AN AMUSING - AND ACCURATE
CRITIQUE OF "THE LONE ASSASSIN"
OF HISTORY SCHOOL

The Final Days of the Third Reich As Told To Woodward and Bernstein

by Arthur Levine

Following the critical and commercial success of our book *The Final Days*, our publishers have prevailed on us to bring out a new edition of our early work on Adolf Hitler's downfall, first published in 1947. Here, in embryo form, are the journalistic techniques that were later brought to fruition in *The Final Days*. Our ability to penetrate the innermost workings of the Third Reich should provide valuable insights for those interested in our methodology.

In the course of reconstructing events, we interviewed 586 Nazis and checked every detail with at least two sources. We divided this massive undertaking into several areas of inquiry, including:

Adolf Hitler
the Reichschancellery staff
the SS
the Gestapo
the Propaganda Ministry
the Luftwaffe
the Nazi Party
Hitler's personal physicians
the public record—statements by Nazi leaders, newspaper articles, memoirs, and official documents of the Third Reich.

From these and other areas of inquiry, we drew up a list of several hundred persons to be interviewed. Some spent many hours with us, and volunteered information freely. Several of the principals met with each other to refresh their memories on these important events. Many supplied us with notes, memos, letters, and diaries, which were of immeasurable benefit. We made it clear that we would check all facts with other participants.

All interviewees were assured that their identities would remain forever secret. We vowed to go to our graves with the names of our sources locked within our hearts. Without this rigid security, we would never have been able to get an honest picture of the last days of the Third Reich. Traditional history, with its cumbersome reliance on footnotes and attributed statements, is too often marred by the desire by participants to "sanitize" the record for posterity. We have avoided those pitfalls here. The results speak for themselves.

Bob Woodward
Carl Bernstein

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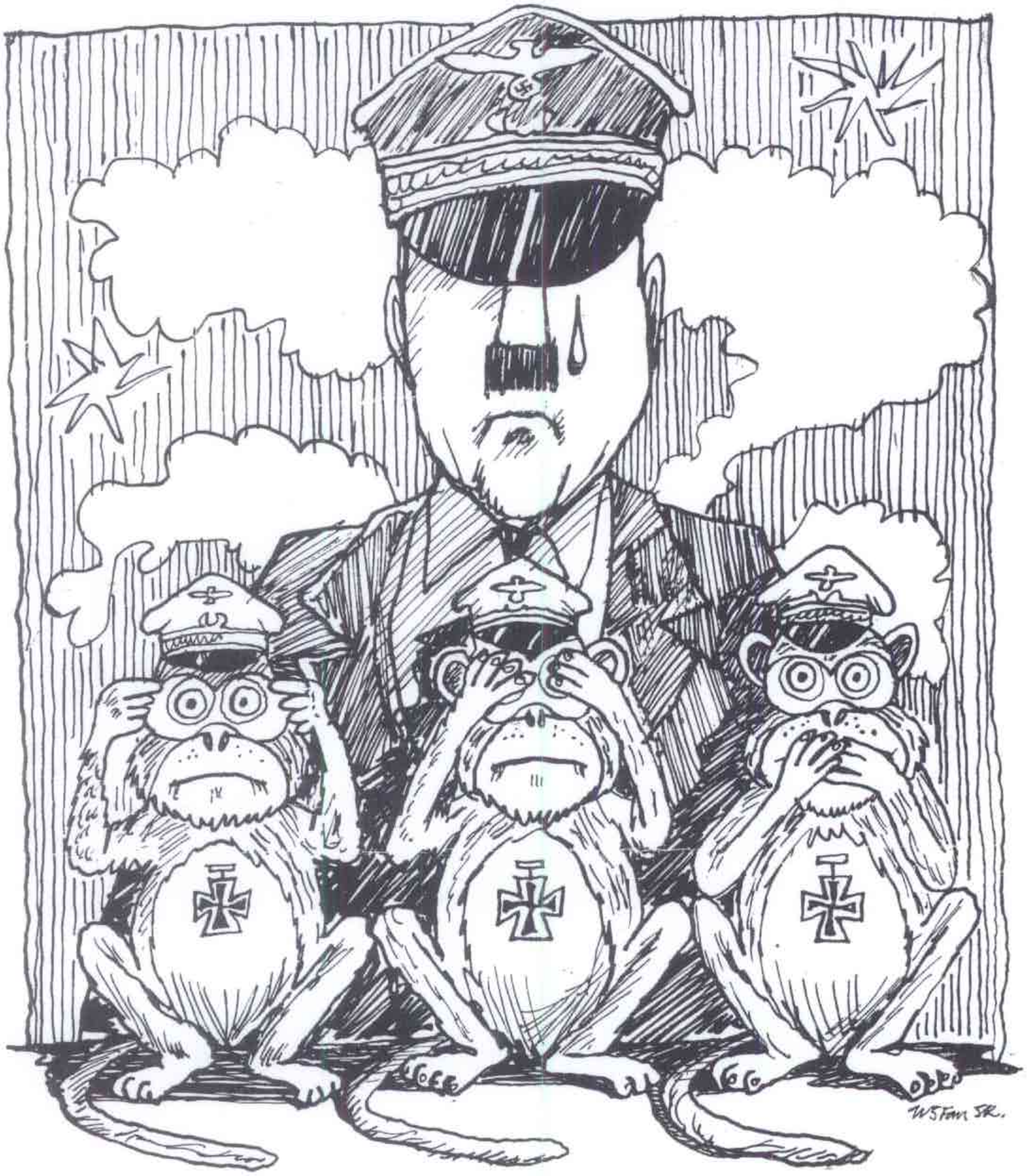

