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“ADOLF DOESN’T LIVE HERE ANYMORE”

The Troublesome Afterlife of Hitler’s Homes

At the war’s end, it was clear that the Obersalzberg would never be the same again. During their reign, the Nazis had violently uprooted the people and structures that had grown up over centuries on the mountainside, replacing them with a military compound of barracks, underground bunkers, defense installations, and luxury buildings for the political elite. The Allies’ cataclysmic air-raid attack on April 25, 1945, had transformed the landscape itself, ripping trees to shreds, pushing up new hills, and hollowing out vast craters. It also left behind shattered and burned heaps of architecture and twisted, impassable roads. In its ruined state, this Alpine resort would hardly seem to have been the type of place to attract the tourists who had flocked to its natural charms earlier in the century. And yet, when a journalist for the Christian Science Monitor toured the Obersalzberg in the summer of 1945, he noted that “What used to be Hitler’s closely guarded mountain retreat here is now a sort of Coney Island sideshow with free admission, patrons approach the 100,000 mark and autographs from all the states of the Union are written on the walls. Or rather what is left of the walls.”1 Instead of staying away, then, tourists had come back to the Obersalzberg in force, but the attractions were no longer just the clean air and scenic mountain views. Hitler’s connection to the place was a considerable part of the draw, creating both an economic opportunity for local inhabitants and a political headache for government authorities, a tension that never quite went away.

The occupation of Berchtesgaden that began in May 1945 established a U.S. Army presence that would continue for the next fifty years. That summer, the United States Forces European Theater Special Services, concerned about the morale of U.S. troops remaining in Europe, who were no longer fighting but not yet permitted to return home, set up recreation programs and areas for military personnel.2 One of the most popular destinations was Berchtesgaden, and in the summer of 1945, there came a “steady stream of sightseers, mainly G.I.’s and nurses. But there have been senators, congressmen, generals, and other ‘distinguished visitors’ as well.”3 To Ronald Stead, writing for the Christian Science Monitor, the atmosphere in Berchtesgaden could not have been more different from that of the wrecked and depressed German cities he had traveled through on his tour of the defeated nation.4 “The fairground touch first became noticeable,” he wrote, when he drove into town “and saw a billboard bearing the words ‘Hitler’s Home’ and an arrow indicating the route to it.”5 Thus began the victors’ triumphal parade to the Berghof, inverting the pilgrimage that had taken place in the 1930s, when Germans had come by the thousands to pay their respect to their almighty Führer. The victors relished the destruction of Hitler’s domestic haven, while also being impressed by its remains.

Stopping at a hotel that had once housed Hitler’s guests, Stead noted a corporal in the 101st American Airborne Division at the reception desk handing out maps and advice about the area’s attractions, including the Eagle’s Nest, which he warned Stead not to visit in the heavy rain and mist, when “it would be too easy to launch a jeep into space at one of the hairpin curves with a precipitous drop over the side.” The next day, after an arduous climb, Stead finally made it to the pavilion atop the Kehlstein and marveled at the views: “Especially at sundown on a clear day when the jagged Bavarian peaks take on a deepening lavender hue touched off with crimson splashes and jet-black shadows. In the words of one GI, ‘It’s a straight Walt Disney.’”6 Beyond the spectacular scenery, the Eagle’s Nest also drew sightseers because of its pristine condition—with “no scar of war” showing, it was almost as it had been in its Nazi heyday. “The only difference,” noted an officer, “is that Adolf doesn’t live here anymore.”7

The subterranean world of the Berghof’s bunkers provided a similar, although more covert, thrill. By then, the tunnels were off-limits to the public and guarded by soldiers. Despite the rounds of looting that had taken place after the bombing, the underground rooms still contained a good deal of furniture and objects, which gave them the uncanny feel of a living relic. Price Day, foreign correspondent for the Baltimore Sun, was permitted to tour the tunnels alone in June 1945. Compared to the crowd milling about in the Berghof overhead, Day noted that he was “absolutely and eerily alone” in the dark tunnels and soon lost his way. The tunnels were in excellent condition; as he observed, their “plaster and cabinets look as though they had been put in last week.” Many of the cupboards were still stocked, including with SS glassware and china, but what caught Day’s eye were the “books by the thousands in new, pine bookcases ranging from leather-bound, fifteen volume histories of architecture to pamphlets on how to bake a cake.”8 Ronald Stead, who was also given access to the tunnels, commented on Hitler’s simply decorated bedroom, where he tried the bed and found it uncomfortable.9 Like the Eagle’s Nest, the bunkers revealed the bizarre mindset of the Nazi elite, which combined a familiar domesticity with delusions of god-like power and preparations for an end-times battle. It was as if one had encountered a demonic Zeus on Mount Olympus reading a cookbook in a cozy armchair and sipping tea from fine china, while his thunderbolts hung on the wall in preparation for war with the Giants. And it was this mixture of the familiar and the fantastical that made such spaces utterly irresistible to visitors—a real-world Coney Island of haunted mazes and horror houses that had threatened to colonize the world.

Reemerging aboveground, Stead ended his explorations with the Berghof’s kitchen, then the best-preserved of its rooms.10 But most visitors came to see the famous large window in the Great Hall and to stand where Hitler had stood and look out over the scenery that had inspired his plans for world domination. The Great Hall was a shambles, according to Day: “The big main room is burnt down to its concrete foundations. Nothing is left except remarkably few pieces of charred wood, the blackened frames . . . that once were on the ceiling but are now on the floor, some dozens of chair and couch springs and some American chewing-gum wrappers.”11 The window glass had been shattered in the Allied attack, leaving an open rectangle framing the scenery. Richard Reiter, who served as a guide and interpreter for the Special Services in Berchtesgaden from 1946 to 1948 and gave hundreds of tours to G. I.’s and officials, reports that there were two must-sees on the list of most visitors: the Berghof’s great window and the Eagle’s Nest. The window had become iconic during the Third Reich, while rumors of the magnificence of the Kehlsteinhaus had not been confirmed until the war’s end. Both sites were defined by their spectacular natural views, and by appropriating Hitler’s vistas, people seemed to believe that they gained some insight into his psyche and the formidable will and power that had almost brought the world to its knees.12 They thus unwittingly replicated propaganda from the Third Reich that had similarly encouraged Germans to empathetically share the masterful gaze of the Führer in nature, as experienced through his mountain home.13

Having seen like Hitler, tourists to the Berghof also wanted to be seen, to inscribe their presence on a house that itself was lodged in the minds of millions. According to Day’s report in the Baltimore Sun, the house “now has become the three-dimensional roster of a good part of the United States Army, whose names, ratings, home towns and sometimes serial numbers are scratched on every square foot of the blackened walls. Only strips near the ceilings are unmarked.”14 For the soldiers signing their names, it was a personal, self-made memorial to the long and bitter struggle to defeat the homeowner. Stead interpreted the ruins more broadly, as “a symbolic monument to the collapse and destruction in a wider sense of the house that Hitler built.”15 In similar terms, Philip Hamburger, writing in the New Yorker in June 1945, called the site “a grotesque and instructive heap of rubbish.”16 A year later, an article in the Christian Science Monitor reported that Hitler’s home would “not be rebuilt, but left in ruins as a symbol for future generations of the condition in which he left all Germany.” But “even in this state,” the article continued, “visitors will be able to get some idea of the sumptuousness of what Nazi propaganda described as ‘his simple home.’”17 Thus, the ruined Berghof would serve to expose the Nazi lies about the private Hitler that it had once served to generate. Similarly, for Day, the house—along with the surrounding service buildings, such as the SS barracks, greenhouse, offices, and workers’ camp—revealed the enormity of the cult around Hitler, or as the G. I. on duty guarding “Hitler’s door” put it, “it seems like a lot of trouble for just one man.”18 Missing from these projections onto the wreckage was a more direct connection between the perpetrators and their crimes. The propensity to frame the ruins’ meaning in generalized or abstract terms suggests the lingering influence of Nazi propaganda, which, while acknowledging Hitler’s mountain retreat as an inspirational wellspring for his mission and plans, had also insisted on its status as a place apart from work and government business—despite all evidence to the contrary. Local residents of Berchtesgaden, for their part, had little interest in reinforcing the connection between the Nazis on the hill and the catastrophe in Europe.

Perhaps the utter physical devastation of the Obersalzberg and its emptiness also played a role in this dissociation. Unlike the concentration and work camps, the very essence of which spoke to the Nazis’ crimes, or the ruined German cities populated by a resentful, defeated enemy, evil seemed, to some visitors, to have left the Obersalzberg when its former residents had fled or died. Henry Taylor, writing for the Los Angeles Times in May 1945, soon bored of touring Hitler’s house: “You can poke around the ruins of Hitler’s valley house, as dead and uninteresting as a bashed-in derby hat, only so long.” He found Hitler’s “hide-out” on the Kehlstein much more attractive a place to visit, partly because, as noted previously, it still seemed to retain some presence of its former owner.19 A few weeks later, Baltimore Sun correspondent Day, emerging from his tour of the bunkers, summed up his visit to the Berghof as follows:

The place isn’t interesting anymore. It isn’t even evil now, and if there is a lesson in it, it is merely the old lesson of vanity. This place is now almost intolerably dull.

