<new page recto/verso>

<set drop folio>

10

SECRETS IN THE CELLAR

Bombing, Looting, and the Reinvention of Hitler’s Domesticity

By mid-April 1945, it appeared that the Obersalzberg might survive the war without being touched by Allied bombs or ground fighting. With German resistance collapsing, American and French forces were advancing rapidly southward toward Berchtesgaden. On April 16, Allied air forces smashed what little remained of Hermann Göring’s Luftwaffe: the majority of the nine hundred planes they hit had been on the ground, unable to fly because they lacked both fuel and pilots. That evening, General Carl Spaatz, commander of the U.S. Strategic Air Forces in Europe, announced that the strategic air war against Germany had been won. American and British heavy bombers would now focus on tactical support to the ground forces in order “to secure the ultimate objective—complete defeat of Germany.”1 The aerial attack on the Berghof on April 25, in the final days of the war, thus came as a surprise to many, raising questions as to how its destruction contributed to Germany’s “complete defeat.”

On several prior occasions, beginning in the spring of 1944, the Allied air forces had devised plans to bomb the Obersalzberg, but in each case the raids were vetoed or canceled. The main argument in favor of bombing was the chance to kill Hitler and thereby precipitate the unraveling of Nazi Germany and the end of the war. But because of the Obersalzberg’s strong defenses, it seemed probable that Hitler would survive such an attack, causing the German people to rally. Some also questioned the wisdom of killing Hitler at this point in the war, when his inept military leadership seemed to be aiding the Allies. In his diary on June 20, 1944, Henry “Hap” Arnold, commanding general of the U.S. Army Air Forces, wrote: “The general impression among the higher officers in the Allied Air Forces is that . . . ‘Our secret weapon is Hitler, hence do not bomb his castle. Do not let him get hurt, we want him to continue making mistakes.’”2 Nor, for that matter, could the Allies be certain that Hitler would be at the Berghof when they attacked. In his absence, the house counted little as a military target, and the danger of flying in mountains frequently covered in clouds along with the expectation of encountering heavy anti-aircraft fire made it difficult to justify the attack as a symbolic gesture.3

Still, Allied servicemen and women as well as civilians on the home fronts, weary from the years of terror and hardship that Hitler had imposed on them, longed to see it happen. On February 21, 1945, a team of U.S. Air Force Thunderbolts, unable to complete a mission in Italy, diverted to Berchtesgaden, bombing the rail yards. The flight leader, who initially did not realize the planes were passing over Hitler’s home, later reported that they had dropped their empty gasoline tanks in the vicinity, giving rise to press speculation that the Berghof had been hit. The day after the story broke, the New York Times described the reaction as a “tremendous political shout that has been heard around the world.”4 When it emerged that the Berghof remained unscathed, the response from the public was something more than disappointment. In a letter to the editor published on March 1 in the Washington Post, a reader wondered why “the Allies [have] continued to show such great delicacy in avoiding the bombing of Hitler’s retreat at Obersalzberg.” The writer reasoned, “Certainly, within the many months that our and British planes have been flying from Italy to bomb certain localities in Austria, there must have been some occasions when it would have been convenient to leave a calling card at Hitler’s place, of which he appears to be so fond and where so many plans have been hatched to make it difficult for the Allies. I don’t recall that back in that fateful September, the Luftwaffe hesitated to bomb some of London’s public buildings, or private ones either. So, why do the Allies so studiously avoid wrecking the Hitler layout at Berchtesgaden?”5 Even Hitler seemed to think it was overdue. In a proclamation made on February 24, three days after the bombing of the Berchtesgaden rail yards, he stated, “I read in British papers that there is a plan to destroy my Berghof. I almost regret that this has not yet happened.” For, he explained, he “would be happy” to shoulder every burden that others must bear, thus alluding to the millions of Germans made homeless by the war.6 No doubt many of them wholeheartedly shared the Führer’s regret. When the Berghof did go up in flames, Johanna Stangassinger, a young woman watching the fire from across the valley with her family and still feeling the pain of forcibly losing her own home on the Obersalzberg to Martin Bormann eight years earlier, turned to her father and said, “This is the most beautiful sight of my life, Hitler’s house burning, just as our houses have burned.”7

When the attack finally came on April 25, 1945, the Allies made up for the delay with a spectacular display of firepower. With aerial strikes in Europe focused on a reduced number of tactical targets, a large number of bomber aircraft were available for the raid. On a clear morning, in ideal flying conditions, a Royal Air Force (RAF) fleet of 359 Lancaster and 16 Mosquito bombers, escorted by 88 P-51 Mustang fighters of the U.S. Air Force, flew over the Obersalzberg in two waves. According to RAF operations record books, the first sweep occurred from 9:51 to 10:11 <sc>a.m.</sc> and the second from 10:42 to 11:00 <sc>a.m.</sc>, with the heaviest bombing occurring around ten o’clock and again from 10:48 to 10:58 <sc>a.m.</sc> (local time).8 Through sometimes heavy flak, the squadrons dropped 1,232 tons of bombs on the buildings and surrounding landscape, including the last of the twelve-thousand-pound Tall Boys, “earthquake” bombs designed to explode underground against reinforced concrete targets. This bomb tonnage was enormous—enough to level a small city. Allied intelligence had discovered the construction of a massive underground bunker system, and the size and type of bombs had been chosen with the goal of penetrating and destroying those structures as well as targets above ground. Nonetheless, the bunkers held up well: about three thousand people safely sheltered underground. While the reported number of deaths was low, given the scale of the attack, it included children who had been caught in the open.9

The next day, in newspapers around the world, banner headlines trumpeted the obliteration of “Hitler’s lair” by “vengeful RAF Lancasters.” A British flight sergeant recalled seeing “one terrific flash right on Hitler’s house,” which was described as having been “wiped off the face of the earth.” The “Kehlstein fortress,” or Eagle’s Nest, one of the main targets, was believed to have been hit, although it was unclear if the pavilion itself had been damaged. The SS barracks had been “smashed” during the first and second rounds of bombing.10 Two Lancasters were reported missing, and it would later be learned that both planes had been hit by anti-aircraft fire; four crewmen died and the survivors were taken prisoner, soon to be liberated by the advancing Allied troops.11 The Obersalzberg raid would be the last major attack by the RAF against Germany. A returning navigator told reporters, “This was the mission we have been waiting for all through the war.”12

