkrieg.”20

Both the mild sarcasm of Life magazine and the restrained neutrality of the New York Times reveal that the press knew it was dealing with a volatile subject when addressing Hitler’s domesticity after the outbreak of war in 1939. The continuation of such stories in the American press, albeit far fewer than before, indicates that editors believed that glimpses into Hitler’s home life still interested readers. But they were less sure of the responses that they would provoke—the range of which was readily apparent in the readers’ letters published in Life magazine. In particular, the press was now wary, in a way that it had not been before, of humanizing the dictator or normalizing his war machine through sympathetic stories of his home life.

A third approach to the subject adopted a more open-ended method of writing that allowed the perceptive reader to construe an underlying criticism. In December 1940 and January 1941, the Washington Post published a four-part series presenting an “intimate, first-hand picture of the opposing war leaders,” Winston Churchill and Adolf Hitler. The series described a day in the life of each leader, while also exploring little-known details about his personality and domestic habits. It began with two reports filed by Hugh Wagnon, London war correspondent for the Associated Press, on Churchill, who had been British prime minister for only seven months. The headline of the first story, “Churchill Devotes 17 Hours a Day to His Only Hobby—War,” set the tone for the series. Wagnon described how the “vigorous 66-year-old Prime Minister” devoted his “prodigious energy” and long days solely to the war effort, keeping a close eye on all developments: “he likes to know everything that is going on.” Although “a voracious reader in peacetime,” he now limited himself to news and reports. He had “little time for ordinary family life, but he sees Mrs. Churchill every day and the rest of the family ‘as much as possible.’ There are frequent family dinners.” His exercise consisted of “striding about Whitehall or walking tirelessly on tours of inspection of fighting commands, defense areas and bombed sectors.” Even his cigar smoking had to be reduced due to work, although he still consumed “six long Havanas a day.” In the evening, he enjoyed “the roast beef of Old England” or “a thick steak, rare.”21

Having established the powerful physical masculinity of the British leader, the second article turned to his matching masculine mindset. Readers learned, for example, that Churchill had been attacked twice by “irate suffragettes armed with dogwhips” because of his fierce opposition to women’s emancipation. While insisting on the traditional order of the sexes, he appeared appreciative of women who knew their place, claiming that his “most brilliant achievement” had been persuading his wife to marry him. Returning once more to the physical, the article informed readers that the prime minister enjoyed “big cigars which he holds fondly in full hand.” With his “stout, thick-set figure,” “heavy shoulders hunched,” and “large head bent forward, he walks like a charging football player.” Shifting metaphors, the article claimed that when Churchill “clamps his jaw in determination,” he resembled the British bulldog. In London, the prime minister liked to dress “in rumpled formality, cocky bow tie askew.” But he knew his way around clothes and had designed some of his own beloved hats. If this evoked any doubts about the grit of Churchill’s masculinity, readers also learned that “in the country, where he now is seldom seen, he is likely to don overalls for a stint of bricklaying.” His bulldog toughness was further emphasized by his humor, which was “of the political, crushing club variety.” In a report to the House of Commons a few weeks earlier, he had quipped that “he didn’t like to compare Adolf Hitler with Napoleon because ‘I don’t like to insult the dead.’”22

Preston Grover, Berlin war correspondent for the Associated Press, contributed the two articles on Hitler that followed. The headline of the first story declared, “Hitler Leads Life of Wakeful Spartan.” The German leader’s days were “a mass of hard work,” although Hitler, an “unregimented Bavarian,” disliked Prussian discipline. Amid the riches of the palatial new Reich Chancellery, Hitler lived in private quarters of “unadorned simplicity,” sleeping four to six hours a night on an “army-styled bed.” His mornings began with a quick read of the newspapers, “not overlooking the sports or theatrical columns.” At his mountain retreat, by contrast, Hitler “lets himself go, if he is not pressed with emergencies, and sleeps himself out.” While not a fussy eater, Hitler did not consume meat or alcohol. He liked small animals and hated to see them killed, putting a halt to vivisection when he came to power. Contrary to other reports, Grover informed readers that Hitler was “an extremely good listener and possesses a phenomenal memory.” At night, he studied texts and maps of battles reaching back a thousand years. He enjoyed opera and movies, but played no sports, and his exercise was limited to walking and burning up energy on the job. Grover reported that Hitler’s associates insisted that he liked children, although he had never married. “Nevertheless, his poses with children as disclosed in ‘publicity pictures’ show him stiff, uncomfortable.”23