You glance at a shelf filled with Christmas-tree decorations, including candle holders with old wax at the bottom, and go back up the 67 steps and out into the clean air and down the mountain.20

For many of Day’s readers, the pronouncement of the Berghof as dead and boring must have come as a relief. The fortress of evil that had held the world prisoner was now reduced to the contents of an interesting garage sale. Its very dullness and the ability to walk away from someone else’s secondhand junk must have seemed like liberty itself.

For others, however, just being there and experiencing Hitler’s banal domesticity was deeply meaningful. Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas were among those who visited the Berghof in the summer of 1945. Despite her literary radicalism, Stein held political views that were conservative, even reactionary, and she admired strongmen such as General Francisco Franco and Marshal Philippe Pétain.21 Stein had remained in France throughout the Nazi occupation, living with her lesbian lover under highly dangerous conditions. The Gestapo visited her Paris apartment during the war, Stein reported, and, not finding her at home, “stole linen and dresses and shoes and kitchen utensils and dishes and bed covers and pillows,” although not, significantly, her highly valuable collection of modern art.22 As Janet Malcolm asks in her biography of the two women, “How had the pair of elderly Jewish lesbians escaped the Nazis?” She and other critics have suggested that Stein’s friend, Bernard Faÿ, a Vichy official and Gestapo agent, protected her and Toklas, as did Stein’s endorsement of Pétain and his pro-Hitler regime.23 Others, however, have argued that her collaborationist activities have been exaggerated, and that Stein and Toklas were also protected by their neighbors.24 In 1944, she and Toklas were photographed for Life magazine by Carl Mydans (who was traveling with a U.S. Seventh Army unit) in front of their village house in eastern France. Stein suggested the title for the article: “The Liberation of Gertrude Stein.”25 Now, at the war’s end and at the insistence, Stein wrote, of her friends in the U.S. 441st Troop Carrier Group, “off we went to visit Hitler.”26

Stein chronicled her German trip for Life magazine, a journey that—apart from some stray luggage problems—she seemed to enjoy thoroughly, especially the stay in Berchtesgaden. The story appeared in August 1945, almost six years after the magazine had published a largely admiring feature on the Berghof. Whereas in October 1939, Life readers had gazed at lush color images of the interiors of Hitler’s home, described as being furnished “in very good taste” and “the comfortable kind of rooms a man likes,” they now were presented with Stein and a group of American soldiers standing on the ruined terrace, the charred frame of the great window behind them, and striking “Hitler’s pose,” an audacious gesture made to look like (although not quite) the Nazi salute (fig. 69).27 This act of mockery through mimicry fit with the tone of the article, which expressed the buoyant good cheer of the victor.

The group stopped first to see Göring’s art collection, which Stein appreciated, despite being a collector of distinctly more modern tastes. She gave Göring, however, little credit, ascribing its merits to his having had “excellent advice, apparently.” The tone of the article then became almost giddy as the time arrived for their Berghof tour:

And then we all climbed into our transport, that is our cars and off we went to Hitler. That was exciting. It was exciting to be there, the other houses were bombed but Hitler’s was not it was burned but not down and there we were in that big window where Hitler dominated the world a bunch of GIs just gay and happy. It really was the first time I saw our boys really gay and careless, really forgetting their burdens and just being foolish kids, climbing up and around and on top, while Miss Toklas and I sat comfortably and at home on garden chairs on Hitler’s balcony. It was funny it was completely funny, it was more than funny it was absurd and yet so natural.28

Although it was left to the reader to decide exactly what Stein meant by “absurd and yet so natural,” she clearly delighted in the existence of the ordinary—horseplay, sunning oneself in garden chairs—in this apocalyptic wasteland.29 And in her euphoria, one hears not only the triumphal voice of the victor but also, beneath it, a survivor’s relief. Stein’s life and work were deeply rooted in and dependent on a familiar domestic routine with Toklas, and when the war came, she feared the unmooring of her center of gravity.30 Indeed, despite pleas from friends and American officials, she refused to leave her adopted nation for the safety of a neutral or Allied country.31 While Stein did not covertly identify as Jewish or, it seems, feel specifically threatened by Nazi persecution, her decision to stay appears to have been driven above all by the need for the comforts and sustenance of home. Later, when France was liberated, she felt belatedly the terror of what might have been lost.32 The encounter with Hitler’s domesticity in its ruined state was no doubt joyous in that it confirmed the security of her own.

As Stein and Toklas sat on the terrace, the soldiers explored the ruins. “And then they began to hunt souvenirs, they found photographs and some X-ray photographs that they were convinced were taken of Hitler’s arm after the attempt on his life. What I wanted was a radiator, Hitler did have splendid radiators, and there was one all alone which nobody seemed to notice, but a radiator a large radiator, what could I do with it, they asked, put it on a terrace and grow flowers over it, I said, but our courage was not equal to the weight of it and we sadly left it behind.” This desire to appropriate and reformulate Hitler’s domesticity tamed the dictator through a kind of Dadaist reinvention. Hitler’s lingering presence was transformed into something harmless and absurd—the much-feared despot reduced to a radiator converted into a trellis. It also rebalanced the score: the Gestapo had taken Stein’s linen, so she would take Hitler’s radiator. But even if she had to leave it behind (taking instead the X-ray of Hitler’s injured arm), Stein departed happy: “After we had played around till it was late off we went, down the hills and that day was over, it was a wonderful day.”33 To casually describe a visit to Hitler’s home as “a wonderful day,” as if it were, indeed, an outing to Coney Island, insisted, moreover, on Stein’s fearlessness. What had once been a symbol of the Führer’s terrifying power was now, in her eyes, nothing more than a victor’s playground, both pleasurable and banal.

By 1947, occupied Berchtesgaden was being touted in the press as “one of the finest recreation areas in the world.” Victor Jones reported in the Daily Boston Globe that “from all over Europe, Army and War Department civilian personnel come here for from three to seven-day visits.” The 150-square-mile area of the Berchtesgaden command now offered “14 hotels with a total of 750 beds and few of them are ever empty.” The sprawling resort, which catered to 150,000 visitors in 1947, was managed by twenty officers, an equal number of Women’s Army Core members, and one hundred enlisted men, “with the help of virtually the whole native population.” The demand was unsurprising given the generous and inexpensive offerings: “Your G.I., the civilians and their dependents here can get for a couple of bucks a day the kind of luxurious resort living which before the war only titled Englishmen and American millionaires could afford.” A room in any of the hotels cost only one dollar per night, meals were free for soldiers, and drinks cost just thirty cents. Additionally, one could sign up for a plethora of free activities, including ski lessons with “the best instructors in Europe” and hunting with a guide for elk and deer. Other entertainments were also at hand: “Every hotel has an orchestra at meal times and a night club complete with floor shows and plenty of Bavarian partners are available every evening.” Further evoking the victor’s sexual spoils, Jones reported that “the G.I. can even have his breakfast in bed. It’s served to him by a fraulein, I’m told, and they have learned to make the soldier reach for the tray instead of setting it down, and to depart while the guest’s hands are still engaged in holding the tray.”34

Despite competing attractions, tours of the ruined houses of Hitler and his neighbors remained popular among American and Allied visitors. The desire to collect souvenirs also continued unabated, even in the face of an ever-diminishing supply. Indeed, once its contents had vanished, the Berghof itself began to disappear as souvenir-hunters carried away pieces of the structure itself. Pilgrims in the early 1930s had taken pieces of Hitler’s wooden fence. In the postwar period, chunks of the marble fireplace in the Great Hall were particularly desirable, as were Hitler’s green bathroom tiles. Guides did a brisk business selling the stones and tiles for one dollar each. When all the tiles had been stripped from Hitler’s bathroom, “a smart local businessman manufactured thousands of new tiles for sale to tourists.”35

A sanctioned souvenir trade also grew up locally in the sale of postcards and other mementoes, including handcrafted photography albums that have since found their way into numerous archival collections.36 Titled “Souvenir of Berchtesgaden” or “Souvenir of the Eagle’s Nest,” the small albums appear to have been created by a photography studio in Berchtesgaden and, although not identical, follow a similar format: black-and-white photographs are pasted onto the thick paper and labeled in English using white ink and Gothic-style handwriting.37 The albums begin with and give pride of place to the exterior and interiors of Hitler’s house, both in its Wachenfeld and Berghof iterations. Other buildings on the Obersalzberg, namely the Platterhof Hotel, SS barracks, and Bormann’s and Göring’s houses, are also included, along with multiple views of and from the Kehlstein. In this way, the albums, while presenting an overview of the Nazis’ Alpine retreat, focused their attention on the two buildings most closely associated with Hitler and where tourists usually lingered: the Berghof and Eagle’s Nest.