The view from the ground suggests the raid was less successful than portrayed by British air command. The snow covering the buildings and surrounding area made targets difficult to distinguish, and the mountains blocked radio signals that could have helped to pinpoint bombing locations.13 Some crews reported that the high mountains and the direction from which they had been ordered to approach prevented them from seeing their targets until it was too late.14 Despite claims by the British Air Ministry that all targets had been successfully identified, the operations record book of 617 Squadron reveals that of its sixteen Lancaster crews, ten could not find their primary targets and aborted the mission or released their bombs elsewhere. Many of the badly damaged buildings—Martin Bormann’s and Hermann Göring’s houses, the camp for Czech workers, and a settlement for evacuated children, among others—seem to have been secondary or accidental targets. The SS barracks, a primary target that was clearly visible because of its size and square shape, received the most accurate drop of Tallboys, reducing the compound to smithereens. The Kehlsteinhaus was untouched, although the land around it was seeded with bombs. The small size of the building, estimated at seventeen square yards, militated against a direct hit. In the case of the Berghof, another primary target, snow made the house difficult to see, and one Lancaster crew observed that “bombing was very scattered.”15 British and German reports, aerial photographs, and firsthand accounts indicate that three smaller bombs hit their target. An eyewitness arriving at the Berghof shortly after the raid ended saw the east and west wings smoldering where they had been hit by high explosive bombs, and the roof of the main house (the section containing the Great Hall and Hitler’s quarters) in flames, possibly from incendiary bombs.16 Christa Schroeder, Hitler’s secretary, recalled that the old part of the house—the original Haus Wachenfeld—had “burst open” when a bomb had landed beside it, and that inside the new section, “the floor was thickly covered with debris and much of the furniture had been demolished.”17 Although thus damaged, the house was far from obliterated, as claimed by the press, and considerable sections remained standing, including much of the east wing and the Great Hall (despite damage to the roof and third story; the great window lay in shards on the ground).18 On May 4, before departing, SS guards doused the Berghof with gasoline and set it alight, gutting much of the interior and adding to the structural damage caused by the air raid (figs. 63, 64).19

Such a large-scale bombing attack on the Obersalzberg entailed heavy risks and costs, especially coming at a time when Germany’s defeat seemed imminent. While the press accounts that followed celebrated the news, they seemed unable to offer definitive reasons for the raid. Charles Chamberlain, reporting from London for the Associated Press, described the raid as “an apparent attempt on the fuehrer’s life.” At the same time, however, he admitted that Hitler’s location was unknown: “German radio propagandists insisted that Hitler was inside encircled Berlin, directing its wild defense, but reports from many parts of Europe lent support to the story he had taken refuge at the Berchtesgaden retreat to which for years he had summoned the heads of states who were his selected dupes to hear his bidding.” But if the mission’s goal had been assassination, it did not explain why “such a shining target had never been bombed before,” a question, Chamberlain noted, that “remained officially without explanation.”20

In his pursuit of an answer, Chamberlain shifted the focus away from a personal attack on Hitler. Since 1944, stories had circulated that the Nazis were preparing a “National Redoubt” in the southern Alps as a last-ditch stronghold for Hitler’s most fanatical followers. The Obersalzberg and Kehlstein, rumored to have vast underground networks of facilities and bunkers, seemed a likely hub of this mountain bastion. Although the National Redoubt would eventually prove to have been a myth, as Berlin collapsed, western Allied leaders, including General Dwight D. Eisenhower, grew anxious that the Nazis fleeing southward would entrench themselves in the Alps and engage in prolonged guerilla warfare.21 Chamberlain stated that “an RAF staff officer said unofficially today, ‘with the fall of Berlin near, Berchtesgaden is looked upon as a sort of Nazi capital—the last spot over which the swastika will fly. Thus the bombing at this time has a psychological effect, and it also can be assumed that the Germans are gathering there for a last stand. Thus it becomes a military target of more importance than before.’” Unofficially, then, the attack was explained as an attempt to take the fight out of die-hard Nazis by eliminating their hope or basis for a last stand in the Alps.22 A correspondent for the Christian Science Monitor, reporting from Supreme Headquarters, similarly reasoned that only expectation of fierce resistance from a mountain redoubt and the desire to decisively eliminate the threat could explain the scale of the attack: “It is hardly conceivable that otherwise would there have been such a concentration yesterday of heavy bombers upon this small area even though it happens to be Hitler’s headquarters.”23

Looking back in 1968 on the Obersalzberg attack, John W. Snyder, who in 1945 had served as director of the U.S. Office of War Mobilization and Reconversion, blamed British eccentricity for the raid, forgetting the contribution of American air forces: “The British for some strange reason, after the war was over, came over and bombed that area pretty badly for no apparent reason; the war was finished, but they came over anyway and took pleasure in bombing out Hitler’s retreat.” Snyder offered these comments as a former government official who had toured Germany in September 1945 to assess surplus property disposal for President Harry S. Truman, and who, while supporting the goals of strategic bombing, had been sickened by the scale of destruction he encountered on his travels.24 While he thus may have been predisposed to take a negative view of the Obersalzberg attack, it is surprising to discover that even some of the participating crewmen shared his opinion. As the operations record books reveal and as recalled in later years by the crewmen, the mission’s poor planning had created chaos in the air, with planes orbiting in all directions and nearly colliding with or bombing each other. This situation, together with the loss of two Lancasters so late in the war, angered some crews who viewed the mission as a public-relations ploy. Even so, “on the way home and back at base there was a mood of celebration.”25

With the advantage of hindsight, some historians have similarly questioned the tactical value of the raid. Nonetheless, the rationale provided to Charles Chamberlain by the RAF officer on the day of the bombing supports U.S. Commander Spaatz’s assertion, made nine days earlier, that future air attacks would focus on bringing about Germany’s “complete defeat.” That defeat, as conceived by the Allies, was not just material, but also psychological, and in raiding the Obersalzberg, the intended impact went beyond the fanatical Nazis imagined to be digging themselves into the mountains. As the Allies well knew, the Berghof had tremendous symbolic significance. Through Heinrich Hoffmann’s images and other Nazi propaganda, the house had come to be intimately associated in the minds of the German people with Hitler himself, acting as a proxy for the leader. Destroying the Berghof allowed the Allies to ritually kill Hitler while he remained in hiding and thus reinforce the end of his regime. The psychological effect of the bombing was thus potentially vast, capable of sending a message beyond the Alps to the German nation as a whole—as the RAF officer himself seemed to imply.

