

MODERN HISTORY

‘Speer, as Minister for Armaments and Munitions was so successful that many consider him to be responsible for prolonging the war. However, this success came at a great cost.’

To what extent does your study of Albert Speer support this view?

There is no doubt that Albert Speer, Hitler’s architect and the German Minister for Armaments and Munitions from 1942 to the end of World War Two in 1945, had a heavy influence on the Nazi Regime within Germany for the duration of the war till its very end. As Airey Neave, a British prosecutor at the Nuremberg Trials states, Speer’s talent within the study of Architecture had built his skills in the areas of efficient planning and organising, which at the emergence of war were of a greater need than that of his architectural work. With Hitler overlooking the fact that Speer had no experience with weaponry or munitions, his well-proven organisational ability is what placed Speer in the centre of Nazi politics, as the Minister, utilising this role to make an enormous contribution to the survival of the Nazi Regime. This skill to use his enthusiasm to find solutions to the problems of war production led to Speer’s complete increased reform of the war economy as being one of the major means in which Speer prolonged the war. This coupled with the cemented foundations of Fritz Todt’s system of the manufacturing of weapons when Minister, Speer was able to fulfil his role as minister to its full extent, efficiently upholding Todt’s three solutions to the success of war production and astoundingly increasing German armaments production to its full capacity, in effect prolonging the war. His enforcement of a total mobilisation for the workforce is what also furthered to the prolonging of the war, allowing him to fulfil the aims of an efficient war production scheme, but also brought the enormous costs to Speer’s success.

From the inheritance of such a highly planned and specific organisation of Munitions and Armaments production from Frits Todt, Speer was able to combine this with his own skills in organisation to develop an efficient system of armaments production which paved the way for a well supplied German army into the war, therefore prolonging Germany’s strength and participation within it. Speer had to assume responsibility for a vast enterprise, left by Frits, and to solve three key issues that would decide the war effort: how to eliminate the gross inefficiencies of war production, how to increase armaments and munitions production despite the growing scarcity of raw materials and the problems of labour shortages, and how to keep production growing despite the increasing bombing of German factories and other production targets. He was able to achieve all three through his implication of a total-mobilisation of the workforce and in doing so provided Germany with more resources, time and economic stability throughout the war, advantages the nation used to remain a strong participant for a longer period of time.

Speer believed that a total mobilisation of the workforce was needed if Germany was to avoid military defeat. After establishing control within Germany industry, Speer began to address the issue of forced labour needed to be provided for production. Despite resistance from other Nazi officials, he succeeded in diverting some of the six million workers who were engaged in producing consumer items to his war production factories. Speer used his power as Minister to spin the legal system in Nazi Government Germany and announce the compulsory registration of all men and women less than 50 years of age for compulsory labour. “With war production at its peak in 1944, Speer has seven million foreign labourers and 400,000 prisoners of war working as slave labourers at his fingertips. His war production had reached an all time great and was one of the major factors holding Germany within the war by a thin rope.” Evident in the increase of 1.3 million workers to the German workforce by 1943, Speer was able to easily gain his needed in-expensive workforce for production. One of the consequences of Speer’s call for Total Mobilisation within Germany was the forcing of women back into the workforce. Although against Hitler’s beliefs, Speer knew that whilst the war situation worsened more women needed to enter the workforce and this was one of the costs of prolonging the war, as women who opposed of this were ignored. Instead of recruitment,

labour was forced upon the people of Germany, which ultimately boosted production which prolonged Germany's involvement with growing resources, though cost the German people their freedom.

A major criticism of Speer's success in Armaments production focuses on the human cost, which supports the Structuralist historian's argument condemning Speer's success such as Matthias Schmidt. "Speer was not only a man who was the closest Nazi to Hitler, a friend, but had known all along about the worst features of the Nazi Regime such as the treatment of slave labourers ..." In his book *Albert Speer: The End of A Myth*, published in 1989 Schmidt argues that Speer was greatly responsible for the terrible treatments and deaths of forced labourers within Nazi Germany throughout the war. Much of the increase in armaments production rested on the exploitation of foreign workers and prisoners of war, often in horrendous conditions. Speer as the minister was only in charge of the number of workers allocated to each work site, and at the Nuremberg Trials, Speer heavily argued that their treatment was the responsibility of his deputy Fritz Sauckel. The enormous costs of Fritz's treatment of these slaves but more crucially, Speer's recruitment of them is evident in the numbers which show that 60,000 slaves worked through the horrors of the Dora Missile Factory and out of these an estimated 20,000 died, all in the name of Armaments production. In a letter posted to Speer after the war had ended, Rosenberg a Nazi official exposed the real human costs of Speer's success "Of 3.6 million prisoners of war, only a few hundred thousand remain capable of working. Many have died of starvation others from typhus. Given the immense numbers, a proper appreciation of our policies could have avoided this extent of loss."

Although criticized by Dan van der Vat, Speer's own economic report drawn up at the end of the war in 1945, the *Rechenschaftsbericht*, no doubt supports Speer's "reputation as an economic miracle worker." This very reputation is what demonstrates Speer's success in prolonging the war. Within six months of his role as Minister, Speer increased the production of Guns by 27%, Tanks by 25% and Ammunition by 97%. Speer himself acknowledges the fact that "many of the experts within office could have done the same but I held what they lacked, the personal support and full authority of Adolf Hitler." With Hitler's backing, Speer was able to sore as Minister for Armaments and base his production schemes on the belief that "Germany now faces a long-term war and needed the efficiency of the mass production of a limited number of standard items." By 1944, Speer had increased armaments production by more than 300% with only a 30% increase in the labour force. This is where the devastating costs of his efficient production lay, were only a limited number of workers needed to produce outstanding numbers of armaments, taking an enormous tole on the forced labourers.

It was evident that Speer knew difficulties he faced in building Germany's war production "Germany was not ready for war but there was no withdrawal, I needed to make Germany ready for the Furer and for Germany" and his ambitions to make Hitler proud pushed his success in production. These successes lead to the prolonging of Germany's involvement within the war although harsh and at times with an absence of prosperity, with a sufficient supply of resources to advantage and strengthen the army. But this prolonging came at enormous costs. These costs lay in the human loss of not only innocent victims of war but the victims of forced labour production, "exploited to their greatest possible extent at the absolute minimum of expenditure."

Bibliography:

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