THIS WAS an extraordinary mission. Reichsmarshal Hermann Goering and Heinrich Himmler, the Gestapo chief, settled in for the two-hour train trip to Berchtesgaden. The two sensitive and brilliant aides were leaving behind a hot, sunny Munich. It was September 15, 1943. Ahead of them lay the mountains and lakes of western Germany and Austria. The sun poured in at a 47-degree angle through the windows. For most of the travelers, the trip was an occasion for relaxation, a brief respite from the war. Yet these two public servants were not in a holiday mood.

Goering and Himmler had heard rumors that the Fuhrer was anti-Semitic. It was all hearsay, innuendo, but, still, the two men were troubled.

They had reached an inescapable conclusion: they must go to Berchtesgaden, confront the Fuhrer with these allegations, and ask him to put all doubts to rest.

As the train moved through western Germany, the amiable, flamboyant Goering mused about his own attitudes towards the Jewish people. He tapped his engraved swastika ring on the armrest as he recalled his lifelong admiration for the Jews.

A plump, avuncular man with a fondness for expensive paintings, Goering had many Jewish friends from his days as a World War I air force hero. He kept up his contacts after he joined the National Socialist German Worker's Party ("Nazis") in the 1920s. The Jews, Goering thought, were bright, hard-working, patriotic.

Goering was well equipped to judge the finer qualities of man. As President of the Reichstag, then as Air Minister and founder of the Gestapo, Goering had impressed associates with his willingness to work long hours and his insider's knowledge of the bureaucracy. He was tough, shrewd, and loyal. Goering was an aesthete and an elegant dresser. With his lacquered fingernails and green velvet capes, he cut an impressive figure at the Reichschancellery.

As the pastoral scene outside sped by their windows, Himmler and Goering were in a reflective mood. "You know, Heinrich," Goering said, twirling his three-foot gold baton, "lately, I sure miss having my close Jewish friends around to talk to. There used to be so many of them, and now I can't seem to get them on the phone any more. Where have they gone?"

"Beats me, Hermann," Himmler answered. He tugged absent-mindedly on his lapels with their provocative death's-head insignia.

A fly hovered two inches above the window sill. Goering moved over to crush it, but Himmler reached out instinctively to grab his hand. "Don't do that, Hermann!" Himmler exclaimed. "All life is sacred, down to the lowliest animal in God's creation."

The two men lapsed into silence for 72 seconds. Finally, Goering asked, "Have you heard anything about these so-called concentration camps?"