The second article began with a truly eye-catching headline: “Warlord Hitler Designs Table Silver in Spare Time.” It was hard to reconcile the image of “the man who is giving Europe a painful face-lifting operation,” Preston admitted, with his time-consuming devotion to designing silverware. Indeed, even the dictator’s intimates, whom Preston claimed as his source, were surprised that “Adolf Hitler, in leisure moments, will quietly sit down at a table and test the weight and balance of knives, forks and spoons he is planning to give away as wedding presents.” Preston also credited him with designing the silverware for the Berghof and the new Reich Chancellery in Berlin. And yet despite this fastidious attention to the details of design, readers were told that Hitler did not care much about minor daily matters and was irritated by the “Prussian punctuality” of his “underlings” at the Reich Chancellery.24

The article then described at some length Hitler’s official and private residences, including his long-held apartment in Munich, as well as the luxurious accommodations set aside for him in hotels. Readers learned about the Munich locations of his Stammtisch, a reserved table for regulars. Hitler’s “intimates” claimed that he was “a good mixer” and “tells a good story well.” But while Hitler could be charming company, he often preferred that of his cronies. Hitler’s associates also spoke of the “acts of kindness” and generosity that characterized his private life, “which so many find hard to associate with a man who is able to order destruction of an entire city in order to further military operations.” Grover ended by referring to an early war speech by Hitler in which “he said it was his capacity to act over people like a huge magnet and draw from them their greatest efforts.”25

At first glance, there is nothing overtly demeaning in this “intimate” account of Hitler—to the contrary, it seems remarkably generous, as if written to please Goebbels’s censors. By the time of the series’ publication, German forces had invaded half of Europe, bombed its cities, and left hundreds of thousands dead or displaced in their wake. To write of Hitler’s “acts of kindness” or his entertainments, even if Grover was careful to attribute this information to his associates, must have struck some readers as taking journalistic objectivity a step too far.

Read against the stories about Churchill, however, and with an eye to the gendered nuances of the references, a subtext emerges. Whereas the reader was encouraged to imagine Churchill in his overalls laying bricks, perhaps while puffing on a Cuban cigar, Hitler was evoked in the splendor of the Reich Chancellery delicately testing the weight of a silver fork. This is not to say that the details were inaccurate, but rather to question what information was chosen for inclusion in the articles. Both Hitler and Churchill were amateur painters, for example, but the series avoided suggesting similarities between them. Instead, readers were given the contrasts of the raw steak eater and the vegetarian who cared about small animals; the cigar-loving smoker and the abstainer; the indefatigable Brit and the unregimented Bavarian; the dedicated family man and the awkward bachelor. Seemingly balanced in its reporting, a between-the-lines reading of the article suggests how Hitler was positioned as somewhat odd and effeminate in relation to Churchill. The comparative approach of the series encouraged readers to evaluate the opposing leaders in this way, and to search for clues as to which one would prove to have the “right stuff” to emerge victorious. Would it be the bulldog or the Spartan?