More interesting than the images, however, is their presentation. The composer of the albums juxtaposed images from the Nazis’ heyday on the Obersalzberg (using either actual or reproductions of Nazi postcards, particularly those of Heinrich Hoffmann) with views after the Allied attack in 1945. The “before,” or pre-bombing, images appear first in the albums, followed by the “after,” or postwar, images toward the end. Thus, Hoffmann’s famous photograph of the large window in the Great Hall majestically framing the Untersberg found a twisted echo in an image of Hitler’s ruined Berghof glimpsed through the charred and dangling roof beams of Bormann’s bombed house (fig. 70).38 Similarly, the newly expanded Berghof pictured in a pristine winter Alpine landscape appeared later from a similar angle as an exploded shell on a devastated hillside, and the sharp rectilinear forms of the intact SS barracks transformed on the next page into cows grazing in their ruins.39 Most of the photographs, however, showed the Nazi buildings and Obersalzberg landscape as they had once been.

Through this selection and arrangement of images—coupled with the old-fashioned handwriting as well as the albums’ intimate format and crafty, homemade feel, which evoked a personal or familial object—the books strongly cultivated a sense of nostalgia. That these keepsakes of the lost Nazi mountain were produced by the defeated for the victors reinforces their strangeness. Nonetheless, the number of such albums in American collections suggests that they appealed to American soldiers and officials touring the sites they had helped to destroy. One wonders whether an American reader would have felt the sentimental pull fostered by the German maker, or whether he or she would have read the book and its before-and-after narrative differently—as a tale of morality and proof of justice delivered. In any case, the albums constructed a hermetic view of the rise and fall of the regime that once again ignored its victims. Indeed, it was purely an architectural story, leaving out people altogether, who were nowhere to be seen in the photographs.

By the early 1950s, German nostalgia for the Obersalzberg’s Nazi past had become a political and public problem. For four years after the war’s end, the Nazi ruins had been off-limits to Germans unless they were accompanied by an American host. Official tours were conducted only in English, and for Allied or approved foreign visitors. That began to change in May 1949, when the U.S. Army took the first steps to lift restrictions to the site, a decision that sparked concerns about the landscape’s moral toxicity.40 An Associated Press article from December 1949 asked, “Is Hitler’s former mountain retreat likely to become a Nazi shrine?” It cited efforts undertaken by Colonel Stanley Grogan, commander of the Berchtesgaden military post and former U.S. Army public relations director, to avoid such an outcome, which included changing place-names associated with the Nazis as well as removing “the bust of Hitler which used to be on display in the Eagle’s nest” and storing it in the basement.41 When problems did arise, however, they derived less from material objects than from their interpreters. By 1951, twenty freelance German guides offered tours of the Obersalzberg, and some did not hide their National Socialist sympathies. To the contrary, they delivered eulogies on the “unfortunate” end of the Nazi regime and even spoke of the “resurrection from the ruins.” Others compensated for their lack of knowledge about the site with ghoulish details. One guide enjoyed revealing Hitler’s torture chamber, a room that did not actually exist in the Berghof (although the Gestapo torture chambers elsewhere were real enough). As the number of daily visitors soared into the thousands, fears grew that once-“harmless” visits impelled by historic curiosity were tipping into sensationalism and pilgrimage.42

This period also saw the rise of neo-Nazi groups in Germany, and as apprehensions spread that democracy was faltering once again in Europe, the press was quick to pick up on rumors that fascism had returned to the Obersalzberg.43 In the summer of 1951, the Münchner Illustrierte (Munich Illustrated) sent its senior journalist, Jürgen Neven-du Mont, on an undercover investigation of the German-language tours. Among the guides was Göring’s former house manager, Herr Zychski, who nostalgically showed off his own destroyed apartment in Göring’s bombed-out chalet. Standing on the Berghof terrace, Zychski reminisced about the Führer’s fondness for German children and the parties he had hosted for them “here, where the red umbrellas once stood.” Inside, Neven-du Mont heard another guide praising the modesty of the furnishings, and his impressed listeners commenting admiringly on what “a truly beautiful and yet simple house” it had been and bemoaning its destruction as “a crying shame.” The guide added that the Führer had lived more simply than the politicians in Bonn, a comment met with approving murmurs. In the Berghof’s main hall, Neven-du Mont described “how the guides point out in particular a block of red stone in the ‘Führer’s’ fireplace, which is getting smaller day by day, since pieces are constantly being taken as souvenirs. ‘Many want to take home some of the Führer’s fire,’ explained the guides.” Neven-du Mont considered their narrative approach a cross between propaganda and a “Here-you-see-Hitler’s-toothbrush” type of sensational tourism.44

While some listeners reacted with disgust to the guides’ National Socialist sympathies, including foreign visitors who understood German, others were emboldened. An older German man, mistakenly believing the undercover reporter to be a like-minded compatriot, agreed to be photographed taking a piece of the Berghof ruin as a memento, explaining that “I have remained loyal to my Führer. We will never again experience an age of such beauty and greatness.” Neven-du Mont later saw him at one of the many souvenir kiosks buying photographs and a drawing of “The Obersalzberg, Then and Now.” The reporter further noted that tourists were being sold tickets to the off-limit bunkers, the walls of which were inscribed not only with the names of people from around the world, but also with swastikas, SS runes, and messages, such as “Long live the SS!” and “Hail to our Great Führer,” that left no doubt as to the scribblers’ political leanings. Finally, the article included a photograph of a handkerchief decorated with an image of the Berghof and flowers, the kind of kitschy merchandise that even Goebbels had tried to ban. Neven-du Mont thus concluded that the Obersalzberg’s burgeoning Hitler tourism represented a multifaceted danger: proselytizing by guides and visitors to a younger and impressionable generation, encouraging nationalist pilgrims, sentimentalizing terror, and damaging Bavaria’s international reputation and tourist industry. He urged the authorities to intervene and asked “whether this particular sort of tourism is healthy for the state of Bavaria.”45

Neven-du Mont’s story, which was also carried by the influential Süddeutsche Zeitung, infuriated Social Democratic politicians, many of whom had spent time in concentration camps or been forced into exile under the Nazi regime. After reading the article, Social Democrat Wilhelm Hoegner, Bavaria’s minister of the interior, wrote a letter, dated July 12, to the district administrator in Berchtesgaden asking for verification of National Socialist activities on the Obersalzberg and stating that if Neven-du Mont’s account proved to be true, “it would be advisable to cordon off the entire area and leave it to the chamois and ibex.”46 Satisfying as the thought may have been, replacing unrepentant Nazis with wild goats clearly was not a permanent solution. Sealing off the ruins, while making them inaccessible to pilgrims, would also preserve them, effectively freezing the site in 1945.47 For the time being, however, local authorities ordered the bunkers on the Obersalzberg to be walled up, the road to the Kehlsteinhaus closed to cars, the eviction of tour guides from the ruins, and the confiscation of souvenirs.48 On August 2, Hoegner and a group of Bavarian cabinet ministers toured the site and later met with delegates from the area to discuss the next steps.49 The majority of the visiting statesmen favored obliterating the entire architectural presence of the Nazis on the Obersalzberg, including the Kehlstein. The local spokesmen focused their efforts on making a case for preserving the Eagle’s Nest, which some considered an essentially blameless building (barely visited by Hitler and distinct from his residential compound), and hoped that experiencing the stunning views from the pavilion as well as realizing the enormous technical difficulties posed by its dismantling and removal would help to shift the cabinet members’ opinion.50

