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Video Production

TEACHERS' NOTES

ALBERT SPEER

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INTRODUCTION

In March 1931 after hearing Adolf Hitler speak at a political meeting in Berlin, Albert Speer joined the Nazi Party. Speer formed a close friendship with Hitler, which propelled him into a position of power and influence. Speer was ambitious and no doubt flattered by the attention he received from Hitler. He became Hitler's architect and in 1942 the Minister of Armaments, a position where he dramatically increased German armaments production and helped prolong the war. At the Nuremberg war crimes trial he narrowly avoided the death penalty by accepting moral and legal responsibility for the crimes of the Nazi regime and by claiming that he was ignorant of the Nazis' Final Solution. While Speer has desperately tried to protect his version of the past the weight of historical evidence tends to expose Speer not as a penitent Nazi but as a skilled manipulator.

THE POLITICAL SETTING

In order to evaluate the career of Albert Speer, it is necessary to have an understanding of the political climate in Germany at the time of Adolf Hitler's rise to power and his consolidation of power. After Hitler's arrest following the Beer Hall Putsch of November 1923 he was sent to Landsberg prison, where he wrote *Mein Kampf*, which would be the basis of future Nazi policy. The party was slow to gain converts and in the 1928 election only gained twelve seats in the *Reichstag*. The combination of the Depression, political and economic policies of the Weimar Republic and the appeal of Hitler and Nazism attracted more people, including Speer to the party. In the elections of July 1932, the Nazis gained thirty seven percent of the vote and were the largest party. Despite President Hindenburg disliking Hitler, Hitler was able to manoeuvre himself into the position of Chancellor in January 1933.

Within a month of becoming chancellor, a fire in the *Reichstag*, the symbol of German democracy, gave Hitler the opportunity to get rid of all rights guaranteed under the constitution. This process was officially known as *Gleichschaltung*. Power was transferred from the Reichstag to Hitler and the Nazi Party. By July 1933, the Nazi Party became the sole legal party and all aspects of political and social life were under Nazi control. The only two obstacles to Hitler were the SA and Hindenburg. In the Night of the Long Knives on June 30, 1934, Hitler ordered the execution of Ernst Rohm, the leader of the SA, and other leading Nazis and political opponents. The Night of the Long Knives resulted in a closer relationship between Hitler and the German army. Hitler's only remaining threat was President Hindenburg. When Hindenburg died on August 2, 1934, Hitler combined the positions of president and chancellor, and as *Fuhrer* he had total authority, including control of the army.

Fear and persuasion were the key elements of Herman Goebbels, Hitler's Minister of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda, and were used against any individual or group labelled as enemies, particularly Jews and communists. Increasingly harsh steps were taken to remove Jews from the economic, social and cultural life of Germany. The outbreak of World War II in 1939 saw a more methodical victimisation of Jews in both Germany and the occupied territories. From September 1941 all Jews were forced to wear a Star of David badge. The culmination of this persecution was the Final Solution, resulting in the murder of approximately six million Jews.

On coming to power Hitler initially concentrated on rearmament at home. He secured the military reoccupation of the Rhineland and gained an ally in Mussolini in 1936. By the *Anschluss* of March 1938 Hitler acquired Austria.

This was followed by the Sudetenland in October 1938 and Czechoslovakia in March 1939. His demands on Poland led to the Second World War in September 1939.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms: *Reichstag*; *Mein Kampf*; *Gleichschaltung*; *The Enabling Act*; *Fuhrer*; Star of David; SA; SS
2. Research the role and importance of the Hitler Youth Movement to the Nazi Party
3. Map Study: Locate on a map Germany, the Rhineland, Austria, Sudetenland, Czechoslovakia and Poland
4. Construct a timeline of the key political and military events in Nazi Germany from 1933 to 1945
5. Outline the key points of Nazi policy as stated in *Mein Kampf*
6. Discussion: Why was the Nazi Party after a slow start able to rapidly gain members?
7. What does the film reveal about the appeal of the Nazi Party?