If we are to judge from these newspaper stories, American audiences, divided in their desire to commit to another European war, were not yet entirely willing to divest themselves of the reassuring image of a German leader who appreciated domestic elegance, as if a taste for good design somehow militated against barbarity. And if such tastes were perceived as distracting Hitler from the war effort, so much the better. Among the British, by contrast, there was no need to write coyly or between the lines after 1939, even though the British press had been just as guilty of whitewashing Hitler through his domestic image before the war as their American counterparts. With German war planes dropping bombs on them, the British quickly lost interest in how Herr Hitler took his tea. Stories in the British press admiring Hitler’s gentlemanly domestic tastes and pursuits evaporated with the start of hostilities. Yet the attention to Hitler and interior decoration did not disappear entirely. The Führer as the creator of elegant country estates now resurfaced in political cartoons as his poorer cousin, “Hitler the housepainter” and “Hitler the paperhanger.”

On April 10, 1940, the satirical English magazine Punch published a cartoon by Ernest Howard Shepard with the caption, “The White Paper Hanger” (fig. 58).26 It depicted Hitler wearing a smock and hanging white wallpaper inscribed with the words “American Plot” and “Poland” over a broken wall surface on which were scrawled the words “Gestapo barbarism,” “German atrocities,” “murders,” and “Nazi brutalities.” Bloodied handprints on the wall are also visible. Goebbels is shown assisting Hitler, applying the glue to the wallpaper. The cartoon referred to the publication of a number of White Books or White Papers published by the Germans after the invasion of Poland, which laid the blame for the war on Poland, France, and England. At the end of March 1940, the Nazis broadened their allegations of warmongering to include American ambassadors to Great Britain (Joseph P. Kennedy) and to France (William C. Bullitt)—the “American plot” to which the cartoon refers.27 The British and American governments condemned these White Papers as Goebbels’s handiwork and an attempt to conceal or paper over the crimes committed by the Nazis in Poland, a criticism cleverly translated into visual terms by the cartoonist through the image of “Hitler the paperhanger.”

On August 6, 1941, George Butterworth, cartoonist for the Daily Dispatch in Manchester, England, published a drawing that depicted Hitler sitting in an Art Deco–style armchair critically assessing the “work” around him: on walls representing the nations that his regime had brutally subjected to Nazi rule, swastika-covered wallpaper had been applied hastily and violently with “new order paste” and “gestapo glue” (fig. 59).28 The title, “Inferior Decoration,” implied that the house that Hitler had built would not stand because, unlike an architect, who proceeds from the ground up, the paperhanger’s work was applied and only surface-deep.

The earliest press descriptions of Hitler, dating back to his days as a beer hall agitator in Munich, described his former occupation variously as sign painter, mason, architectural draftsman, machinist, paperhanger, and housepainter—and sometimes a combination of these.29 In his autobiographical Mein Kampf, published in 1925, Hitler kept things vague. Of his time as a young man and aspiring architect in Vienna, he wrote that he had supported himself as an unskilled worker on construction sites, an assertion that historians have dismissed for lack of evidence.30 Whether true of not, the image of Hitler as an honest laborer served the purposes of National Socialist propagandists who, wishing to depict him as a man of the people, further propagated the story.

In the early 1930s, as Hitler began his political ascent to the Chancellery, his opponents revived the image of the uppity tradesman to stir the social prejudices of Germany’s intellectual and ruling classes. On April 8, 1932, the left-liberal Wiener Sonn-und Montags-Zeitung (Vienna Sunday and Monday Times) published a sensational exposé about Hitler’s past that received international coverage, including on the front page of the New York Times. The paper reported that “a correspondent sent to Braunau-on-the-Inn in Upper Austria, the birthplace of Adolf Hitler, had ascertained from parish registers that Herr Hitler’s followers would be shouting ‘Heil Schuecklgruber [sic]!’ today had not his father, who was a customs official, changed his name to obtain an inheritance.” The article also revealed that “Herr Hitler, after an undistinguished school career at Braunau, worked in Vienna as a paperhanger and painter, and that when he was called to the colors in February, 1914, he was rejected as ‘too weak and unfit to bear arms.’”31 The humiliating story appeared just two days after Hitler had lost national presidential elections in Germany, its timing seeming to confirm that the paperhanger had crested politically.