The day after the politicians’ visit, the Berchtesgadener Anzeiger (Berchtesgaden Advertiser), a conservative local paper owned by a former National Socialist Party member, surveyed its readers on the “dictatorial” handing of the Obersalzberg’s future, which it felt should be decided by those who would be most affected—the area’s residents. It printed what it claimed was a representative sample of the three hundred replies it received, most of which opposed clearing away the Nazi ruins or razing extant buildings. A respondent described as “A Housewife” asked: “Is this what democracy looks like—a couple of gentlemen decree, like in 1933?” A man identified as “A Clerk” considered such measures an economic waste in a region of few resources and suggested reusing materials from the ruins for local housing. Wrecking the Kehlsteinhaus, he added, was “completely absurd,” and if the intention was to avoid memorializing the Nazi regime through its structures, then, by extension, the government should dig up the Autobahns. “A Precision Engineer” asserted that the war had destroyed enough, and that the money intended for demolition would be better spent repairing salvageable buildings to help ease postwar overcrowding. Another reader wondered why keeping the Berghof ruins should be objectionable when other countries had preserved the monuments of history’s “greatest political criminals,” a group that in his mind included Napoleon, the emperor Nero in Italy, and the Turkic conqueror, Timur. Similarly, “An Employee” remarked that Joachim von Ribbentrop’s summer residence near Salzburg had been converted by the Austrian government into a palatial hotel that attracted high-class foreign guests and brought the state needed foreign currency, thus transforming a legacy of the former regime into a positive benefit for the people. “A Catechist” proposed sealing the Berghof to visitors and hanging a banner across the void of its great window proclaiming “Sic transit gloria mundi” (Thus passes the glory of the world), as a reminder to politicians of the transience of their preaching and plans. He also warned that if the Obersalzberg were to avoid becoming a fascist pilgrimage site, the removal of the ruins had to be accompanied by the creation of jobs and housing for the dispossessed Germans who had arrived in Berchtesgaden from former parts of the Reich, and that eradicating the remains of a disastrous past without creating new life would be meaningless. Another reader suggested that the endless stories about Hitler and his cronies in the tabloids did more to promote fascism than any ruin.51

Because the Obersalzberg was still a U.S. military post in 1951, German officials consulted with George Shuster, U.S. land commissioner to Bavaria, on the site’s development. On August 6, Waldemar von Knoeringen, chairman of the Bavarian Social Democratic Party, announced the Cabinet’s decision to demolish the Berghof and surrounding ruins and replant the area with trees and grass. Knoeringen explained that the vast geographies of ruins within Germany sufficiently testified to the legacy of the National Socialist regime, and that there was no reason to foster neo-Nazism by preserving the ruins on the Obersalzberg as a memorial.52 Nonetheless, Schuster confirmed that the Eagle’s Nest would be saved as a reminder to posterity of the social irresponsibility of the Nazi regime, which had built castles in the sky while depriving its own people.53 In November, in light of the opposition from Berchtesgaden residents, the U.S. High Commissioner formally reinforced the demolition initiative by making it a condition for returning the Obersalzberg properties (Bormann’s house, Göring’s house, SS barracks, and the Berghof) to the Bavarian state: namely, that “the buildings be razed completely and all structural evidences of their location be erased.”54 The American authorities thus passed on a responsibility that they themselves had neglected for years. Ironically, when the U.S. Army had tried to demolish the ruins in 1947, in part because of fears of their structural instability, they had been stopped from doing so by the U.S. Special Services, who were making a hefty profit charging admission to the site.55

For months following the August announcement, the Anzeiger actively campaigned against the proposed demolition. It gave various reasons to preserve the ruins, but above all emphasized their value as an attraction for the local tourist trade and their ability to bring in foreign currency. The numbers seemed to support its claim: from July to October 1951, 136,560 people toured the Obersalzberg ruins, 80 percent of whom were non-Germans. But while the Social Democrats argued that it was the beauty of nature that brought visitors to the mountain, the Anzeiger insisted that they came for the ruins, and it looked to the American media for proof. It quoted at length, for example, from an article in the Denver Post that described the Berghof ruins as Berchtesgaden’s main point of attraction for foreign travelers. In mid-August, it also cited a recent media story of a “well known American hotelier” who had offered to buy the ruins of Hitler’s Berghof with the intention of transporting and reconstructing them at one of his hotels in the Rocky Mountains. The paper implied that if a successful capitalist recognized the Berghof ruins as a tourist goldmine and proposed setting up a Hitler theme park in the American West, then Bavarians would be foolish to miss out on the economic opportunity presented to them by the original sites of their own history.56

Meanwhile, a rival newspaper, the Südost-Kurier (Southeast Courier)—based in the nearby town of Bad Reichenhall and led by a Social Democrat, Josef Felder—fought just as vigorously and just as long for the eradication of the Nazi ruins on the Obersalzberg.57 Felder, “an old Dachau alumnus,” antagonized conservatives in the region with his insistence on confronting its Nazi past and resurgent fascist sympathies.58 To contest the Anzeiger’s claim that all local residents wanted to preserve the ruins, he gave demolition proponents a voice. Felder also agreed with his party in treating the ruins as an essentially political, rather than economic, issue.59 A November editorial by Sepp Kiene, a Social Democratic delegate to the Bavarian parliament from neighboring Traunstein, pointed out that the decision to eradicate the ruins had been taken by democratically elected representatives, whose understanding of the public good extended beyond the self-interests of a kiosk owner on the Obersalzberg. As West Germany tried to legitimize itself in the world’s eyes, larger issues were at stake, he argued, than the profits of local merchants.60

For many West Germans, the search for some form of normalcy after the war involved developing selective memories of the Third Reich. As historians have amply documented, although a few localities erected memorials to victims before 1950, a broader desire for an honest confrontation with the nation’s crimes took decades to develop. In 1968, a young generation rebelled against the lingering amnesia and pushed for greater openness in exploring National Socialism’s legacy, and, particularly, their parents’ complicity in the Holocaust, which would be fully realized, however, only in the period after the Cold War ended in 1989.61 In the context of this long national aversion to atoning for and commemorating victims’ suffering, the Obersalzberg stands out by virtue of how early it confronted, as a community, the preservation of National Socialism’s physical remains. But whether this can be construed as a true reckoning with the past is doubtful. The mountain sites were associated with the regime’s perpetrators, not its victims, and pro-preservation forces considered them to be largely innocuous—a gangsters’ vacation colony. Among this faction, the ruins’ proposed removal stirred little self-critical awareness with regard to profiting from a genocidal regime, but rather fostered a sense of victimhood in the perceived loss of economic freedom at the hands of remote state politicians and American occupiers. Pro-demolition advocates, by contrast, viewed the mountain as a place of almost cultic power, as seen in the dangerous magnetism of Hitler’s house. But while seeking to stamp out fascist “cells” drawn to it, they were equally concerned with protecting Bavaria’s image as a reformed, democratic state. Perhaps as a result, they gingerly avoided the thorny question of just how widespread sympathy for Hitler remained in the area—which did not, however, stop the pro-preservation camp from asserting that the vocal attention brought to a few bad apples had effectively smeared the entire local population.62 Thus, discussions about what to do with the ruins revolved less around respecting the memory of past victims or standing accountable for past sins than around defending current interests. Both sides had much at stake in their opposing interpretations of the site, for which there seemed to be no room for compromise.

Within weeks of Knoeringen’s announcement, the issue had become so emotionally fraught that the debate between the Anzeiger and the Kurier about the “Obersalzberg question” spilled off their pages and into the area’s beer halls. The escalating tensions and rhetoric attracted international media attention, reminding some a little too closely of beer-hall agitations in Bavaria thirty years earlier. In an article for Harper’s Magazine, American writer Paul Moor recounted how the newspaper exchanges devolved into shouting matches: “A seven-column editorial on the front page of the Anzeiger’s September 7 issue categorically denied the existence of neo-Nazism in Berchtesgaden. At a public meeting the following day, Herr Felder of the rival Kurier, took the Anzeiger to task for this statement; late in the evening a cry of ‘The real and only culprits are the Jews!’ rent the air, and things disintegrated into tumultuous disorder.” Later that month, the Social Democrats held a meeting to rally pro-demolition forces, but hundreds of vocal opponents turned up, and the evening again ended badly.63

By October, Moor’s story continued, the Social Democrats were worried enough to organize a debate between Knoeringen and Heinz Erich Krause. Better known under his nom de plume, Hek Rau, Krause was a young man from Austria who wrote and edited a clandestine Nazi monthly, Deutschland Brief (Letter from Germany), and who had been a chief instigator of trouble at the local meetings. On October 26, the packed restaurant in the Berchtesgaden train station (a monumental Third Reich structure) heard Knoeringen, a seasoned politician and one of the party’s finest orators, appeal to the crowd to rise above hatred in objectively assessing the issues at hand. Taking the podium, Krause adopted a different approach, insulting and goading those present; he asked Knoeringen, for example, why he bad-mouthed Hitler when he owed him his current position. (As a young man, Knoeringen had been so effective a speaker against Hitler that he had been forced to flee for his life in 1933 and spent the next twelve years in exile, working for the resistance.64) At the end of the night, Krause was escorted out of the room under police protection. As Moor reported, such gatherings “provided the first open proof that there might be something in what the Social Democrats were saying about a Nazi renaissance here.” While opponents of the demolition had hoped protests would strengthen their cause, the unwanted media attention they drew to the region cemented the cabinet members’ resolution, prompting them to give the go-ahead to begin dismantling the ruins in mid-November.65

