

**Joachim C. Fest.** *Die unbeantwortbaren Fragen: Notizen über Gespräche mit Albert Speer zwischen Ende 1966 und 1981.* Reinbeck: Rowohlt Verlag, 2005. 270 S. (gebunden), ISBN 978-3-498-02114-6; (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-499-62159-8.



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## A Total Loss of Moral Standards

Over the last few years, Germany's media output about Albert Speer has soared.[1] Heinrich Breloer's TV documentary *Speer und Er* (2005) probably represents the most striking example of this development. It stands for the arrival of the debate about Speer in mass culture. The continued fascination with Hitler's architect is not surprising. Unlike that of any other top-level Nazi, Speer's biography still poses many questions that are not easily answered. Characterized by ruthless careerism and personal affection for Adolf Hitler, the educated architect with high moral standards simultaneously loathed other leading Nazis and disobeyed Hitler's orders during the final period of the war. After the war, Speer condemned the National Socialist regime, yet stubbornly insisted that he did not know about the regime's mass crimes. Today, there can be no doubt that Speer had sufficient knowledge and even approved of its criminal actions.

In *Die Unbeantwortbaren Fragen*, the late historian and publicist Joachim Fest adds bits and pieces to the complex picture of Speer's persona. The book consists of Fest's notes about his encounters with Speer between 1966 and 1981. He wants it to be understood as a sup-

plement to his *Speer. Eine Biographie* (1999). Instead of providing a coherent narrative, Fest confronts the reader with an amalgam of diary-like reports about conversations and impressionistic sketches of Speer's psyche. Primarily interested in interviewing Speer for his biography of Hitler, Fest also functioned as "vernehmender Lektor" (p. 7) of Speer's *Erinnerungen* (1969) and as editor of his *Spandauer Tagebücher* (1975). In addition to making these notes (referred to as "Notizen des Verfassers," meaning Fest, in *Speer*) available to a larger audience, Fest presents facts and observations that add to and challenge Speer's self-description in his memoirs and diary.

Several themes reoccur throughout Fest's compilation. Among them, Speer's relationship to Hitler receives particular attention. Fest found Speer's last visit to the *Führerbunker* on April 23, 1945, especially intriguing. Even though his boycott of Hitler's scorched earth policy had ruined their friendship, Speer still felt affection for the dictator. He wanted to confess his disobedience while he still could. This episode elucidates Speer's psyche and provides insight into the eerie atmosphere of the bunker. Furthermore, it also illuminates Fest's attitude towards

Speer. The former found it incomprehensible that the latter could risk his life for the sake of a kitschy and unbearably “German” notion of loyalty. As in many other instances, when asked for his reasons, Speer failed to provide a satisfying answer: “Das verstehen Sie nicht!” (p. 200). Again and again, Fest returns to the cardinal question of Speer’s life: the extent of his knowledge about the regime’s mass crimes. During one of their final conversations in 1981, Fest confronted Speer with an explanation for his suppression of his knowledge. He suggested that Speer not only wanted to save his life through denials at Nuremberg, but that he also hoped to emphasize the sharp contrast between him and Nazi mass murderers like Ernst Kaltenbrunner and Hans Frank. For the sake of his credibility, Speer had to stick to this story after his release from Spandau. In addition, Fest was convinced that Speer’s knowledge had been only fragmentary and that time had erased most of his memories of these incriminating facts. Speer’s reaction exemplifies the elusive position of his identity. He politely asked Fest to stop asking him unanswerable questions (p. 250).

In addition to the light it casts on Speer, *Die Unbeantwortbaren Fragen* also adds to our understanding of its author and his *oeuvre*. Fest’s preoccupation with Speer clearly sparked his later decision to write a biography of Hitler’s architect. He also returned to Hitler’s final days in his last historical monograph, *Der Untergang* (2002). Moreover, Fest’s reactions to Speer’s testimonies constitute a crucial facet of the book. Although Fest has been accused of participating in the creation of the myth of the “good Nazi,” his inability to understand Speer’s motives is clearly visible throughout the text. Fest does not doubt that Speer knew about the regime’s criminal actions. He was, however, more interested in how somebody with

high moral standards like Speer could fall for Hitler and serve a criminal regime with the utmost loyalty almost until the end. Speer’s knowledge of mass crimes and his contempt for Nazi grandees, such as Martin Bormann, Joachim Ribbentrop, and Heinrich Himmler, only exacerbated this puzzle. Thus, Fest concludes with disillusionment that Speer’s role in the Third Reich epitomized the “Verlust aller Maßstäbe” (p. 17). This judgment leads him to ask a rather universal, yet highly relevant question: if somebody of Speer’s background could become complicit in a criminal regime, could there ever be any hope for the success of efforts to prevent such a total loss of moral standards? According to Fest, Speer’s biography illustrates that there is not much hope for such a mechanism.

In the final analysis, the book leaves the reader somewhat unsatisfied. Fest doubtlessly presents fascinating details about Speer’s life and his interaction with Hitler and other Nazi leaders. Yet, the book’s nature as a collage of notes impedes the reader’s pleasure. The chapter’s paragraphs, many only a few sentences long, often hardly correspond with one another. Historians will agree with Fest when he says that publishing the notes was preferable to letting them disappear in some archive (p. 15). Given sufficient background knowledge, a wider public may also benefit from this instructive and at times entertaining book; however, it only fully serves its purpose as an appendix to Fest’s *Speer*.

#### Note

[1]. In a review essay, Tilmann Lahme examines four examples of this trend. See: H-Soz-u-Kult, July 21, 2005, at <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2005-3-049>.

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