References to Hitler as a paperhanger or housepainter and other belittling monikers appeared less frequently in the foreign mainstream press as Hitler’s stature as a statesman grew in the mid-1930s. Nonetheless, exiled German writers, such as Bertolt Brecht, and Hitler’s foreign critics still resorted to such appellations.32 In 1937, Cardinal Mundelein, Roman Catholic archbishop of Chicago, incensed the National Socialist regime and worsened Nazi-Vatican relations when in a speech to five hundred prelates and priests he denounced the “malicious” propaganda and actions undertaken by the Nazis against the Catholic Church in Germany, calling Hitler “an Austrian paperhanger, and a poor one at that.”33 While the National Socialist regime protested the “insult” to the Führer, the Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators, and Paperhangers of America protested the insult to their trade: “That egotistical, anti-labor dictator might have hung paper at one time, but that does not qualify him for the honorable title ‘paperhanger.’ . . . The only thing Hitler has hung in the past ten years is the liberty of the German people.”34

Following the international controversy sparked by Mundelein’s words, American cartoonists found a variety of ways to incorporate “Hitler the paperhanger” into their critiques of current events. In early March 1938, for example, as Austrian Chancellor Kurt von Schuschnigg desperately fought off Nazi encroachment, a cartoon published in the Los Angeles Times under the caption “The Paper Hanger Returns” depicted Hitler in overalls papering over a wall identified as Austria with swastikas.35 When the number of German casualties soared after the June 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union, some America cartoonists imagined Hitler as a macabre paperhanger, adorning the walls of his empire with long casualty lists.36 In February 1942, a widely circulated news story provided fresh inspiration to cartoonists. Benny Nussbaum, an émigré and paperhanger in New York, claimed that he knew Hitler when he “was known as plain Schickelgruber, the paperhanger.” Nussbaum commented, “He was not only a crack-pot . . . but he couldn’t put paper up straight. His work was terrible. With one arm I could do a better job than that guy. No wonder he gave it up.”37 Later that year, New Yorkers expressed their feelings about Nussbaum’s alleged former colleague by hanging a “Hitlerian grotesquerie in paperhanger’s costume, with paste smeared on its face, bits of wallpaper stuck to the clothes and an American flag stuck in the right hand” from a lamppost in Yorkville, a Manhattan borough with a high number of German, Central European, and Jewish immigrants.38

Perhaps not coincidentally, Nussbaum spoke up when the military tide had begun to turn against Hitler. At the end of 1941, the German army’s attacks on the Soviet Union began to fail because of harsh weather conditions, for which the Germans were not prepared; on December 11, Hitler further extended the conflict by declaring war on the United States. The image of the inept paperhanger suggested by Nussbaum was ripe for humoristic exploitation. In 1942, a spate of cartoons appeared in American newspapers depicting the harried Hitler running from one front to the other, attempting to hold up his paper empire as it unfurled and collapsed around him (fig. 60). Following the disastrous siege of Stalingrad, in 1943 a new crop of American cartoons imagined a desperate Führer trying to get his old paperhanging job back. In January 1944, with German forces in rapid retreat on the eastern front, the Allies sensed a demoralized enemy nation. William Shirer reported that the German people blamed Hitler for the catastrophe in the Soviet Union, and that signs of pessimism could be detected among the Nazis’ highest echelons. Even Goebbels, according to Shirer, seemed to be “slipping.”39 A cartoon published a few weeks later depicted Goebbels, standing beneath a portrait of Hitler, whispering to Göring, “Confidentially, Hermann—I’m Beginning To Wonder If He’s Even Any Good At Paperhanging.”40