ALBERT SPEER – BACKGROUND

Albert Speer was born on March 19 1905, the second of three sons, into a very wealthy family in Mannheim, Germany. His father was an architect and was a liberal sympathiser of the pan European ideals that arose in Europe after World War 1. Albert was nine years old when the war broke out. He excelled at school and confident of his mathematical ability had hoped to study that subject at university, but was persuaded by his father to study architecture. Speer completed his architectural course at the Munich Institute of Technology in 1927 and married Margarete Weber, only informing his parents of the marriage by telegram.

After graduating, Speer took up an academic position at the Institute of Technology in Berlin-Charlottenburg, where he came under the influence of Professor Heinrich Tessenow. Speer identified with his philosophies about architectural simplicity. The German economy began to falter at this time and with the onset of the Great Depression there was increasing support for the German Communist Party (KPD). In this period of political uncertainty Hitler and the Nazi Party began to emerge with promises of reviving the German economy, restoring racial pride and countering the fear of communism. Speer attended a Nazi student rally at a Berlin beer hall in December 1930 and admitted to have been deeply impressed by Hitler. A few weeks later he attended another Nazi rally and while not totally impressed by Joseph Goebbels' fanaticism and anti-Semitism, decided to join the Nazi Party in March 1931 becoming member 474 481. He later found out that his mother had also joined the Nazi Party at much the same time. There is evidence that Speer also joined the Brown Shirts.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms: KPD; Brown Shirts
2. Research the influence of Tessenow on both Speer and German architecture
3. Outline the reasons why you think Speer kept his membership of the Nazi Party secret from his family and associates
4. Debate: How does Speer's membership of the Brown Shirts equate with his views that he was not particularly interested in politics?

5. Discussion: Why did Hitler have such a profound impact on the young Albert Speer?
6. Film Study: What does the film reveal about Speer's early life that might have impacted on his views and political career?

ALBERT SPEER: RISE TO PROMINENCE

Speer's plans to develop his private architecture practice on his days off from teaching were unsuccessful and he moved back to Mannheim. His efforts to find architectural commissions were again unsuccessful and he returned to Berlin. The Nazi District leader, Karl Hanke knew of Speer's qualifications and in July 1932 gave him a commission to redecorate the new district organisation headquarters. In March 1933 he received another call from Hanke, who had become secretary to Goebbels. At this time Hitler had been installed as Chancellor and the Nazi Party had won nearly 44 per cent of the vote in the Reichstag. Hanke gave Speer the commission of rebuilding and redecorating Goebbels' Ministry of Propaganda. Speer was now given many new assignments by the Nazi government including the extension of Goebbels' House, designing decorations for the 1933 May Day rally at Templehof, and the decorations for the Nuremberg Party Rally of 1933, where he installed a massive Reich eagle overlooking the Zeppelin Field. Speer also refurbished the Chancellery along with Hitler's official architect, Paul Ludwig Troost.

Hitler took a close interest in architecture. Speer's work on the Chancellery and other buildings greatly impressed Hitler. Hitler spent many hours discussing art and architecture with Speer who was flattered by his friendship with Hitler. Hitler saw in Speer an architect who could carry out the Party's ideology and Hitler's own architectural ideas. Speer was given a party uniform and was appointed to the staff of Rudolf Hess and to Goebbels' Ministry of Propaganda. Speer was also invited to live in Hitler's mountain estate at Obersalzberg. In January 1934 with the death of Troost, Speer became Hitler's major architect. In January 1934 Hitler gave Speer his first commission to build the reviewing stand for the Nuremberg Rally. Speer was conscious of Hitler's belief in the 'Thousand Year Reich' and took inspiration from the Pergamum Altar of the Ancient Greeks. Speer also planned aspects of the design for the rally and used 130 searchlights to create what the British Ambassador described as 'a cathedral of light'. Hitler was determined that more buildings and stadiums would be needed for the future and Speer designed an entire complex covering over 16 square kilometres. In 1936 Speer designed the award winning German Pavilion at the World Fair in Paris in 1937. Hitler's major project was to rebuild Berlin on a grand design as a worthy capital for Germany. This new capital would be called *Germania*. In January 1937 Speer was given the task of translating Hitler's dream into reality. He was given the position of Inspector General of Building. In 1938 Hitler also wanted a new Reich Chancellery, which was built in a neo-classical style and completed within twelve months. The outbreak of World War II brought a halt to construction at both the Nuremberg site and Berlin by March 1940, although by August 1941 there were over 10 000 prisoners quarrying stone and making bricks.