Moreover, the victors, who desired not just to end the war, but to end it decisively and triumphantly, also derived a psychological boost from the bombing. For General Eisenhower, the Obersalzberg represented the “symbol of Nazi arrogance” and seeing the images of how “our bombers had reduced the place to a shambles” gave the Allied command “a gleeful and understandable satisfaction.”26 Following criticism voiced in the United States and England of the “terror bombing” of German cities in February 1945, it has also been proposed that Arthur “Bomber” Harris, head of RAF Bomber Command, wanted one last heroic mission to remind politicians and public alike of the decisive role of the air war in defeating the Third Reich.27 Charles Chamberlain’s article, however, suggests a more broadly held unease among the victors at the war’s close, which may have contributed to their desire to bomb the Obersalzberg into oblivion. Former British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, Lord Halifax, the British press magnate Lord Rothermere, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, British Ambassador Sir Nevile Henderson, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, French Ambassador André François-Poncet, and former U.S. Ambassador to Belgium John Cudahy were among the “selected dupes” who had visited Hitler at the Berghof and thereby served to legitimize his claims to being a respectable world statesman. The memory of Chamberlain’s 1938 meeting with Hitler at the Berghof to negotiate the partition of Czechoslovakia, which had bolstered Hitler’s belief that Europe’s strongest powers would not oppose his plans of empire, especially stung. Reporters covering the Obersalzberg bombing referred to the visit and to Chamberlain’s tragically mistaken confidence that he had achieved “peace in our time.”28 By 1945, then, the Berghof stood as a humiliating reminder of how Allied nations had contributed to the European catastrophe through denial and appeasement, and the sheer force with which RAF bombers set out to annihilate the place suggests a desire to wipe from memory the stain of that capitulation.

If the Allied air forces had hoped to eradicate the Berghof’s physical traces, the epic looting that followed the bombing worked against them, preserving the physical remnants of Hitler’s house and disbursing them to the far reaches of the globe where, in collections stored in basements, living rooms, and attics, the presence of the house lives on. Lee Miller, Vogue’s war correspondent, arrived at the Berghof as it was still burning on the night of May 4 (see fig. 63). “In the morning,” she noted, “the fire was nearly out and so were the looters, in force.”29 French and American soldiers, having competed—and nearly come to blows—in the race to be the first to claim the prize of Hitler’s mountain retreat, were now united in their search for souvenirs.30 Observing the “very wild party” of drinking and trophy hunting in the crumbling ruin, Miller commented sardonically that “there isn’t even a piece left for a museum on the great war criminal, and scattered over the breadth of the world people are forever going to be shown a napkin ring or a pickle fork, supposedly used by Hitler.”31 As it turns out, she was right.

The bombing of the Obersalzberg revealed a Nazi landscape of luxury that verged on the surreal. On the morning of April 25, Richard Reiter, a seventeen-year-old SS courier who as a child had visited Hitler’s home and played with his dogs, was called to his battalion’s temporary headquarters outside Piding, a Bavarian village north of Berchtesgaden; he was ordered to deliver a courier case that had arrived from the Reich Chancellery in Berlin to Bernhard Frank, commander of the SS detachment on the Obersalzberg, who then had Göring under house arrest. Reiter had been assigned the task because he knew the area well and could take back roads to avoid enemy forces, then less than ninety miles from Berchtesgaden. He had just handed over the case to the commander when the air raid sirens began to wail. Frank pointed Reiter to a one-man bomb shelter beside Göring’s pool and disappeared into the house. When the bombing ended and Reiter emerged, he saw that Göring’s house, like a pirate’s cave, had literally exploded with treasure. Unaware of the extensive underground bunkers, Reiter assumed that everyone in the demolished house was dead. He picked up an exquisite silver Persian plate and a bejeweled Persian hunting knife lying in the debris, tucked them into his jacket, and sped off on his motorcycle toward the Berghof. Stopping briefly on the driveway, he saw that a number of art portfolios had blown free of Hitler’s home and lay charred on the nearby ground. He took one that seemed only slightly scorched, put it in his saddlebag, and drove on to rejoin his battalion. Later, he discovered that it contained reproduction prints of six figures painted by Michelangelo on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, including the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, whom the artist depicted lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem.32

With the collapse of the Third Reich, the homes of the Nazi elite on the Obersalzberg and the riches they contained became fair game in the eyes of soldiers and civilians. After Hitler’s death, the first to plunder the Berghof were those who had once been his most faithful followers: Hitler’s personal SS bodyguards, the Reich Security Service.33 Berghof employees brought trucks and emptied out the rooms.34 Next came area residents, who gazed in amazement at “things that had long disappeared from the rest of the Reich”: in the bunkers, storerooms overflowed with sugar, butter, flour, honey, and coffee beans—unimaginable luxuries after years of rationing and barely digestible substitutes. Rooms were stocked with clothes, soap, shoes, dishes, and furniture. Near Bormann’s bunker, the ever-more-astonished looters “stumbled upon large quantities of French Champagne, wine, and cognac.” Utter havoc broke out, and with wheelbarrows, carts, bicycles, and horse-drawn wagons, local residents carried away all that they could manage before the arrival of the Allied troops.35

When French and American soldiers reached the Berghof in early May, yet another round of frenzied looting began. David Kenyon Webster, a private with Easy Company in the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, who later became a reporter, recounted how he came to drink “Hitler’s champagne” in the Saturday Evening Post (fig. 65). He began by describing the long, roundabout journey to reach Berchtesgaden, which took the soldiers through “sweet and warm” country landscapes as well as German cities that stank of the dead. As the Bavarian Alps approached, the men’s anxiety mounted: “We had all heard a little too much about the so-called National Redoubt, where Hitler was supposed to have ordered a final hearty SS stand—one of those fight-to-the-last-man things he was always ordering—and we did not look forward to cleaning out the Alps just when the war was almost over. As we rode the Munich-Salzburg Autobahn and looked up at the huge, dark sharks’-teeth mountains on our right, we wondered if they held the last fanatics.” While the Allies met with no organized resistance, a pocket of SS men in the mountains attacked the Third Battalion, and “several men who had been with the regiment since its start died in this last tragic ambush.”36