As the war front drew nearer to Germany, the Berghof itself began to appear in American and English editorial cartoons. When Hitler had first become chancellor, thousands of Germans had flocked to the Berghof in pilgrimage. With the intensity of Allied bombing increasing, people again began to stream to Berchtesgaden, but now as refugees from devastated German cities, prompting the Nazi regime to issue a decree prohibiting people from approaching the area.41 Referring to the ban, an August 27, 1943, cartoon by the London-based David Low depicted Hitler, with reports about the bombed cities at his feet, looking out worriedly at the faces of the dispossessed peering at him through the world’s most famous window (fig. 61). A 1943 cartoon by Reg Manning in the Arizona Republic showed a sinister castle with the face of Hitler on a remote mountain peak surrounded by ghostly figures (fig. 62). The title put it simply: “The Most Haunted House.”42

In its extreme and isolated location—in close proximity to the ghosts of Hitler’s victims, but not to the German people—Manning’s cartoon house visually captured the English-language press’s new focus on estrangement in its coverage of Hitler’s mountain residence. This shift in perspective in the final years of the war marked a sharp, if tardy, departure from the official German story about the Berghof. In part because Hitler spent so much time on the Obersalzberg, National Socialist propagandists had worked hard to militate against possible associations of the mountains with isolation. Instead, in their hands and drawing on past Romantic traditions, the mountains became a symbol of the German nation and German consciousness. When Hitler “retreated” to the mountains, the propagandists maintained, he actually drew closer to the German national and racial consciousness. The idea that Hitler was closer to his people in the mountains was reinforced by the pilgrimage of admirers to the house, a phenomenon at first encouraged and exploited by the regime’s propagandists as proof of Hitler’s accessibility. Hitler’s mountain retreat was thus constructed as the site of mediation between the German leader and his people, suggesting a more “authentic” form of communication between the two than offered by the democratic institutions of the previous Weimar Republic.

For much of the 1930s, the mainstream English-language press was complicit in perpetuating the myth of the Berghof as a place that united folk and Führer. When Fitz-Gerald mythologized Hitler as a country squire living among his tenants, he was rewriting the Nazi story in terms familiar to English audiences. After the war began, however, and especially in the last years of the conflict, narratives about the house flipped from emphasizing the proximity between the occupant and his fellow citizens to the distance that separated them—in keeping with what German writers in exile had been saying all along. In a 1942 New York Times Magazine assessment of Hitler’s personality and political fortunes, Walter Brown, a Washington news correspondent, directed readers’ attention to the “nouveau riche” grandeur of Hitler’s private lifestyle and his preference for dwelling in “surroundings of ostentatious, often almost morbid, splendor.” He compared Hitler’s “lavish tastes in architecture and decoration” to Versailles—a pointed reference to a “decadent” and doomed regime. A drawing accompanying the article depicted Hitler in front of the Berghof’s great window gripping a globe with bloody paws, while outside, a ragged crowd of his victims approached.43 Beyond the divide of riches, Hitler’s mountain home was increasingly described in terms that suggested the emotional and physical removal of Hitler from the German people as well as his desire to hide, both from his countrymen and his Allied enemies. Words such as “hideaway,” “fortress palace,” “castle,” and “mountain fastness” became common in descriptions of the home.44 Once touted as the site of rapprochement, the Berghof was now reimagined as a place of alienation and reckoning.

More than the Berghof, however, it was the Kehlsteinhaus that, after the start of war, came to represent for foreign observers the architectural evidence of the dictator’s folly. The pavilion, located a few miles from the Berghof on the neighboring Kehlstein peak, was commissioned by Martin Bormann and designed by Roderich Fick as a showpiece for the National Socialist Party and, reputedly, a fiftieth birthday present to the Führer. The costly interiors, decorated with stone and wood, consisted of a spacious octagonal reception hall with an Italian marble fireplace (said to be a birthday gift from Benito Mussolini), a dining room for thirty people, a smaller lounge with retractable panorama windows, a study for Hitler, and a kitchen and guard room. There was also an outdoor terrace for sunning and strolling. The construction, directed by some of Germany’s and Austria’s best engineers, took thousands of men laboring around the clock and in all weather conditions just over a year to complete. It also necessitated the building of a dangerous mountain road with multiple tunnels and the excavation of several hundred feet of solid rock for the creation of an elevator shaft that climbed directly to the building, which perched on an outcrop more than six thousand feet above sea level. The project, which vaunted the mastery of the National Socialist regime over nature at its most rugged, cost an immense fortune and ten workers their lives to complete. Hitler, as far as we know, used the pavilion only fourteen times and did not return after a final visit in 1940 with Crown Princess Marie José of Italy.45 The extravagant architectural project, constructed at a time of material shortages and economic belt-tightening, was not publicized or widely known within Germany. By January 1939, however, articles about it began to appear in the non-German press based on the reports of a few foreigners who had been invited by Hitler to the Kehlsteinhaus in the fall of 1938.