Göring’s and Bormann’s houses, pulverized by Allied bombs, were among the first to go.66 Visiting the Obersalzberg in the winter of 1951, Moor noticed some trucks by the ruins, into which men were shoveling the rubble. “It somehow seemed an anticlimactic way to raze anything with so flamboyant a history,” he wrote, “but the truth is that most of the ruins were too unstable to require any blasting. It was mainly a matter of pushing them over, picking them up, and carting them off.” In the debates preceding the demolition, neither side had raised the cost to taxpayers of preserving the ruins—only of what it would cost to take them down. But given the perilous condition of the structures, the government would have had to expend considerable public funds to make them safe for visitors. It is hard to imagine a newly democratic nation, struggling to overcome a disastrous world war and the lingering wounds of fascism, agreeing to literally prop up the houses of Hitler and his cronies. In any case, the ruins were so deteriorated that some questioned the possibility of keeping them at all. Everett Schoening, the State Department’s resident officer, told Moor that “the ruins had to come down . . . it wasn’t safe having all those thousands of people climbing on them—what that air raid didn’t blow up was left pretty shaky.”67

To spare taxpayers the expense of clearing the site, the Bavarian government sold salvage rights to a local construction firm on the strict condition that none of the materials be resold as souvenirs.68 In addition to handling the ruins, the company agreed to remove a number of intact buildings associated with the Nazi regime, including the Kampfhäusl where Hitler had written the second volume of Mein Kampf.69 All of this was to be accomplished by the end of May 1952; the reforestation of the site would come later, at a cost to the state of some 100,000 Deutsche Marks. Fearing neo-Nazi protests, Hoegner posted thirty policemen to the demolition site “to protect democracy.”70 Work stopped over the winter months and resumed the following spring. By the end of April, the demolition crews had almost finished dismantling the Berghof. The last thing to go was the facade that had once held the great picture window that looked out at the Untersberg—without doubt, the most symbolic part of the house. On April 30, on the seventh anniversary and almost to the hour of Hitler’s suicide, the remaining walls were dynamited. The Berchtesgadener Anzeiger, which recorded the event in detail, complained that the announcement was made at 3:00 <sc>p.m.</sc>, only two hours before the blast was due to occur. Rushing to the site, its reporter found a small group of American officers and Bavarian government representatives gathered to watch the explosion. Evoking a state execution, he gave a minute-by-minute account of the house’s final moments, leading to the detonation at 5:05 <sc>p.m.</sc>, after which “a brown cloud of dust covered the site of the explosion for a few minutes.” The site was then inspected by the American and German authorities in attendance.71 Images of the exploding facade were published worldwide and must have been cathartic for many viewers: as Life magazine acknowledged, “Hitler’s era and end were shared by the Berghof.” To mark the event, Life published a before-and-after photographic narrative of the house, recalling its heyday and demise (fig. 71).72 The New York Times, which itself had once lavished attention on the house, now noted that “the restless ghost of Hitler will have to look for another place to haunt.”73

But if Hitler’s ghost moved on after the demolition, the tourists did not. To the delight of local merchants, the numbers of visitors steadily increased in the decades following the contested removal of the Obersalzberg ruins. Despite the stipulation in the American transfer agreement that all traces of the Nazi buildings be removed, the construction firm had left foundations and other underground structures, including Hitler’s garage. These remnants, along with the vast bunker system and the Kehlsteinhaus, which reopened as a restaurant, continued to draw the historically curious to the area. Indeed, the traffic on the Obersalzberg was so great that it interfered with the effort to grow grass over the cleared sites to obscure the Nazis’ architectural footprints. Even after the disappearance of most of the house, the Berghof remained the largest unadvertised tourist attraction in Germany, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors.74 In 1962, Peter Brügge, a correspondent for Der Spiegel (The Mirror), likened the buses unloading their passengers and the crowds mulling about the foundations to similar scenes in Pompeii.75

After the demolition, press reports about the Obersalzberg diminished significantly, but the occasional story in the German or foreign media over the next four decades served as a reminder that the issue of memory and monuments had not died with the blasting of the Berghof. Not only tourists, but also Nazi sympathizers found their way to the site and left behind reminders of their stubborn presence. And as neo-Nazism increasingly became recognized as a global phenomenon, these pilgrims could no longer be assumed to be German. Brügge described how shortly after arriving on the Obersalzberg, he entered Hitler’s garage and was informed by a scrawled English text on the wall that “Hitler was right,” a comment presumably put there by a foreign traveler who had come prepared with a can of paint.76

But Brügge was more interested in what was happening aboveground on the Obersalzberg, particularly the continuing absence of a critical context in which to understand the Nazis’ presence on the mountain and its physical remains. The lack of serious histories about the Obersalzberg’s Nazi period, combined with the natural beauty of the landscape, left the past open to reinvention. Visitors drinking Hofbräu beer on the Kehlsteinhaus terrace, glorying in the blue skies and mountain scenery, were prone to spontaneous outbursts praising Hitler’s sense of beauty.77 It was all so pleasant that it made it hard to remember the human suffering on which the place had been built, and such reminders were, in any case, conspicuously absent.

What remained of the Obersalzberg ruins was similarly devoid of official markers other than rusted “keep out” signs, and since the government insisted that there was nothing left to see, there were also no official tours. Nonetheless, freelance guides continued to give tours based on what they thought their listeners wanted to hear. Brügge interviewed a tour guide who claimed that he neither praised nor criticized Hitler, but simply stuck to the facts: “My tours have to be objective,” he insisted. “I can’t say, ‘over there lived that bastard Hitler.’ People don’t want to hear that.” A similar attitude informed the offerings on hand at area souvenir shops, which included locally produced books that sanitized the mountain’s National Socialist history.78 Taking their cue from propaganda of the 1930s, and reusing period photographs, these publications represented the Nazis’ Obersalzberg activities as wholesome, recreational, and largely nonpolitical. Their pages revealed Hitler relaxing on the Berghof terrace, Göring curling on his frozen pool, and Eva Braun sunning herself, among other scenes of domestic innocence.79 Souvenir stands also sold postcards and color slides of the Obersalzberg before 1945 and before the demolition. In 1986, Peter Kurz, a local Social Democratic representative in the Bavarian state parliament, caused a stir by complaining about the nostalgic tone of such souvenirs.80 When more explicitly political material was made available for sale, it was presented in a thoroughly decontextualized manner. A travel writer visiting the Obersalzberg in 1978 was surprised to find shopkeepers displaying records of speeches by Hitler and Goebbels alongside albums by Pink Floyd and Plastic Bertrand.81

While government authorities would occasionally remove more offensive souvenirs, a laissez-faire attitude generally prevailed on the Obersalzberg. Therese Partner, owner of the Türken Inn, took advantage of the laxity to offer access to the Berghof’s underground bunker. Partner, the daughter of Karl Schuster, was among the very few former Obersalzberg residents to successfully petition to have property seized by Bormann restored after the war.82 All entrances to the bunker system had been sealed by the American occupiers and again by the Bavarian authorities in the early 1950s. Partner claimed that in 1954, a dream guided her to a blocked door underneath the inn. When it was opened, she discovered a long tunnel leading to Hitler and Eva Braun’s private bunker rooms beneath the adjacent Berghof. She began to admit visitors and soon was making a fortune from the fifty thousand people who toured the bunker annually. Its walls, which she would occasionally whitewash, became an international canvas on which to express pro- and anti-Nazi sentiments.83 In 1966, responding to complaints “that Berchtesgaden was cashing in on Hitler’s memory,” the Bavarian finance minister ordered the Berghof bunker sealed, a rare act of intervention that made the headlines of major American newspapers.84 Nonetheless, the Schuster family continued to sell tickets to the tunnel and underground rooms still accessible from their inn.85

In 1995, when the U.S. Army announced the closure of the Armed Forces Recreation Center in Berchtesgaden, the problem of the mountain’s half-remembered history could no longer be ignored. Despite the legal transfer of the Nazi properties on the Obersalzberg to the state of Bavaria decades earlier, the Americans had retained the exclusive use of a large part of the mountain for their recreation center, which had grown to encompass several lodges, a hotel, a ski resort, and a golf course. Now this land and the former Nazi buildings on it, including the once-luxurious Platterhof Hotel (renamed the General Walker Hotel) and Martin Bormann’s experimental farm, would be accessible to all. German officials, who had long believed that the American presence on the Obersalzberg had discouraged neo-Nazi activities, expressed their concern about what would fill the vacuum after they left.86 Neo-Nazi pilgrims were already becoming more brazen, erecting makeshifts altars to Hitler in the now heavily wooded area of the Berghof ruins. The American departure, Stephen Kinzer wrote in the New York Times, “will leave Berchtesgaden alone with its ghosts.”87

Subsequent debates about what to do with the Obersalzberg took place in the context of the end of the Cold War and the reunification of Germany, a period that often saw the desire to confront the nation’s bloody past pitted against the investments needed to revive its economy.88 Yet clearly both were needed to combat the sharp rise in neo-Nazi activity after 1989, when a lack of education about the Third Reich combined with shrinking prospects for employment and social advancement drew young people from former East Germany into the arms of extremist groups. Moreover, in the galloping pursuit of new markets, historical sensitivities sometimes fell by the wayside. In 1991, the construction of a shopping center on a cobblestone road paved by slave labor just outside Ravensbrück, a women’s concentration camp in a former East German town near Berlin, created an international furor that embarrassed the German government and halted the project.89 Seeking a compromise, Kurt Faltlhauser, the Bavarian finance minister, decided on a “two-column model” for the Obersalzberg’s redevelopment: the creation of a luxury resort alongside a documentation center that would inform hotel guests and other visitors of the mountain’s National Socialist history.90 Faltlhauser presented these two pillars as a balanced and integrated unit, but his critics argued the plan was contradictory, commemorating with the one hand and erasing with the other.