Not really, Himmler said. Rumors here and there, but nothing solid, no firm evidence. They must ask the Fuhrer about them.

Yes, Goering said, that was a good idea.

The train pulled into the Berchtesgaden station at 5:22 p. m., sending clouds of steam 18 feet into the air. The two men got off the train and looked for their chauffeured automobiles, which would take them to the Berghof, the Fuhrer's mountain retreat. They were nervous and tense as they contemplated their upcoming meeting with Adolf Hitler.

WHEN THEY arrived at the chalet, the two men were led through a living room that was 60 feet long and 50 feet wide, with Italian paintings and Gobelin tapestries hanging on the walls. The soft-spoken Martin Bormann, often called the conscience of the Reichschancellery, greeted them in the anteroom outside Hitler's office. He was reading a travel guide to Argentina when they came in.

"I'm so glad you could come here," Bormann said, adjusting his argyle socks. The Fuhrer, Bormann said, had been withdrawn and uncommunicative, making decisions in isolation. He had been in this mood for at least five years, maybe more.

Bormann felt he didn't really know the Fuhrer. His decisions were unpredictable: one day, silence, the next day, they invaded Russia. It was eerie.

Goering and Himmler were finally led into Hitler's office. The Fuhrer was seated at his desk, drinking a Lowenbrau. He looked pale and exhausted. He had not been sleeping well. He had been troubled by the defeat at Stalingrad, the Allied landing in Italy, the fall of Africa. Events were closing in on him.

They exchanged brief pleasantries. Churchill was an "asshole," Mussolini "that fat wop." Hitler rambled on about nothing, making little sense.

Then they got to the point. There had been some talk that the Fuhrer was anti-Semitic. They themselves didn't believe the charges, they made clear, but it was important for the sake of the country that Hitler lay the rumors to rest. The image of anti-Semitism was hampering foreign policy. Himmler and Goering finally wanted to get ahead of the problem, meet the current charges, anticipate future ones, answer them all.

Had Hitler played any role in mistreating Jews?

Absolutely not, Hitler said.

"Excuse me for a moment," the Fuhrer said, picking up a bright red phone on his desk. "Hello, Ilse? Bormann tells me what a good job you've been doing. The way you've handled it has been very skillful."

Hitler turned back to face his confused assistants. "You know," he remarked, "Hess just didn't have his head screwed on right."

"The Jews, Mein Fuhrer, what's happened to all the Jews?" Goering asked. "There used to be so many of them."

"I'm dying to find out," Hitler said, winking broadly. "Get it?" He collapsed with laughter, then composed himself.

Himmler was skeptical, but he didn't press the point with Hitler.

The Fuhrer glanced at a picture of his dog, Blondi. "Of course, we could lean on the Poles, too," he added. He paused for a long moment. "But it would be wrong."

Himmler and Goering were beset with fresh doubts. But they were committed to serve, and they would do their best. The biggest problem here, Goering thought, is credibility. The Fuhrer's team could pull through, but it would not be easy.

Himmler was disturbed. The Fuhrer was not being very cooperative in dispelling any lingering doubts. Finally, he asked point-blank: "Mein Fuhrer, what are your true feelings about the Jewish people?"

Hitler exploded. "I don't give a shit how you do it, just get rid of them. That's the plan."

The two men greeted these remarks with a disappointed silence. There was not much room for maneuvering here. It could be a problem. They kept their concerns to themselves, however. They did not wish to add to the Fuhrer's burdens. Standing up to leave, Himmler said, "Thanks for giving us fresh insights into your views on the Jewish people." The three men shook hands, and Himmler and Goering simultaneously realized how little they really knew the Fuhrer, even after all these years.

Privately, the two men were troubled by the meeting. They walked quickly down the hall and strode 29 yards into an empty office. They sat across from each other in two leather chairs, and sorted out their feelings. The two Nazi leaders realized that the Fuhrer was probably thinking out loud—trying out outrageous alternatives as a way of reaching decisions. It was part of the process. They had heard him do it before.