The prewar reports in the English and American presses admired—indeed, appeared mesmerized by—the pavilion they dubbed “the Eagle’s Nest.” Ralph Barnes, writing for the Washington Post in January 1939, compared it to something out of German mythology or the Arabian nights. Hitler, Barnes wrote, “sits there for hours at a time, gazing over the magnificent vista of snow-swept summits or down into his Austrian valley.”46 Without photographs to rely on, some of the details journalists provided were inaccurate—for example, the house was described as being constructed of steel and glass when, in fact, it was a more traditional brick structure faced with granite. And yet perhaps because no images were available, the awestruck descriptions of a crystalline retreat high above the clouds where the sun shown every day, huge bronze doors opened onto a cavern deep inside the mountain, and an elevator glided through rock evoked all the more vividly in the reader’s imagination a sense of an impossible, magical place.47

After Germany invaded Poland, the fairly-tale qualities ascribed to the Kehlsteinhaus took a dark turn. In December 1939, the French government issued a Yellow Book, which contained diplomatic documents chronicling its relations with Germany in the period from the Munich Accord to the start of the war. Among them were reports filed by André François-Poncet during his time as the French ambassador to Germany, including a lengthy description of his visit to the Kehlsteinhaus on October 18, 1938, where Hitler had invited him to discuss the outcome of the Munich Accord before François-Poncet left for a new diplomatic post in Rome. In high literary style, François-Poncet analyzed the architectural project as part of the riddle that was Hitler:

The visitor is not quite sure that he is not dreaming. He has to pinch himself to make sure that it is not a hallucination.

Is it the Castle of Monsalvat, where the Knights of the Holy Grail lived; or a Mount Athos built for the meditations of a Cenobite or the Palace of Antinea rising in the heart of the Atlas? Is it the realization of these fantastic drawings with which Victor Hugo adorned the margins of the manuscript of Burgrave’s “The Fantasy of a Millionaire,” or merely the den where brigands take their rest and accumulate treasures? Is it the work of a normal spirit or that of a man tormented by the folly of grandeur, by a haunting desire for domination and solitude, or simply a prey to fear?48

An Associated Press article summarized François-Poncet’s impressions in less eloquent but more succinct terms: the envoy’s visit to Hitler’s Eagle’s Nest “definitely gave him the creeps.”49 If Hitler read François-Poncet’s report, he perhaps regretted his earlier hospitality. But more likely he would have been pleased to see how his desires and actions continued to confuse his adversaries.