While a small group of Berchtesgaden residents had lobbied for some form of memorial, others feared that bringing attention to the town’s “brown” past would forever sully it with evil. “We don’t want another Dachau here,” Berchtesgaden mayor Rudolf Schaupp said. “Nothing terrible happened here. This was only a place where the bandits came for vacation.”91 Martin Seidl, a Berchtesgaden councilor, claimed that “in principle, I have nothing against the idea, but such a center belongs in Berlin or Munich, not here.”92 But the leader of Berlin’s Jewish community, Andreas Nachama, who served as an advisor on the project, reinforced the need for greater on-site awareness, saying that on an earlier visit to the area, he had been “strongly angered that there was no information—only souvenirs.”93

When it opened in October 1999, on the foundations of a former Nazi guesthouse, the Obersalzberg Documentation Center effectively refuted any lingering assertions that the mountain had been no more than a holiday destination for Hitler. The carefully researched exhibits revealed the Obersalzberg to have been a central hub of Nazi power and a place where its leaders had discussed and planned their crimes. This curatorial viewpoint necessitated moving beyond a narrow focus on the daily lives of the mountain’s elite residents to include a panorama of the events that unfolded throughout Europe.94 Displays also explored how publicity about the Obersalzberg fed the personality cult around Hitler that had helped to consolidate his regime. Finally, and in contrast to the Türken Inn’s unregulated access, the center offered a curated experience of the underground bunker spaces, entered at the end of the exhibits.95 Rather than damaging tourism, as its critics had once feared, the Documentation Center became a considerable attraction in itself, and in May 2007 surpassed the one million visitor mark.96

Having paid its dues to historical memory, the Bavarian government then turned its attention to the business of forgetting, building the five-star InterContinental Berchtesgaden Resort on the former site of Göring’s residence. The spa hotel, with its slogan “Time-Out in the Mountains,” offered an array of wellness services to a wealthy clientele seeking to relax and leave their cares behind. Unlike the Documentation Center, which conspicuously integrated Nazi architectural remains into its design, the InterContinental Resort just as conspicuously asserted its break with the past through its modernist facades and curvilinear forms. Jonathan Margolis, in a travel review for the Independent, compared it to “a software company’s Colorado HQ.”97 In designing the building, Herbert Kochta, an established Munich architect, sought “an expression of human confidence in the face of some of the most stunning natural beauty on earth.” His original plan for the 138-room hotel featured two parallel wings sweeping gently outward and joined in the middle by a central corridor. But, as historian Timothy Ryback reported, “when the model was complete, it became clear that from an airplane or an adjacent peak the hotel would look like a giant ‘H’ branded on the landscape, an uncomfortable reminder of the mountain’s most infamous former resident.” Kochta modified the design by turning the wings inward and connecting them at their northern ends, thereby arriving at the present horseshoe shape. Modernism, as the design process revealed, was by no means a simple antidote to Nazi architecture or its perceived “aesthetic pollution” of the landscape.98

By the time the hotel opened on March 1, 2005, it had already been deluged with negative press.99 While much of it originated in Germany, the English media had also been highly critical, provoked by the involvement of the London-based Six Continents, which owned InterContinental and other hotel brands. In September 2002, in its typically provocative fashion, the British tabloid the Sun dubbed it the “Hitler Hilton.”100 Mitchell Symons, writing shortly afterward in the Daily Express, argued that “there’s nothing wrong with people visiting sites of sensitive historical significance but they shouldn’t take holidays there and you shouldn’t make money out of it.” He demanded of Six Continents’ directors, “Why not stop being coy and open a chain? The Warsaw Ghetto Crowne Plaza, the Auschwitz Holiday Inn, the Treblinka Intercontinental—you get the picture.”101 Faltlhauser, Bavaria’s finance minister, admitted the hotel stood on highly sensitive ground, but maintained that the Obersalzberg should be allowed to return to being a tourist resort, as it had been long before Hitler’s arrival.102 Yet was normalcy possible anymore in such a setting? For the many journalists who poured into Berchtesgaden to review the hotel, this was the question foremost in their minds. Reflecting on his visit, writer and Guardian contributor Ian Buruma mused, “sitting back in your comfortable chair at the wellness hotel, enjoying Hitler’s view with a glass of fine wine, is a kind of sacrilege. Or is it?”103

The hotel’s management was abundantly aware of the difficult position it had to navigate and was alert to potential insensitivities or dangers. The international staff had all undergone police background checks and signed a declaration of support for Germany’s democratic ideals. They had also been instructed on the area’s Nazi history and on how to respond to inquiries, directing guests to the nearby Documentation Center.104 Moreover, in each room, the bedside table contained not only a Gideon Bible, but also a copy of the Documentation Center’s eight-hundred-page, “no-holds-barred” exhibition catalogue, The Deadly Utopia (Die tödliche Utopie). On a visit to the hotel in March 2005, journalist Max Davidson took a break from the spa to read the book in his room: “I sip a beer from the mini-bar and study black-and-white photographs of Auschwitz. It is an uncomfortable half hour.”105 (Other guests likewise found the books to make for disturbing holiday reading, and they were eventually removed to the hotel’s library.106) Beyond such measures, the hotel defended against “the dread possibility of a neo-Nazi group managing to book it for a convention” by pricing itself out of the “unemployed and disgruntled youth” market.107 As an extra precaution, in its first year of operation, the hotel refused all reservations for April 20, Hitler’s birthday, at a loss of 10,000 Euros in revenue.108 It was able to do so because the Bavarian government had funded and managed the project through the Bavarian State Bank, with the InterContinental chain providing no more than its name and booking system.109 While this arrangement gave the hotel considerable freedom, it also made Bavarian taxpayers liable, obliging them to absorb its considerable losses when it proved unable to fill its rooms.110 Fiscal irresponsibility thus joined the list of criticisms lobbied at the Bavarian government for its Obersalzberg redevelopment plan.

But above all, it was the loss of historic sites and landscapes that proved to be the most controversial. Between 1995 and 2008, in the process of reinventing the Obersalzberg as a tourist recreation center, state authorities dismantled the mountain. The hill on which Göring’s house had once stood, known officially during the Third Reich as Adolf Hitler Hill, and where, on May 5, 1945, members of the Third U.S. Infantry Division had raised the Stars and Stripes, was removed to create more level ground for the hotel, leading to accusations that the Bavarian government was engaging in an “abuse of nature” reminiscent of the Nazis.111 Contractors also razed almost all the remaining visible historic traces of the National Socialist regime on the mountain, leaving only the Kehlsteinhaus and a few other buildings. This wholesale destruction of structures that the state itself had declared to be historic provoked angry protests within and beyond Germany. Ryback, present at the demolition of the basement of the Modellhaus, a building near the Berghof where Hitler had kept his architectural models, described how the excavator rammed into the walls with little concern for the historic objects they contained.112 Michel Friedman, vice president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, decried the replacement of historical fabric with new structures, which obscured what had actually taken place on the mountain.113 The former Platterhof Hotel, for example, became a parking lot, and the remnants of the SS barracks gave way to a Segway track for hotel guests to practice their riding skills. Josef Dürr, head of the Bavarian Green Party, argued that these historic traces were important to democracy, and accused the conservative Bavarian government of wanting “to reduce the Nazi past to a minimum.”114 Others pointed out that as the last of the Nazi-era generation passed away, the buildings remained as the only physical link to that history.115