Himmler noted that all people, even dictators, said things they don't mean. "Which one of us is without sin?" Himmler asked. Goering nodded solemnly. Furthermore, Himmler added, the Fuhrer's approach to the Jewish question had to be understood in the context of Hitler's global plans for the security of the Third Reich. Nothing was black and white, he said. The two men nodded in agreement.

They would stand by the Fuhrer.

Drawing on their reserves of inner strength, they summoned up the courage to walk out of the office with big smiles on their faces. The foreign press still had questions, they learned. Goebbels would relay their answers. Was the Fuhrer an anti-Semite? No, Himmler said, Hitler was not an anti-Semite. "The problem is behind us," Goering added. "We're definitely out of the woods."

THE RUSSIAN troops had reached the outskirts of Berlin. It was April 21, 1945. The skies were overcast. Goering and Himmler met secretly in the fashionable conference room of the Reichschancellery bunker. They had just learned of a signed memo linking Hitler to concentration camps.

"We've found the smoking Luger," Himmler told Goering, his voice calm and emotionless. "It's the ball game." No anti-Semite should continue to lead the German people, they agreed.

Himmler and Goering were shocked by the new evidence. For years, they had faithfully served Hitler, never once imagining that he was capable of such depravity. They had pledged their lives to him, and he had betrayed them. More in sorrow than in anger, they decided that Himmler should arrange to meet the Fuhrer one last time.

Hitler seemed preoccupied. He was sitting on a brown leather couch in a small 12-by-9-foot room with a gun pointed at his head. Now and then there were the occasional dulled reverberations of artillery shells overhead.

Himmler looked at the pathetic figure before him with a mixture of loathing and contempt. He had always despised anti-Semites, and although he had never personally met any, he had heard that they were without a smattering of human decency. It was, he realized now, all too true.

Yet now Hitler acted as if he were reaching out to Himmler for forgiveness, some sign of absolution. Himmler was reminded once again of the enormous distance between them. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the concentration camps, Heinrich," Hitler said, tears coming to his eyes. "I know that you are completely innocent and I only hope that you have an opportunity to vindicate yourself in a court of law, or, failing that, in any contemporary histories produced by journalists after my downfall." He lowered his eyes. "Will you ever forgive me?" he pleaded.

"I accept your apologies, Mein Fuhrer," Himmler responded. He thought to himself that the world will never know the full truth. "Himmler the monster," the Allies would probably call him. It was a shame, but he would bear up under the burden. He had wanted a Third Reich devoted to civil liberties and racial equality, but his efforts apparently had had no impact on Hitler's policies. Now he would be called a war criminal by close-minded critics. He sighed with stoic resignation.

Suddenly, Himmler flashed with anger. "How could you lie to us all these years? You *know* how strongly I feel about religious freedom and the sacredness of human life!"

Hitler shrugged. "It was something I had to do if I were to trick good people like yourself into devoting themselves to the national interest," Hitler said, glancing at his Timex. "If you knew my real thoughts about the Jewish people, I'm sure you would have left the country in the 1930s."

"You're damn right, Hitler," he shot back. "And I would have joined the Allies and brought you to justice, too."

Himmler got up to leave. "I'm going to convert to Judaism the first chance I get, as a small symbol of atonement for your immoral atrocities, which you implemented without my knowledge."

Then he walked out, never once looking back at his nation's leader.

The end was near, he realized, and as he strolled along the corridors he pondered his own role. He was, perhaps, not without guilt. He had made prolonged concealment possible. He had unwittingly helped keep things going. Of course, he had been careful not to participate. He might tell himself that he hadn't known what was going on. But there had been hints and signs everywhere, all along the way. He should have known, goddammit. He hit his fists together in exasperation.

Still, he hadn't known of any specific piece of evidence. Until they uncovered the death-camp memo. There it was, in black and white. Proof. The gossips in the Reichschancellery had been asking the same question for over two years: What did the Fuhrer know and when did he know it?

Now Himmler knew. Somehow, it didn't make him feel much better. He went to his office to write a letter of resignation on a yellow legal pad. ■