A few years later, foreign journalists no longer entertained doubts as to what the Kehlsteinhaus represented. In a 1942 article for the New York Times, Frederick Oechsner labeled Hitler “the most dangerous and one of the shrewdest political gangsters in existence.” Oechsner was in a position to know: the former chief of the United Press Berlin bureau, he had just returned to the United States after a six-month internment in Germany. In Oechsner’s view, the so-called Eagle’s Nest embodied Hitler’s “tremendous egoism” and “fantastic whims.” He wrote: “In that lofty retreat have occurred councils of historic importance, quarrels that have made history, a romantic suicide and an occasional Hitler revel that makes the place roughly the equivalent of a tired business man’s seat in the first row of a burlesque show.” Oechsner’s lurid (and highly exaggerated) account of events at the Kehlsteinhaus emphasized it as a place of degeneracy—the lair of moral monsters. It was also, he further revealed, a dangerous place, a fortress equipped with “a powerful radio transmitter and receiver” and a vault to protect the “innermost Nazi secrets” as well as “dynamite chambers” that, if discharged, would make it impossible to access the top of the mountain. It was from the Kehlsteinhaus, Oechsner warned, that the “evil genius” Hitler had conceived and was now putting into action his plans to subjugate the world to his “master race.”50 An article in the Daily Mail that appeared in June 1944 reinforced the idea of the Kehlsteinhaus as a last-ditch stronghold, citing reports of the arrival of “huge trucks laden with supplies,” enough “to keep Hitler for years.”51 Beyond fueling fear about the ability of the Nazis to hold out, rumors such as these also bred confusion about the relationship of the Berghof to the Kehlsteinhaus, which seemed to merge into one fantastical creation (indeed, the Manning cartoon discussed previously suggests just such an amalgam, although the drawing was clearly meant to be more of a symbolic than accurate depiction of the Führer’s house).52

By 1944, the Kehlsteinhaus had transformed in press descriptions from an “Eagle’s Nest” to what the New York Times now called an “ogre’s nest,” a place in “a monstrous fairy tale” from which Hitler could “see neither the charred ruins nor the mounds of dead he has scattered over Europe.” This man, more a Grimm fairy-tale figure than real person, “puts himself on a mountain top, above the world, above humanity, above the laws and codes and limits which make peace possible either within nations or between nations.” The article, written in the weeks leading up to D-Day, consciously positioned the Kehlsteinhaus for American readers in relation to the tremendous task that lay ahead of liberating the European continent from Hitler’s grip: “In this tense moment before the grand assault on his stronghold, it is well to place this symbol of the evil we fight against the dangers we brave to destroy it.” The Kehlsteinhaus had become the symbol for the war as a whole, for the final battle approaching between good and evil.53

In Germany, the start of war also brought changes to Hitler’s image. While Hoffmann continued to reissue books, such as Hitler in His Mountains, that presented Hitler enjoying nature and relaxing at home with neighbors and friends in his earlier days as chancellor, new publicity about the Führer focused on his role as the nation’s military leader.54 At a time when German soldiers were off fighting an unpopular war and those on the home front were shouldering ever-greater burdens, images of Hitler surrounded by domestic comforts would have sent the wrong message about the Führer’s own willingness to make sacrifices. Nor could Hitler have been eager to emphasize how much time he was spending on the Obersalzberg and away from the German capital.

Perhaps to alleviate such concerns, Hitler was filmed several times at the Berghof in the 1940s for German Newsreel (Deutsche Wochenschau), rare instances in which his Alpine home was filmed for public consumption. The black-and-white weekly newsreels, produced by the Ufa film company between 1940 and 1945, were widely distributed wartime propaganda that public theaters in Germany were obliged to show before every film screening. In the Berghof footage, typically lasting from one to two minutes in the newsreels, a uniformed Hitler is captured at work: conferring with Göring, accepting the papers of Japanese ambassador Hiroshi Ōshima, examining maps with his generals, and meeting with friendly heads of state, including the Croat fascist Ante Pavelić and Mussolini. The spaces of the Berghof that viewers see are the outdoor main entrance, where visitors arrive and are sometimes greeted by Hitler, and inside the Great Hall, where he holds his meetings. Dramatic intensity is created by the arrival of large black Mercedes; the honor guard standing at attention; the soundtrack of triumphal music or the drumroll heard as the visitors and the Führer enter and exit the house; the power of uniforms and medals; and the figures silhouetted in the light of the Great Hall’s vast window, with its majestic Alpine panorama. The terrace at the back of the house appears only once, when Pavelić presents Hitler with a flag that Frederick the Great had used in the Seven Years’ War as well as Frederick the Great’s chess set (both taken from the former Croatian National Museum at Zagreb)—gifts with obvious allusions to military strategy and victory.55 Thus, in these wartime films, the Berghof is depicted as a sober yet vibrant place of diplomacy and government work, a notably different representation from Hoffmann’s early books about Hitler in his mountain home.

