

Last order from the Führerbunker

On April 23, Hermann Göring, by decree of June 1941¹ Crown Prince in the Nazi hierarchy, had sent a carefully worded telegram to the ‘Führerbunker’ inquiring whether he, in accordance with his position as the ‘second man’ in the Reich, was to assume leadership, Hitler’s incarcerated situation in Berlin taken into consideration. Göring added that if no reply was received by 22:00 that night, he would take for granted that the Führer had lost his freedom of action and that he, Göring, as Hitler's deputy, would then take the reins. He ended the message pledging his undying loyalty to his Führer.

Nr. <u>F</u>		Marinenachrichtendienst					Ltg.-Nr.	
Augen, den <u>23.4.</u> 19.45		Weiter an	Lag	Uhrzeit	Ltg.	durch		
um <u>0056</u> Uhr						Uhrzeitgruppen		
von Ltg.						1811/11 frr		
durch <u>Schl</u>						2352/14 frr		
Verzögerungsverm.						Geheim!		
Fernspruch	Funkspruch	von:		Obersalzberg				
Fernschreiben	Posttelegramm							
Mein Führer:								
<p>General Koller hat mir heute auf Grund von Mitteilungen, die ihm Generaloberst Jodl und General Christian gemacht hatten, eine Darstellung gegeben, wonach Sie in gewissen Entscheidungen auf mich verwiesen hätten und dabei betonten, dass ich, falls Verhandlungen notwendig würden, dazu leichter in der Lage wäre als Sie in Berlin. Die Ausserungen waren für mich derart überraschend und ernst, dass ich mich verpflichtet fühlte, falls bis 2200 Uhr keine Antwort erfolgt, nehme ich an, dass Sie Ihrer Handlungsfreiheit beraubt sind. Ich werde dann die Voraussetzungen Ihres Erlasses als gegeben ansehen und zum Wohle von Volk und Vaterland handeln. Was ich in diesen schwersten Stunden meines Lebens für Sie empfinde, das wissen Sie und kann ich durch Worte nicht ausdrücken. Gott schütze Sie und lasse Sie trotz alledem baldmöglichst hierher kommen.</p>								
Ihr getreuer Hermann Göring								

The original Göring telegram

Hitler was initially rather indifferent to the proposal and prone to accept it from the viewpoint that it *‘didn’t really matter who conducted the peace negotiations’*. Göbbels, however, saw the letter as an attempted putsch and with the help of Bormann eventually managed to sow the seeds of suspicion in the suggestible Führer. Catching on to the ever present suspicion of conspiracy among his entourage, isolated from the outside world, Hitler eventually worked himself into a frenzy. Denouncing the Reich Marshal for his incompetence as commander of the Luftwaffe and ranting about a coup d’état, he ultimately stripped Göring of all positions and powers, expelled him from the Party and nullified the 1941 succession-decree.

On the same date, but prior to receiving Göring’s telegram, Hitler had inquired his minister of armaments, Albert Speer, who was visiting the Bunker for the last time, of his opinion of Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz; his professionalism, character and approach to his job – in general terms, but Speer, getting the notion that the question had a deeper tone and might involve thoughts of succession, answered favorably².

On the evening of 28 April, the BBC broadcast a Reuters' news report about Heinrich Himmler's attempted negotiations with the western powers through Swedish Count Bernadotte. This betrayal of the most faithful paladin, the dreaded head of the SS, was the final straw; one last time the Führer made up his mind.

Consequently, and just a day before his suicide in the afternoon of April 30, Hitler dictated his testament, personal as well as political, to his young secretary Traudl Junge. The political part not only exempted Germany and himself from any guilt as to the war, putting the blame squarely on England, USA and the 'International Jewry', but also expelled Göring and Himmler from the Nazi Party. The testament furthermore held directions for the formation of a 'post-Führer' government, spearheaded by the ardent Nazi and Chief of the 'Kriegsmarine'; Großadmiral Karl Dönitz.³

Since the de facto division of the Nazi Reich into a southern and a northern part, as the American and Russian armies linked up at Torgau on the Elbe on April 25, Dönitz had been in control of the northern part, embracing a small strip of the German Baltic coast along with occupied Holland, Denmark and Norway. The southern part of the Reich fell under the aegis of Field Marshal Ferdinand Schörner, commander of Army Group Center.