As the war worsened for Germany, there was a greater need for Speer's planning and organisational skills than his expertise as an architect. In January 1942 Dr Fritz Todt the Reich minister for Armaments and Munitions died and Hitler appointed Speer his successor, despite his lack of experience. From 1942 to the end of the war, Speer was one of the key experts behind the German war economy and was responsible for the production of armaments and the construction of strategic defences.

The appointment was undoubtedly a dramatic success. Speer believed that a total mobilisation of the workforce together with the knowledge and expertise of German business was needed to stimulate the war effort. In April 1942 Speer set up the Central Planning Board to control the allocation of raw materials to industry. The registration of all men and women under 50 years of age added another 1.3 million people to the workforce. But the bulk of the labour for the German war industry after 1943 came from able bodied workers from occupied countries. By September 1944 when war production was at its peak, over seven million foreign labourers and 400 000 prisoners of war worked as slave labour. At Speer's request more German women were also forced to enter the workforce. In the period from March to July 1942, armaments production increased by 55 per cent and by May 1943 it had increased a further 50 per cent. In September 1944 German armaments production reached its peak with production outputs three times greater than the figure for 1941. However Speer realised by late 1944 that hopes of German victory had gone. Hitler refused to listen to defeat and ordered a 'scorched earth' policy as German troops pulled back. In late 1944 as Germany faced defeat, Speer tried to countermand Hitler's orders as he believed it was necessary to save German infrastructure for post-war recovery. The relationship between Hitler and Speer was nearing its end. Speer flew to Berlin to see Hitler in his bunker one last time on April 23 1945. The war ended on May 8 1945 and Speer was arrested shortly afterwards by advancing US troops.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms: Nuremberg Rally; chancellery; Pergamon Altar; 'scorched earth' policy;
2. Outline the reasons why Speer joined the Nazi Party
3. Research: How important was Hitler's view of architecture to his concept of the 'Thousand year Reich'?
4. Evaluate the importance of the work of Albert Speer to the Third Reich in the period 1933-1945
5. Discuss Speer's claim that up until February 1942, he had nothing to do with the governance of the Third Reich
6. Debate: Speer's architecture should be condemned as it was a vehicle for the promotion of Nazi propaganda.
7. Film Study: What reasons does the film put forward for Speer's rise to prominence in the period from 1932 up to 1945?

ALBERT SPEER – SIGNIFICANCE AND EVALUATION

At the Nuremberg War Trials which had been established in 1945 to try important Nazi leaders, Speer was charged on all four counts of planning aggressive war, waging aggressive war, engaging in war crimes and crimes against humanity. There can be no doubt that Speer showed great personal courage at the trials. He took full responsibility for his actions, going against legal advice and contrary to the wishes of his twenty co-defendants. He described his horror and revulsion at the material presented by the court of the Holocaust. Speer declared that he was responsible for carrying out all the orders that Hitler had given him. He acknowledged his guilt for the forced labour programs, but denied any knowledge of mass extermination of the Jewish people. He also took responsibility for the regime's crimes in the period from 1942 as he was a member of the leadership of the Reich.

He also maintained in his defence that he tried to save German infrastructure from Hitler's 'scorched earth' policy, recounted his association with the 'July 20 Plotters' and claimed that he had planned to assassinate Hitler. Based on the evidence presented to the court at the time, Speer was found innocent of counts one and two, but guilty of counts three and four. He was sentenced to 20 years in Spandau prison. Speer's confession and remorse characterised him as 'the penitent Nazi'. The Chief Prosecutor for the trial, Justice Robert H Jackson even concluded that Speer seemed a 'decent fellow'. Speer's autobiography *Inside the Third Reich*, which was first published as *Erinnerungen* shortly after his release from prison continued this view of him as a remorseful, but apolitical technocrat.