Webster’s battalion, the Second, was luckier, and once they entered Berchtesgaden on May 5, they relaxed and enjoyed its comforts. They identified a small suburban development just north of town that had been “lovingly built for the local SS police and their families,” and giving the occupants half an hour to pack their bags, “leased our building with M-1’s.” Inside the “very modern, Alpine style dwellings,” Webster and his squad ate well, “drank what liquor remained in the apartment and after spells in the bathtub lay in Oriental splendor on beds with sheets and listened to the radio.” Later, they encountered soldiers with cases of champagne from Hitler’s house and, deciding it was “too good to miss,” made their way up the Obersalzberg. On the way, they discovered that “everybody else in town apparently had the same idea we had. Recon cars, half-tracks, 6-by-6’s, DUKW’s, Volkswagens, Schwimmwagens—all were winding uphill in a desperate drive to the treasure trove.” When they reached the house, they encountered “a frantic scene that I shall never forget: the midnight looting of Hitler’s home. . . . The front yard was an ugly mass of timbers, broken glass, mortar and brick, over which thirsty soldiers milled about frantically in the rainy darkness.”37

As G. I.’s drank and toasted their dead host (“Heil Hitler, the bastard”), Sergeant Harry Sions, correspondent for Yank magazine, went in search of other prey, exploring the house for traces of its former inhabitants. The Great Hall, where Hitler had once entertained foreign leaders “after he completed the business of sealing a country’s doom . . . is an empty, charred room smelling of spilled wine and burned wood, and great timbers hang from the ceiling at sharp angles” (fig. 66). On the second floor, in Hitler’s former office, nothing but a safe remained containing “only a few autographed copies of Mein Kampf.”38 Sions then arrived at Hitler’s bedroom and bath, which had “been sacked, but there was enough left to indicate they had been simply furnished, although his combination bed and day-couch was burned and the rest of the furniture was gone. The bathroom was a simple affair, like those in less-expensive apartments in New York City. The sit-down toilet, washstand and tub were plain white porcelain. There was no shower; sometimes the Fuehrer used a rubber shower attachment fastened to the tub faucet, similar to those which used to sell for $1.98 at any cut-rate drug store in the States. Inside the medicine chest were a bottle of castor oil, a bottle of liniment for rheumatism and a sample bottle of mouthwash marked in German: ‘Not to be sold in the trade.’”39 In these most private of spaces, Sions thus evoked a strange mixture of intimacy, banality, and loss. The portrait of the modest man that emerged was eerily reminiscent of earlier Nazi propaganda, the influence of which may have colored visitors’ experiences as they combed through the ruins searching for traces of the Führer. One can almost imagine Baldur von Schirach’s obsequious, overexcited commentary: “Look, Hitler is just like us: he likes free samples, too!” But unlike Schirach, who drew on the quotidian to praise Hitler as a man of the people, Sions undoubtedly meant to use the references to castor oil and rheumatism to deflate the image of the Führer as it had appeared to many outside Germany: a fearsome, nearly invincible force. For Lee Miller, this deflation was in itself terrifying.

About one hundred miles away and a few days earlier, Miller had conducted her own interrogation of Hitler’s domestic spaces in Munich. She was staying in his apartment at 16 Prince Regent Square with soldiers from the 179th Regiment of the 45th Division, having arrived there after seeing and photographing the heaps of skeletal dead and the walking corpses in the Dachau concentration camp, which had been liberated on April 29. The apartment building had not been touched by the war and the apartment’s contents were largely intact, giving Miller the impression of having walked into a home that had just been vacated—which, in fact, it had, Hitler’s housekeeper, Anni Winter, having left just hours earlier.40 Miller’s sense of horror only increased when she came to Munich and encountered Hitler on more intimate terms: “He’d never really been alive for me until today. He’d been an evil machine-monster all these years, until I visited the places he had made famous, talked to people who knew him, dug into backstairs gossip and ate and slept in his house. He became less fabulous and therefore more terrible, along with a little evidence of his having some almost human habits; like an ape who embarrasses and humbles you with his gestures, mirroring yourself in caricature. ‘There, but for the grace of God walk I.’”41

Having tracked down and entered the monster’s lair, Miller was unnerved to discover the familiar and the commonplace at the end of the road from Dachau. “Superficially,” she wrote in the July 1945 issue of British Vogue, “almost anyone with a medium income and no heirlooms could have been the proprietor of this flat. It lacked grace and charm, it lacked intimacy, but it was not grand. It wasn’t empty enough to be ‘sub-let’ as it stood, but a quarter of an hour’s clearing cupboards (especially the medicine chests) would have made it ready for any new tenant who didn’t mind linen and silver marked A.H.” Miller did not glamorize these signs of the Führer—the monogrammed crystal and china—but framed them in the larger context of his prosaic tastes and domesticity. Nothing seemed either remarkably good or remarkably bad: the “mediocre” art, the chintz fabric in his bedroom (fig. 67), the out-of-tune Bechstein piano, even the rubber tree plant in the hallway. Historic events similarly slipped into the vortex of banality in these domestic spaces. The Vogue article included a photograph taken by Miller of a beer mug in the shape of the head of King George VI sitting on a desk. Miller explained that the mug, which played “God Save the King” when it was lifted, had been given to Hitler by Chamberlain in 1938 when he visited the Führer’s apartment to negotiate the Munich Accord, and that Hitler had ordered it to be brought down to the bomb shelter during alerts.42 Through such details, Miller revealed the “almost human habits” she found so disconcerting—here, however, tinged with humor, as the reader was left to imagine the mug playing “God Save the King” all the way down the stairs to Hitler’s bomb shelter.