After the suicides-a-deux of Hitler and Eva and their subsequent Viking funeral, Martin Bormann, the 'éminence grise' at the Nazi Court, wasted no time in organizing his own role in the next act of what had evolved into a mere tragicomedy. The day before, three officers had been dispatched on Hitler's order to carry copies of his testament to safety, including one copy to the Führer's successor, and now Bormann radioed⁴ Dönitz, headquartered in the small city of Plön in Schleswig-Holstein, with the happy tidings that he was the chosen one, but - ever the Machiavellian - his message was veiled and oblique and did not clearly state Hitler had already opted for the 'Freitod':

"Grand Admiral Dönitz.

The Fuehrer has appointed you, Herr Admiral, as his successor in place of Reichsmarschall Göring. Confirmation in writing follows. You are hereby authorized to take any measures which the situation demands.

Bormann."

A bewildered heir

Upon receiving the message, Dönitz, believing Hitler was still alive, initially responded with vows of loyalty to his Führer. However, in the morning of May 1, as further information was received that the testament 'was now in force' (and that Bormann was on his way to Plön post haste), Dönitz realized that Hitler was dead and, unaware of the circumstances, he chose to announce it to the German people as '*a heroic death of the Führer, leading his troops in combat!*' followed by the announcement of his own elevation to power, directed to the fighting German troops (and to the approaching Allied Forces). He stated that the struggle in the East carried on unabated, but that continued fighting in the West would depend squarely on the attitude of the Allied. This took place via the still functioning Hamburg radio around half past nine in the evening⁵.

The second message to Dönitz, this time composed by Göbbels, was less indirect and read:

"Großadmiral Dönitz - Most secret - Urgent - Officer only.

The Fuehrer died yesterday at 15.30 hours. Testament of 29 April appoints you as Reich President, Reich Minister Dr Göbbels as Reich Chancellor, Reichsleiter Bormann as Party Minister, Reich Minister Seyss-Inquart as Foreign Minister. By order of the Fuehrer, the Testament has been sent out of Berlin to you, to Field Marshal Schörner, and for preservation and publication. Reichsleiter Bormann intends to go to you today and to inform you of the situation. Time and form of announcement to the Press and to the troops is left to you. Confirm receipt.

Göbbels"

Dönitz' understanding; that his prime task was to put an end to hostilities as soon as possible⁶, was in his own words rivaled only by his efforts to save as many Germans as was within his grasp from future 'Bolshevik rule', a goal that had been pursued during the last months where his Kriegsmarine relentlessly shuttled between the eastern strongholds, still in German hands, and ports in northern Germany and Denmark, carrying thousands of refugees to relative safety [Operation Hannibal; commenced in January 1945].

"I assumed that Hitler had nominated me because he wished to clear the way to enable an officer of the Armed Forces to put an end to the war."