But while the Nazis no longer found it strategic to emphasize the “gentler,” homey side of Hitler to German audiences, they had not lost faith in its propagandistic power over others. The publication in 1941 of A Leader and His People: A Man among Others (Un Chef et son Peuple: un Homme parmi les Autres) testifies to the ability of the National Socialist regime and its supporters to delude themselves about the limitations of Hitler’s charisma. The creators of the book, intended for French audiences and almost certainly funded by the Germans, believed that they could persuade a subjugated people to appreciate and admire their conqueror. After all, in the years before the war, efforts at rapprochement between Germany and France as well as direct German interventions in the French press—which, in any case, already leaned heavily toward the right—had laid a foundation for sympathetic portrayals of Hitler and National Socialist culture. To zealous collaborators, Germany’s invasion of France in 1940 did not repudiate the Nazis’ benevolent intentions or negate the possibility of a positive relationship between the two nations. By continuing to promote the “good” Hitler, much like Goebbels and Hoffmann had done in Germany, they believed that they could convince their fellow citizens that the German occupation would benefit France.56

The foreword to A Leader and His People, written by the fervently pro-Nazi French author Alphonse de Châteaubriant, explained that the album was meant to “bring to life before the eyes of the French the personality of the Führer Adolf Hitler in moments of intimate contact with his people.” It was also meant, he continued, as a corrective to the hateful, “distorting slander” directed at Hitler by his opponents, including the uncomprehending former ruling classes, jealous adversaries he had defeated, and foreign nations that cowered before his mounting achievements. The images, according to Châteaubriant, had been chosen with care to evoke “interest, understanding, and intelligent sympathy.” Châteaubriant, who idolized Hitler as the “prototype” of a new kind of leader, the significance of which extended beyond the German people, already used the pages of La Gerbe (The Sheaf), the weekly French pro-Nazi newspaper that he directed, to trumpet collaboration with the occupiers. When he was asked, he said, to contribute a foreword for A Leader and His People, an album compiled specially for the French people, he “naturally” agreed.57

The images so “carefully” chosen for French eyes were a rewarmed hash of photographs that Hoffmann had been pedaling to German and foreign audiences for years. But it is precisely their lack of originality that is of significance here, revealing that the book’s creators believed that the propaganda that had worked so effectively in peacetime could work just as well in war. The majority of the photographs depicted Hitler interacting with Germans within Germany, although he was also shown as the welcome “liberator” of the ethnic Germans in Czechoslovakia and of the Austrian people. Only a handful of photographs showed Hitler in France, and these were contextualized with quotes in which he praised the valor of the French people. Châteaubriant claimed that the book’s images manifest the new type of leadership embodied by Hitler. Thus, nationality was less important than the nature of the relationship between people and leader captured in these documents, and it was with an eye to this dynamic that Châteaubriant encouraged French readers to study the images.58

The Berghof took pride of place in this visual exploration of a new kind of leader who shared an intimate, spiritual bond with his followers. The first pages of photographs were devoted to different views of the house seen from the exterior and interior, including an image of the “thousands who arrive each day at the Berghof to greet the man who is for his people more than the head of state.”59 In subsequent pages, Hitler was depicted chatting with his Obersalzberg neighbors, interacting with children at the Berghof, and deep in thought in the mountainous landscape—in other words, the very same tropes that had been used so effectively to seduce German and foreign audiences in the prewar period. Even in a nation torn apart by the German occupation, Hitler’s propagandists believed that they could win hearts and minds with these images of the man from Berchtesgaden.