As part of the toxic cleanup of the mountain’s Nazi past, and at considerable expense to the state, Hitler’s garage and the terrace above it were dug up and removed in 1995. Having a neo-Nazi pilgrimage site so close to the planned Documentation Center posed potential hazards in terms of physical damage (the center was smeared with Nazi graffiti while under construction) and of international public relations. In 1999, the chance discovery of a warren of underground rooms led to further excavations and the partial removal of the Berghof’s basement. Orders were given to destroy the material and remove all debris from the site.116 Today, a retaining wall and small traces of the foundation are all that remain visible of the house. Yet despite such efforts, the site continues to attract Hitler’s faithful, although notably fewer since the Documentation Center opened.117 With the garage now gone, they signal their presence by scrawling SS runes into the towering trees planted after the 1952 demolition. When these markings are discovered, the tree’s bark is either removed or the tree itself felled. Ryback and Florian Beierl, a local historian, have argued that the wooded location, with its moss-covered rubble, lends itself to romanticization, and that the best way to demystify the site would be to expose it to public view: “Historicizing the ruins will help leach them of the current cultish aura that surrounds the property.”118 In 2008, for the first time since Allied soldiers arrived at the Berghof in 1945 and triumphantly staked their claim, a sign was posted that identifies the former location of Hitler’s house. In English and German, it gives a brief history that challenges a simple view of its domestic function: “Hitler spent more than a third of his time in power here. Important political discussions and negotiations were conducted here and incisive decisions were made, which led to the catastrophes of the Second World War and the Holocaust, causing the death of millions.” Those interested in learning more are directed with an arrow to the nearby Documentation Center. On the German side of the sign, the word “Holocaust” has been freshly repainted after having been scratched out.119

If state authorities believed that such actions would contain the toxicity of the Berghof site, they were rudely surprised when its traces reappeared in an unexpected and embarrassing location. In 2010, Richard Nemec, the spokesperson for the Bavarian Monument Protection Agency, which was already under fire for the destruction of historic structures on the mountain, revealed that red marble flagstones removed from the Berghof’s terrace in 1995 had been used to pave the floor of the Wegmacher Chapel, a small roadside Catholic chapel erected in 1997 near Bad Reichenhall. This recycling of materials had occurred despite government orders to obliterate all remaining vestiges of the site. Yet tourists, local residents, and those clearing the site had surreptitiously taken materials and souvenirs. Matthias Ferwagner, the chapel’s architect and head of the state building authority in nearby Traunstein, which was responsible for the removal work on the Berghof in 1995 and later for building the chapel, admitted that he had saved some of the flagstones, which he was reluctant to destroy, given their fine craftsmanship and material value. The stones were loaded onto a truck and sent to the authority’s building yard; two years later, when it came time to lay the floor of the chapel, the stones were both convenient and free.120

Soon after Nemec’s announcement, historians Ryback and Beierl published the story of the reused flagstones in the New York Times and the International Herald Tribune. As they reported:

In defense, the chapel’s architect, Matthias Ferwagner, said that his design explicitly addressed the use of the Hitler-era masonry. Ferwagner said he arranged the flagstones in the shape of a cross on the assumption that they had been quarried by Jewish slave laborers and would be “redeemed” through this symbol of suffering and salvation. He also installed a glass ceiling designed to “float” over the stones like the Holy Ghost. “The idea was that the stones somehow needed to be cleansed, blessed,” Ferwagner said. He said he envisioned the roadside chapel as a place where people with “evil intentions” could stop and purge their minds.121

In a subsequent interview, Ferwagner pointed out that materials from the Berghof had found their way into many local buildings, both private and public, saying, “You can hardly find a mason in the region who isn’t storing columns and stone blocks from Obersalzberg.”122

Ryback’s and Beierl’s revelations, appearing in two international newspapers, aroused yet more media criticism of the Bavarian government’s mismanagement of the Obersalzberg. But some of the debate also centered on Ryback and Beierl’s actions in speaking up, which, in the opinion of some commentators, provided fodder for another nuisance scandal. Der Spiegel, by contrast, argued for taking “the fight over Hitler’s flagstones” seriously, citing the stones’ highly symbolic value. On this well-known stage, the Führer had been photographed playing with children and entertaining party officials, such as Himmler and Goebbels.123 Some local residents called for the chapel to be demolished and complained that “a number of shaven-headed, leather jacket-wearing ‘pilgrims’ leave behind notes of praise to Hitler and candles burning in his memory.” A small carved swastika also appeared on one of the wooden roof beams.124 Ferwagner later stated that the stones might have come from the Platterhof rather than the Berghof, although he could no longer be sure.125 Whatever the facts, the controversy over the recycling of “tainted” materials made clear that the lack of transparency among the state agencies charged with banishing Hitler’s ghost from the area was actually keeping it alive. Although Nemec’s disclosure about the stones alerted the media to the chapel’s possibly tainted foundations and increased pressure on his agency to better protect the few remaining historic sites on the Obersalzberg, including what is left of the Berghof, Ryback and Beierl commended him for having taken the first step toward greater public accountability.126

In light of the Berghof’s turbulent postwar history, involving beer hall brawls, police cordons, dynamiting, reforestation, neo-Nazis, and political scandals, the quietude surrounding Hitler’s Munich apartment on Prince Regent Square seems almost anticlimactic. Until 1946, the apartment building was occupied by American armed forces. That year, the Bavarian State Office for Asset Administration and Restitution—charged with managing Third Reich property that had been seized by the Allies and returned to German authorities as well as processing the claims of Nazi victims—took over the premises. It was superseded in 1969 by the Traffic Violations Bureau, and since 1998, the entire building has been occupied by a police station.127 The police presence ensures the building’s security and discourages neo-Nazi pilgrims, souvenir hunters, and sensation-seekers. Only the reception rooms on the ground floor, which once housed Hitler’s SS guards, are normally open to the public. Those who enter encounter the flowing, curvilinear Jugendstil decoration of the original interior, dating from the turn of the twentieth century. Visitors without police business are not encouraged to linger: this is a working police station, not a museum. Requests to see Hitler’s apartment are politely but firmly denied.

There is no question, however, that the apartment remains a historically and architecturally important site. As one enters the bright, open foyer and sees the starkness of Gerdy Troost’s renovations, one understands how modern the apartment must have seemed—indeed, still seems—in comparison to the older units in the building. It makes one realize that Lee Miller’s published photographs constructed a sense of stodgy, cramped spaces that avoided capturing the light or space experienced in person. In short, like the physical experience of any architectural space, it leads to adjustments to perceptions derived from objects removed from their context, written texts, and even photographs. Despite the disappearance of the original furnishings and postwar alterations to some of the rooms, the apartment remains surprisingly intact. Still-preserved decorative features of the Troost renovation include parquet floors, doors, wainscoting and other woodwork, marble mantelpieces, and some built-in furniture, most strikingly the dark oak shelves that fill Hitler’s library. Hitler’s living room, where he met with Neville Chamberlain to discuss the Munich Accord in 1938, is used for conference meetings. The shelves in the library hold the trophies won by the police soccer team, named after the neighborhood, the Bogenhauser Cops (plate 12). The rooms once occupied by Geli Raubal and the Winters are offices; they have retained their elegant decorative ceilings and some built-in furniture. Hitler’s bedroom, on the other end of the apartment, is a locker room, where police officers change into their uniforms (plate 13).

From outward appearances, the apartment seems a rather empty, functional space. But for a historian of the Third Reich, steeped in images of the crimes committed by its former resident, a visit is a disturbing and surreal experience. One stands in the room where Hitler slept warm and sheltered and imagines his starving, shivering victims; one looks at the nook where Chamberlain sat and thinks how things might have turned out differently, if only. For Police Chief Inspector Harald Freundorfer, who has worked in the building for years, 16 Prince Regent Square holds no such demons. It is only space contained by four walls, the place to which he and his staff of one hundred go to work every morning—even if there is a fully preserved luxury bunker in the backyard. Freundorfer would like people to forget the building’s association with Hitler, and he discourages publicity for fear it will attract neo-Nazis and endanger the neighborhood.128 While one sympathizes with his concerns, one wonders about the continuing feasibility of hiding in plain sight.

Admittedly, the virtual occupation of the building since 1949 has successfully prevented the troublesome activities that have plagued the Obersalzberg. The fact that Hitler’s Munich residence did not function as a center of power and was not publicized during the Third Reich has also helped to maintain the building’s low visibility. Also unlike the Berghof, few political events took place here, apart from visits by Chamberlain and Mussolini. Before 1933, Hitler also used his apartment as a party office, and would be visited regularly there by top Nazi leaders, such as Goebbels and Himmler.129 From the point of view of the police, there is no reason to give the public access, since this was nothing more than a residence. Nonetheless, the historic draw for most people is precisely that, from 1929 to 1945, Hitler called this place home. Its state of preservation also adds to the appeal, especially as other sites associated with Hitler have decayed or disappeared. Once abundant in Munich, the Nazi birthplace and “capital of the movement,” such sites have been systematically effaced since the war’s end in the city’s broader efforts to remove National Socialism’s traces from the urban landscape and, with them, memories of a shameful past.130 Yet the more such historic locations vanish, the greater the pressure grows on those that remain. In recent years, as a greater historical consciousness about place has emerged, increasing requests from journalists, scholars, and filmmakers to document the spaces of Hitler’s Munich residence are making it more difficult to keep it out of the realm of public awareness. But what, if any, alternatives exist to the current defensive strategy remains unclear. Could 16 Prince Regent Square be something other than a police station? No one has yet openly broached the question, and the state of Bavaria seems in no hurry to have the discussion.