However this favourable image of Speer as 'the penitent Nazi' began to falter in 1971, when historians and journalists began to question Speer's ignorance of the Holocaust. Questions were also raised as to whether Speer should also be condemned for his architecture. That Speer's architecture was a form of Nazi propaganda is largely beyond question. Speer and Hitler consciously strove to create a Nazi style of architecture to convince the world of the power and progress of Germany under Hitler. Many of Speer's buildings were also built by slave labour. Speer was also criticised for his use foreign workers and slave labour in armaments production, many of whom worked and lived in horrendous conditions.

Professor Erich Goldhagen of Harvard University challenged Speer's version of his attendance at the Gauleiters' and Reich Officials' Conference at Posen in October 1943. Goldhagen claims that Speer, even if somehow he had avoided been informed about the Holocaust up to that meeting, could not have avoided Himmler's speech about the Final Solution. Speer had stated that he left the meeting before Himmler's speech, but Goldhagen research and Speer's own memoirs refer to the anguish and heavy drinking at the end of that day. It has also emerged that the original copy of the *Office Chronicle*, a diary account of Speer's work between 1941 and 1945, written by his close friend Doctor Rudolf Wolters, was never made available to the prosecution team at the Nuremberg Trials. Wolters has admitted that the original version contained a number of incriminating passages that had been removed from the revised *Office Chronicle*, the only version available.

Speer's supportive biographer, Gitta Sereny, author of *Albert Speer : His Battle with the Truth* (1995), held extensive interviews with Speer from 1977 to 1980, and also maintains that there is no way Speer could have failed to know about Himmler's speech, whether he was in attendance or not. Speer also gave Sereny a three page affidavit in 1977 that stated that the Nazis had a plan to exterminate the Jews and that he had tacitly accepted their persecution and murder. The Dutch historian Dan van der Vat (*The Good Nazi: The Life and Lies of Albert Speer*, 1997) argued that Speer's *Erinnerungen* was not all his own work as he was assisted by the historian Joachim Fest. He also argues that Speer never made the original draft he wrote in prison available for reference. He believes that Speer saw enough in Germany to know what was happening and that he was nothing more than 'a liar and a hypocrite'. Both Dan van der Vat and Gitta Sereny point out that Speer visited Mauthausen concentration camp near Linz in March 1943.

Albert Speer has remained unwavering in his version of events during the war. It is impossible to argue with any certainty whether or not Speer was sorry or remorseful for his crimes as Hitler's architect or as Armaments Minister. It also cannot be stated with complete certainty that Speer attended Himmler's session at the conference at Posen in 1943.

He did however voluntarily join the Nazi Party, despite it being an anti-Semitic organisation and he did maintain his membership despite the brutality of the Nazis and their undeniable treatment of the Jews. His architectural exploits did do much to promote Hitler and the Nazis and the construction of buildings did involve thousands of concentration camp prisoners and forced Jewish people from their homes in Berlin. Furthermore his organisational skills and his use of thousands of slave labourers as Armaments Minister certainly extended the war. Could one of the most powerful and astute men in Germany really have been ignorant about the Final Solution?

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms: Holocaust; technocrat; penitent; Final Solution; concentration camps
2. Research the significance of Doctor Rudolf Wolters and the *Office Chronicle*
3. List the crimes Speer was accused of at the Nuremberg War Trials
4. Analyse the range of arguments used against Speer after 1970? How did Speer and his supporters try to counter these claims?
5. Discussion: Was Speer's plot to kill Hitler more fantasy than fact?
6. Debate: Albert Speer was more of a skilled manipulator than a penitent Nazi
7. Film Study: From your study of the film, how has Speer been judged by historians?