For Miller, it was all intolerably ordinary and familiar—a seductive coziness that both fascinated and repelled her. This uncomfortable tension between banality and evil infused Miller’s reporting from Germany and culminated in the now-famous image, published in the same Vogue article, of Miller in Hitler’s bathtub, taken by David Scherman, a photographer for Life magazine and Miller’s lover (fig. 68).43 The image shows a naked Miller posing modestly, her arm lifted to soap her shoulder, surrounded by the Führer’s attributes: a framed portrait of a stern Hitler in uniform and a sculpture of an idealized female torso indicative of his classical tastes, both items placed there by Miller. On the once-clean mat in front of the tub, Miller has left her boots, covered with the mud of Dachau, as if she has just stepped out of them and into the water. Given that there was another full bath in the apartment, at the other end used by the servants, Miller clearly chose to enact this ritual of cleansing, made poignant by the impossibility of washing away what she had witnessed, on Hitler’s turf.

In a letter to Audrey Withers, her Vogue editor, Miller stated that no other reporters had yet been to Hitler’s Munich apartment and “it is an absolutely exclusive story.”44 As much as that must have pleased Withers, she may have been even more excited to hear of another exclusive: a visit to Eva Braun’s villa, a short distance away at 12 Wasserburger Street. Hitler’s propagandists had kept Braun a secret from the German public, and it was only after his death that they discovered that their Führer had not married the German nation, as he had long insisted, but rather a real, flesh-and-blood woman. Reporters arriving in southern Bavaria with the Allied forces and with access to Hitler’s and Braun’s domestic spaces were the first outsiders to investigate this secret life and the woman for whom Hitler had jilted his nation-bride. Both Sions on the Obersalzberg and Miller in Munich sought to capture something of Braun’s essence by sifting through her domestic remains. Their discoveries helped to shift the narrative of Hitler’s domesticity away from official portrayals of the Führer’s lonely celibacy toward an interest in his sexual life—a topic that had been silenced in Germany since the fall of the Weimar Republic and the imposition of strict press controls. But Sions’s and Miller’s house searches suggested a rather ordinary and banal intimate life, an outlook that would quickly be supplanted by journalists’ hunt for a more sensationalistic story.

When Miller arrived at Braun’s house, she found it in good repair, although sacked and a mess. The looters seem to have been looking primarily for food and alcohol, and furniture and some personal items remained. Unlike Sions, who maintained an observer’s distance, Miller put her body at the service of pursuing her subject. In Hitler’s apartment, she had sat naked in his bath; at Braun’s house, she lay down on her bed and took a nap. By engaging these most intimate spaces with her own body, Miller reenacted Hitler’s and Braun’s moments of vulnerability (in the bath, asleep), as if she wanted to test a shared humanity or to steel herself against it. Of the experience, she wrote in Vogue that “it was comfortable, but it was macabre . . . to doze on the pillow of a girl and man who were now dead, and to be glad they were dead.” Miller avoided a sensationalist tone in describing these intimate infringements and did not glamorize Braun’s home. While providing glimpses of luxury, such as the “self-striped ice blue satin” sheets on Braun’s bed (the “self-striped” contrasting here with the stripes enforced on the Dachau inmates), Miller emphasized the ordinariness of its “department-store” furniture and of the odds and ends left behind by the occupant, such as the remnants in her bedroom cupboard (“a few belts, a tweed beret and a douche bag”), or the items on her dressing table (“tweezers, Elizabeth Arden lipstick refills”) and on her bedroom desk (stationary, clips, pencils, an unfinished letter about “a deal for some eggs in the country”). Turning to the bathroom, Miller declared it “supernormal” except for the two medicine chests full of drugs and preparations, which seemed to suggest a hypochondriac.45 Through this accumulation of mundane details, and despite (or perhaps, because of) the matter-of-fact tone, Miller nonetheless blurred the line between the “supernormal” and the surreal. It was profoundly disturbing to imagine the “almost human” domesticity of the monster and his mate, a feeling that Miller both chased after and pushed away.

In Braun’s rooms at the Berghof, Sergeant Sions found a contrast to Hitler’s puritanically tinged asceticism, his castor oil and $1.98 bathroom hose, but as in Miller’s description of her Munich home, a sense of banality remained, despite the flashes of glamour. “Her bedroom measured about 18 by 27 feet. It had a fireplace and simple maple furniture, most of which had been wrecked and looted. Scattered on the floor was some of Eva Braun’s stationery, light blue, unscented, with EB in the corners; there were some of her calling cards, a couple of booklets on amateur movie photography, and a tailor’s bill dated June 8, 1940, for a dress. The dress cost Hitler 500 marks, or about $125.” Sions then peeked into an even more intimate interior space: “Inside a closet were hundreds of clothes hangers and shoe trees, and a November 1942 copy of La Femme Chic, a Paris fashion magazine.” In a corner of her sitting room, Sions found “an envelope with a last-minute shopping list scribbled on the back.” Finally, entering the most intimate domestic space of all, Sions was surprised that “Eva Braun’s bathroom was simple and nothing like the Hollywood conception of the bathroom of a dictator’s mistress. The wash basin, douche bowl and bathtub were plain white porcelain. Inside her medicine cabinet, above the wash basin, were a jar of Ardena skin cream, made by Elizabeth Arden of Berlin and New York, and a bottle of disinfectant used for athlete’s foot.” While Sions’s account left no doubt that Braun had enjoyed privileges beyond the means of most Germans—a 500-Mark dress was more than a month’s wages for a skilled worker—the references to a scribbled grocery list, plain bathroom fixtures, and athlete’s foot made her appear less alien and remote.46 As was true for Miller, Sions’s reader was left with an overall impression of Hitler’s and Braun’s domesticity that was underwhelming rather than overwhelming. And as the full horror of what had happened in Europe became known, this perspective was deeply troubling to those who wanted to put more distance between themselves and the perpetrators. Before the war, Germans and non-German audiences alike had been drawn to the seeming similarity between their modest lives and that of the Führer, as depicted by his propagandists. Once he had been exposed as a mass murderer, the familiar became a threat rather than a comfort.