The troublesome afterlife of Hitler’s homes has not only played out on the ground in Germany. It has also rippled through auction houses and museums in other countries, where objects looted from Hitler’s residences at the war’s end have made an unsettling reappearance. Nazi memorabilia may be sold legally in the United States and the United Kingdom, but the practice is outlawed or restricted in Germany, Austria, France, and Hungary. Hitler’s domestic objects are particularly sought after by collectors and garner high prices; forgeries are common. Items auctioned in recent years from 16 Prince Regent Square and the Berghof have included silverware, china, tablecloths, napkins, monogrammed bed linen, a lamp, desk, globe, and marble paperweight, among others. Most Third Reich memorabilia trades hands quietly, through a dealer or antiques store, and the transactions are almost impossible to trace. By contrast, the visibility of auctions often attracts media attention as well as protests, the latter primarily from Jewish groups and survivors, who argue that these sales glamorize Hitler and profit from the deaths of Holocaust victims.131 The motives of those who choose to live with the dictator’s bed sheets and fish knives are as complex as their backgrounds, which range from sympathizers to history buffs to Jews whose own families were murdered. As one Jewish collector of Nazi militaria explained to the New York Times, there can be a sense of triumph in possession: “You may have killed my relatives,” he said, “but I own you now.”132

The objects of Hitler’s domesticity are rarely seen outside the world of private collectors. While many museums have such items in their collections, they are almost never exhibited. In 2010, the German Historical Museum in Berlin opened a groundbreaking exhibition, Hitler and the Germans: Nation and Crime, which explored the reasons for the regime’s widespread acceptance by German society. It was the first major exhibition on Hitler to be held in Germany since the end of the Third Reich, and the curators were understandably concerned about reviving admiration for the dictator. They refused to include any of Hitler’s personal effects for fear that these “relics” still harbored a dangerous magnetism. Indeed, any object from the period deemed too alluring was visually obscured to prevent the viewer from the potential seduction of unmediated vision. For example, a vast sideboard designed by Albert Speer, which had stood in Hitler’s new Reich Chancellery office, was isolated in a corner, mounted on a tilt, and veiled with a thin, black mesh screen. This approach, the curatorial equivalent of a hazardous materials suit, functioned by frustrating the viewer’s desire to see, enforcing disengagement from the object.133

In January 2012, the New-York Historical Society announced an upcoming exhibition of its silver collection, including a monogrammed fork and knife that had once belonged to Hitler. The flatware, part of a dinner service made to celebrate the dictator’s fiftieth birthday in 1939, had been taken from the Berghof by an American soldier and given to the society in 1946. According to Margaret Hofer, the society’s curator of decorative arts, the fork and knife had never been exhibited because there had not been “an appropriate context in which to do it.” The show, which featured 150 of the “most aesthetically and historically compelling pieces” of the society’s collection, took a broad cultural view, as suggested by its title, Stories in Sterling: Four Centuries of Silver in New York. For Hofer, whose Jewish relatives had fled Nazi Germany, the flatware represented a symbol of the Americans’ triumph over tyranny, which is also how Hitler’s silverware had been presented when it was displayed on a Victory Loan train in 1945 and by returning veterans who proudly showed off their war trophies.134

But sixty-six years after the war’s end, and largely in the absence of the generation who had fought the war, the interpretation of those spoils had changed. Debórah Dwork, a professor of Holocaust history, called the inclusion of the silverware in the exhibition “totally tasteless” and intended “solely for sensational purposes.” Dwork argued that the knife and fork “trivialize the evil that Hitler and his allies perpetrated.”135 In fact, historians of the Third Reich have long argued that aesthetics, from mass spectacles to everyday objects, played a crucial role in the regime’s popular appeal.136 Hitler’s fork and knife do, indeed, have a “story in sterling” to tell that links together design, power, and violence. Nonetheless, Dwork’s comments reveal that the society failed to tell the right story—or, rather, to make the political context of the objects relevant to New York. Hitler’s flatware was exhibited in a section called “Elegant Dining” devoted mostly to American dining customs. It was an incongruous setting, and the catalogue text, which focused on the design of the silver service and its discovery by American soldiers, did not help to make the connection between dining in Berchtesgaden and dining in New York.137 A more compelling story might have discussed the allure of Hitler’s home life for prewar American audiences, which contributed to their fascination with the domestic remnants that soldiers brought back. The contemporary puff pieces that appeared in the New York Times (among other respectable publications) about life at the Berghof, which charmed readers with details about the Führer’s gracious living and love of gooseberry pie, provide one such possibility to explore the relationship between the objects in the glass display case and the image of the dictator once cultivated for an American audience.138 Yet while Hitler’s fork and knife have emerged out of storage, the story linking them to American celebrity journalism has remained buried.

An article in the Guardian published in November 2003 exposed the reluctance of the British media to investigate its own complicity in burnishing Hitler’s prewar reputation through flattering portrayals of his domestic life. As Guardian journalist Simon Waldman recalled, one evening earlier that spring, his father-in-law had proudly taken out a family heirloom, a November 1938 edition of Homes and Gardens, to show him a feature about a modernist bungalow designed by his father. Flipping through the magazine, Waldman discovered “Hitler’s Mountain Home,” the account published by “Ignatius Phayre” of his visit to Haus Wachenfeld. Amazed that a British interiors magazine would treat Hitler like a fashionable design consultant, Waldman scanned the pages and posted them on his personal website. When, to Waldman’s surprise, the Hitler pages attracted tens of thousands of readers worldwide, he wrote to the editor of the magazine, Isobel McKenzie-Price, to ask if she could shed more light on the sixty-five-year-old article. Claiming that Waldman had infringed the magazine’s copyright of the text and images, she compelled him to remove the scans.139

But in their place, he posted their correspondence, which generated even more interest. In the resulting online discussions, Phayre was identified as William George Fitz-Gerald, but no other biographical information emerged. That he had been sympathetic to Hitler’s beliefs and likely had never been to Haus Wachenfeld, but had instead assembled his fawning narrative from Nazi sources, remained unknown. A historian in Louisiana, however, told Waldman that the images used for the article had, in fact, come from Hitler’s own photographer, Heinrich Hoffmann, and were not owned by Homes and Gardens. Waldman then reposted the images, but not the text. The story of the suppressed Hitler article was picked up by major news outlets and received further international coverage from the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies, based in Washington, D.C., which organized a petition signed by seventy Holocaust scholars and educators demanding that the company that owned Homes and Gardens, IPC Media, Britain’s largest media conglomerate, “face up to its past” and make the article publicly available. The publisher relented in so far as it agreed that it could not verify copyright ownership and would not contest reproduction of the article. Unsatisfied, the Wyman Institute insisted that IPC Media acknowledge its moral responsibility for having cast Hitler in a positive light, depicting him “as a gardener and a gourmet,” at a time when his country openly and violently persecuted Jews. Following discussions with the Wyman Institute, IPC Media issued a statement in which it confessed to being “appalled” that Homes and Gardens had been “taken in by the Nazi propaganda of the 1930s.” It also pointed out, however, that “much of the world’s media” had been similarly duped.140

The international debate sparked by Waldman focused on journalism’s accountability, but little was said about the audience. The abundance of prewar features on the domestic Hitler published outside Germany reflects not only the foreign media’s willingness to disseminate flattering stories about the dictator, but also the existence of an eager audience. That Fitz-Gerald, who essentially published Nazi propaganda, was able to sell his work to so many outlets, ranging from a journal of contemporary world affairs to a popular dog magazine, testifies to the strength and breadth of this market. While the role of the foreign press in laundering Hitler’s image thus must be examined, it is important not to overlook the magazine and newspaper readers around the world who wanted to believe the sanitized version. Indeed, the tens of thousands of readers who visited Waldman’s Hitler pages and their subsequent reposting on websites around the globe reveal that there is still tremendous interest in such accounts, and not all of it is critical. Since being rediscovered, the Homes and Gardens article routinely is cited on websites as a reliable, firsthand account of Hitler’s mountain retreat. Ironically, a young generation is again learning about the “Squire of Wachenfeld” from the same pseudo-journalist who misled readers in 1938. More than seventy-five years later, the distorting mirror of Hitler at home continues to deceive.