The G. I. looters described by Private Webster did not much share this interest in interrogating the spaces of the Berghof in search of the psychic interiors of Hitler and Braun. Instead, they wanted booze and treasure. And in pursuing their desires, they constructed an alternative narrative of domesticity that diverted from and sometimes conflicted with that of Sions and Miller. Arriving in the dark at the Berghof, Webster and his fellow paratroopers made their way over debris down to a large, bomb-proof wine cellar, which was intact and “filled to the ceiling” with bottle racks holding wine of “every brand and blend in the world, or so it seemed—and the victors were making merry with the spoils. Small desperate groups of warriors drank with one hand and filled boxes with the other in the uncertain flicker of matches, candles and flashlights. Bottles were breaking on the floor; men were cursing and clutching; lights flared and faded; and everybody was having one hell of a time.”47 In their joyful immoderation, the G. I.’s told a story not just about “making merry with the spoils,” but also about the spoils themselves. Just as British bombers had exploded Hitler’s house, the widely reported stories of the après-war party at the Berghof detonated the myth of the Führer’s modest, self-sacrificing domestic lifestyle that Nazi propagandists had expounded for years. Here was definitive proof that while his people had suffered, Hitler had surrounded himself with every luxury. In place of a National Redoubt, the Allies discovered the world’s best-stocked wine cellars. “It looks to me,” an infantry colonel told Harry Sions, “like they were expecting to defend the place with wine bottles.”48

As Webster and his squad mates prepared to leave with their haul of Hitler’s champagne, “we noticed a curious thing. The French weren’t putting any liquor in their trucks. A practical people, they were carting off more durable souvenirs. They had discovered a tunnel into the hillside across the road that contained most of Adolf’s household furnishings. We saw them with Hitler’s silver and Hitler’s linen and Hitler’s furniture, but reluctantly decided not to help them dispose of the remainder of the estate.” Other G. I.’s, however, did join in the plundering and shipped home a wide array of “liberated” objects from Hitler’s homes. Unlike their French counterparts, who returned to a country deeply troubled by its relationship to the Third Reich and who largely kept their war spoils out of sight, many American soldiers happily announced their acquisitions to friends, family, and the press. They felt comfortable doing so despite the military’s insistence that looting was illegal—a stance weakened, however, by the fact that some of the worst offenders were high-ranking officers.49 In August 1945, for example, an Associated Press story reported that “one of the postwar social events planned by Lieut. Col. And Mrs. Willard White of Austin” in Texas was a dinner party featuring Adolf Hitler’s table linens and over a hundred pieces of his crested silverware, which White, commander of the 1269th Engineer Combat Battalion, and among the first to reach Berchtesgaden, had collected as “trophies.”50 (The story did not mention that this was only a small part of what White had amassed. He has been called “a strong candidate for top souvenir collector at Berchtesgaden” for the “fortune in spoils” that he acquired, the sale of which allowed him to live in “grand style” upon returning to the States.51) Earlier that summer, newspapers had carried photographs of Mrs. Eileen Doran Morris, the wife of Major Frank Morris and the recipient in Springfield, Illinois, of silverware, tablecloths, and plates taken by the major from Hitler’s apartment in Munich. In the photograph, Mrs. Morris posed with her young daughter, Margaret, beside a table displaying the items, above which hung another of the major’s spoils: a large Nazi flag.52

Texans had a chance to gaze at the relics of the Führer’s domesticity at the end of 1945, when a Victory Loan train made its way through the state. In a five-hundred-city tour to show what war bonds had bought and to promote new purchases, six trains laden with artifacts from the war traveled through forty states in November and December 1945.53 The exhibits, manned by decorated combat veterans, varied from train to train, but included German and Japanese surrender documents, American war weaponry, and various “trophies,” such as captured Japanese and German weapons and uniforms. Crowds of thousands greeted the trains at each stop. On the train heading to Atlanta, “possibly the biggest attraction of all will be the fabulous jewel-studded marshal’s baton taken from Nazi no. 2 Hermann Goering.”54 The train arriving in Texas had another “star” relic on board: Hitler’s silverware from his house in Munich.55 In Texarkana, a small group of reporters was invited to have a meal on the train using Hitler’s silverware. Guards carefully laid out the silverware on a handsomely appointed table, to which a chef then brought a large plate of steaks. “Then the photographers came in. For 20 minutes they snapped pictures of us looking at that silverware. The steaks got cold. So did the coffee.” Then the steaks, uneaten, were taken away, as was the silverware. Associated Press correspondent William Bernard, describing the strange event, insisted on being able to use a coffee spoon to stir his coffee, and after some hesitation from the guards, he “managed to get one spoon in a cup of cold coffee before it was snatched away from me, carefully polished, and put back under lock and key.”56

Long before the Victory Loan trains rolled across the American landscape, the spectacle of the King Midas riches of the Nazis, lurid and moral in its fascination, had played out on the front pages of the world’s newspapers. Since 1940, stories had appeared warning that the Nazis were looting gold, art, and other valuables in the countries they occupied. An article in the Manchester (UK) Guardian from March 2, 1940, for example, revealed that Poles had been forced to hand over “all articles of value which date from before 1850.” These included “oil-paintings, etchings, drawings, furniture, glassware, woodcuts, all articles of silver and gold, historical autographs, manuscripts, miniatures, frames, coins, medals, and rings. No compensation will be paid for any of these, which are to be taken to Germany. Even museums are not exempt from the order, and heavy fines and imprisonment up to fifteen years are provided for those who do not comply with the Nazi order.” Only German nationals in Poland were exempted, leading to a frenzied rush among the Germans to buy what they could from their Polish neighbors.57

Nonetheless, in the spring of 1945, as the Allies advanced into the heart of Germany, the scale of the plundering they uncovered defied all expectations. On April 4, the Thuringian village of Merkers fell to units of the Ninetieth Infantry Division of General George Patton’s Third Army, leading a few days later to a startling and widely reported discovery. In a local mine, army engineers blasted a false wall to reveal a large room, about seventy-five feet wide and one hundred and fifty feet long, filled with one hundred tons of gold bullion and gold coins, silver and platinum bars, and vast hoards of foreign currency, including $2 million.58 The division had stumbled upon the gold reserves of the Reichsbank, much of it stolen by the Nazis from central banks in Europe as well as from SS victims.

The American occupation of Berchtesgaden in early May brought with it a slew of new discoveries documenting the unimaginable riches and luxuries enjoyed by the Nazi elite. The treasures, liquid and other, that soldiers had found in the still-smoldering ruins of the Berghof were only the beginning. Louis Lochner, who had written about the Kehlsteinhaus in 1939, when it was inaccessible to all but a tiny group of Nazi elite, headed to the mysterious Eagle’s Nest to see it for himself a few days after the Allied forces arrived in Berchtesgaden. Since the elevator was not functioning, he and two other correspondents in the company of a group of soldiers made the difficult hike up the steep, snow-covered mountain. Arriving at the pavilion, which Lochner likened to a “lavish castle,” they were “amazed” by the “palatial dimensions of Hitler’s aerie” and its “expensive appointments.” Lochner carefully described each room, marveling, for example, at the massive “mauve colored sandstone” walls in the main hall, which reminded him of a medieval fortress, with its heavy oak furniture, including a round table “twelve feet in diameter,” and its “huge fireplace of chocolate marble streaked with white,” decorated on the inside with “figures of medieval knights on horseback.” The reporter noted the costly Meissen china used in the dining room, bearing a red “Chinese dragon motif,” and the fine linens and glassware, which “all bore the monogram ‘A.H.’” Beyond the splendor of the rooms themselves, Lochner reported on the “immense wine and liquor cellars stocked with the finest of beverages, including cognacs dating back to 1832 and the rarest of French champagnes. There were also vast stocks of food.” In reporting these discoveries, Lochner sought to “expose the myth of the fuehrer’s simplicity.”59 But he also went one step further: in making analogies to castles and medieval fortresses, Lochner presented his readers with a more satisfying or comforting version of Hitler’s domesticity than that offered by Miller and Sions, endowing the evil overlord with a suitably fantastical and imperious architecture. The article thus not only exposed the deceit of National Socialist propaganda, but also encouraged the reader to think, “You see, Hitler is not like us.” On a more personal level, it allowed Lochner to revise his earlier, more positive account of the Eagle’s Nest, written in March 1939, under the watchful eyes of German press censors.60

Lochner, who wrote several articles about Hitler’s domestic spaces in 1945, was one of the few reporters writing on the topic who had known Hitler personally, having served as Berlin correspondent for the Associated Press since 1924. Indeed, he had visited the Obersalzberg in August 1932, where he had interviewed Hitler. Well versed in earlier National Socialist propaganda that claimed Hitler derived his best ideas at his mountain home, Lochner asserted that the Berghof was now “symbolic of the Fuehrer’s entire work—it is totally wrecked.” Like Miller and Sions, but with a focus on the extraordinary rather than the ordinary, Lochner evoked what had once been: “gone is the celebrated 30 by 20 foot window of the huge parlor which Hitler used to look across the deep valley at Bavaria’s most famous mountain, the Watzmann. Gone is the spacious dining room in which he entertained European bigwigs. Gone are the reception halls and private apartments for visiting friends. Gone also are those costly paintings and sculptures which made Haus Wachenfeld a veritable art museum.” Lochner speculated that the art objects “may be hidden somewhere in the mountain recesses behind Hitler’s estate.” He also interviewed a local resident who claimed that two days before the arrival of the Allies, the SS had “sealed with thick stones many caches in the mountain which, on opening, may yield surprises.” The Berghof that Lochner evoked was thus a memory of past splendors as well as a promise of future treasures. In other words, the great riches of Hitler’s domestic spaces were slipping (or being pushed) into the realm of the legendary.61

Following in Miller’s footsteps, Lochner then visited Hitler’s Munich apartment, but his description of a “sumptuous” residence bore little resemblance to hers. Lochner noted the “costly furnishings, large rooms, modern gadgets and expensive paintings.” He also explored the bunker that had been built for Hitler once the war began, describing it as “one of the most modern and replete bombproof cellars in all of Germany.” The ceiling of the shelter was made of “seven inch steel plates, embedded in four foot thick concrete,” and “every room was separated from the next by steel doors. There was a modern little electric kitchen, a small but comfortable bedroom and several small underground living rooms.” For Lochner, unlike Miller, these domestic spaces distanced Hitler from common people, rather than demonstrating the similarities between them. “The more one studies Hitler’s various hide-outs,” he wrote, “the more one realizes how deceitfully official propaganda built him up as a simple man of the people, whose personal wants were the most modest and whose every hour was so concentrated upon Germany’s welfare that he had no time for private life.”62

Admitting that he himself had been fooled, Lochner advised readers to reassess what had been written about Hitler’s celibacy. But unlike Miller, who evoked a more-or-less conventional private life, Lochner pointed toward a different form of deviancy. A painting and bust of Hitler’s niece, Geli Raubal, prompted Lochner to note that “she was reported to have committed suicide in her bedroom in this dwelling soon after Hitler’s ascension to power because she was jilted by her uncle. However, the story that Hitler strangled her in a fit of passion never died.” Hitler’s bedroom, which Miller found unremarkable, struck Lochner “as effeminate, except that the couch-like bed was exceptionally hard. The upholstery of the couch and chairs had delicate, light colors.” But in Braun’s house, Lochner came closest to Miller in perceiving something almost ordinary, “some sort of bond between the Fuehrer and the former photographer’s assistant.” He deduced this entirely from Braun’s book collection, which suggested shared interests in art and architecture and contained personal gifts from Hitler and his friends. Braun herself, however, remained an abstraction for Lochner. Based on her oil portrait, he described her as “a blue-eyed, blond, Gretchen type of Teutonic maiden.”63

Articles such as these and, later, the Victory Loan trains served to readjust the picture of the private lives of the men who had claimed to lead Germany toward a new morality. In mid-May, a much-publicized exhibition opened in Berchtesgaden that put on display Göring’s private collection of art treasures, further exposing the rapaciousness of the Nazi elite. While it was also an opportunity for those who had liberated the art to enjoy it, the exhibition’s presentation and the press surrounding the show encouraged viewers and readers alike to appreciate the art more as loot than for its aesthetics. As was broadly reported, the collection contained paintings, sculpture, tapestries, rugs, and objects made of silver and gold and was valued in 1945 at $200 million—an astronomical sum when one considers, for example, that a fourteen-story apartment building with penthouse on Park Avenue in New York City could be had at the time for well below $1 million.64 The objects had been acquired for Göring from collections throughout Europe that had either been looted or sold at “holdup” prices and had been found in or near Berchtesgaden on railcars, in a house, and in bunkers.65 In “one of the strangest art exhibitions in history,” the recovered treasures were put on display at the former Bavarian Hotel, “a rustic three-story inn” in the small town of Unterstein, on the southern edge of Berchtesgaden.66 Although the exhibition was proudly guarded by the American 101st Airborne Division, which claimed the discoveries, security was insufficient and some of the smaller pictures on display disappeared, exemplifying the growing problem of more serious looting by American soldiers.67

Among the artists represented in this makeshift gallery of “tiny, pine-walled rooms” were Rembrandt, Cranach, Rubens, Boucher, Fragonard, Memling, Holbein, van der Weyden, Brueghel, van Dyke, Bellini, Andrea del Sarto, and Renoir. The quality and quantity of the artworks stunned viewers: “In one room alone are two Rembrandts—one of them a hitherto unknown portrait—the Memling Madonna, valued at $240,000, and three Cranachs.” In total, there were about a thousand paintings on display, all of which, a reporter noted, were “originally intended to wind up on the walls of Goering’s mansions.” Richard J. H. Johnston, reporting from Berchtesgaden for the New York Times, said that the exhibition “proved that Hermann Goering is either one of the wealthiest men in the world or one of the most discriminating thieves in history.”68

The show proved to be something of a blockbuster: “Scores of tourist American soldiers and officers threaded their way through the art objects and the maze of ‘positively no smoking’ signs.” Captain Harry Anderson, an art historian serving with the 101st Airborne, who had been put in charge of locating and securing the safety of the Göring collection, had conceived the idea for the show. Despite the cramped conditions and security problems, the exhibition was not without its professional touches, including a guide who “patiently lectured to those interested in learning what they were looking at. He was Walter Andreas Hofer, Goering’s chief curator.” Hofer, who had also been Göring’s chief purchasing agent, and was thus deeply involved in the ransacking of European collections, insisted that everything had been properly purchased and that he was not a Nazi, a claim that prompted knowing smirks from the G. I.’s listening to his tour. In remarks that were widely reported by the press, Hofer boasted of having successfully competed against Hitler’s art agents in the race to acquire the most desirable masterpieces, thus implicating the Führer in the looting. Moreover, “damning evidence of [art] larceny on a stupendous scale” involving Göring and Hitler had been found in the Bavarian Neuschwanstein Castle in mid-May 1945, and further evidence of Hitler’s involvement had turned up among his personal effects at the Berghof: twelve albums of looted artworks with indications that “he had been thumbing through the volumes, perhaps to select some for his mountain hide-out.” As one reporter sarcastically commented on the voracious art collecting activities of the top Nazis, “They were all gentlemen of culture.”69

The sensational discoveries of Nazi hordes of art, gold, and other treasures came so quickly in the first weeks of the Allied advance into Germany that there was barely time to absorb the news of one fantastical stash before another would surface. In June 1945, the press announced the discovery by American troops of a Nazi treasure hoard that eclipsed the one found in Merkers and that was valued at $5 billion. It consisted primarily of foreign and domestic securities that represented the main national wealth of Austria and Bavaria as well as stolen jewelry, gold bullion, and church objects, such as a solid gold tabernacle from a church in Prague. For most people, $5 billion was a surreal, almost imaginary, figure, like so many of the values being attached to the finds of Nazi plunder. A story from May 29, 1945, in the Chicago Tribune about U. S. Army Sergeant George Murphy, who set the blast that revealed Hitler’s gold in the Merkers mine, helps give a more human perspective on these numbers. A preliminary inventory of the gold, silver, and currency found there valued the find at over $520 million; Murphy, on an emergency furlough to visit his seriously ill mother, arrived home in Seattle, Washington, with “15 cents in his pocket.”70

In July 1945, the press reported that the Allies had brought all the looted wealth they had discovered to the Reichsbank building in Frankfurt am Main in order to inventory the accumulated caches. The task was Herculean. An article in the Chicago Daily Tribune described paper currency “stacked in canvas bags from floor to ceiling,” bullion “stacked like cordwood,” and barrels brimming with pearls, rubies, and sapphires. Judy Barden, a reporter allowed to see the vaults, wrote that “Ali Baba and his 40 thieves had nothing on Adolf Hitler and his band of robbers and murderers.”71 If such fictional metaphors seemed to best capture the immensity of the riches, the crimes they represented were all too real. Among the recovered SS loot were wooden cases filled with “gold and silver fillings from the teeth of tens of thousands of murdered Jews.” In another stash, “thousands of wedding rings stripped from the fingers of women victims of the Nazis in Germany, Greece, Poland, and other occupied countries were strung on ropes like country sausages.”72 To speak of Hitler’s modest way of life or the self-sacrifice of his elites in the face of such colossally criminal greed was, in a word, obscene.

But with the death of one myth arose another that would exert its own profound and long-lasting fascination. In his famous images, Heinrich Hoffmann had presented the Berghof as all surface: the countless scenes he recorded of Hitler on the terrace, in the midst of friends, children, and dogs, enjoying the sunshine and fresh air, were meant to suggest to the German people a goodness and wholesomeness that was aboveboard and visible—what you see is what you get. The discoveries that followed in the wake of the Allies’ arrival transformed the Obersalzberg into a place of subterranean mysteries, secret caverns, and buried treasure. Indeed, Hitler’s former residence came to resemble the folk legends about the neighboring Untersberg, which imagined kings and their courts hidden inside the mountain. The surface life of the Obersalzberg now seemed deceptive, and attention turned to what lay beneath, to the porous mountain the Nazis had created and where, some believed, their treasures still lay buried.

Within weeks of the Allied capture of Hitler’s homes, then, a very different image of the private Führer began to emerge. Secrecy, luxury, and crime replaced accessibility, modesty, and morality. In the process, the question of what had been at stake in the careful construction of the earlier image of the Führer’s domesticity and why it had exerted such enormous appeal both within and beyond Germany’s borders began to be lost. The revelations of the magnitude of the Nazis’ deception could be used to conveniently excuse German and non-German audiences alike for having previously been taken in by Hitler’s publicists. Rather than contemplate the disturbing possibility of complicity in having once enjoyed and willingly accepted the earlier images of the Führer as a modest man and kindly neighbor, despite ample evidence to the contrary, it was easier to see oneself as yet another of his “selected dupes.”