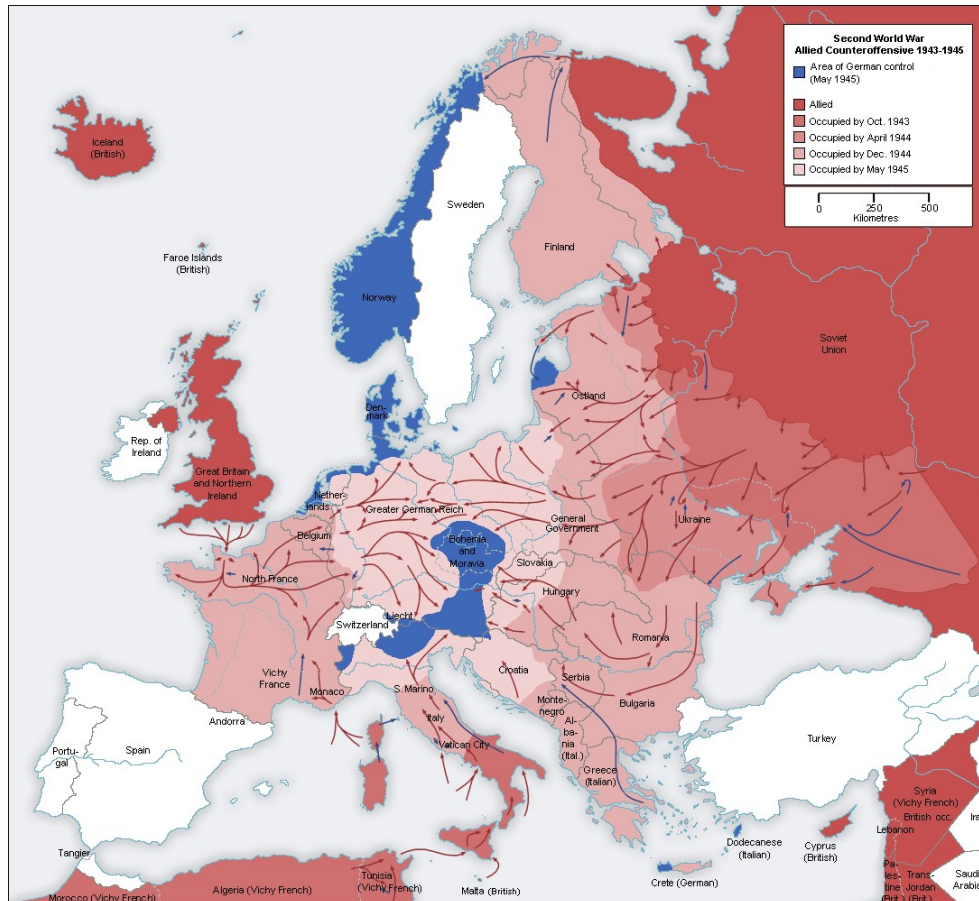
This concern still weighed heavily in the balance, and he was consequently stalling for time while remnants of the German forces in the east fought a desperate rearguard battle, retreating towards the west.



Small vessels en route west with refugees. Bundesarchiv

A President without a country

MAY 1; SETTING UP THE NEW ADMINISTRATION. In Hitler's Last Will, Dönitz was appointed the new Head of State, titled Reichspräsident and Supreme Commander, and the resigning Führer had laid down a tentative list of ministers for the new government.⁷ Albeit none of the three emissaries from the Bunker, who were carrying written copies of the testament, ever reached Dönitz⁸, the instructions were – in part at least – radioed to Plön, where Dönitz resided along with the leftovers of the Army High Command.



Remnants of the Third Reich in April 1945, marked in blue [Wikipedia]

For the moment Dönitz and the new government were out of reach by both the Allied and the Soviet authorities, and therefore enjoyed some freedom of action albeit the Britons under Montgomery closed in on them.

Neglecting the last wishes of his late Führer, the otherwise zealous Dönitz – with a keen eye to who might be acceptable to the Allies and somewhat worried that Bormann might actually make it to Plön – made up his own list of government members, comprising relatively neutral or at least not-so-tainted names. Speer, i.e., was made Minister of Economics and the post as Minister of Foreign Affairs as well as Head of Cabinet (effectively Chancellor) was assumed by Lutz Graf Schwerin von Krosigk, the former Minister of Finances in the Nazi Reich.

AT THIS POINT IN TIME AN INTERLUDE HAD OCCURRED, posing a potentially serious threat to Dönitz' plans but also illustrating the thinking among the Nazi brass hats. Heinrich Himmler, unaware of - or overlooking - his dethroning

as Reichsführer SS⁹, appeared before Dönitz in the belief that he was to be Hitler's successor. Here is what the admiral wrote about the encounter:

"First and foremost I had definitely to ascertain Himmler's intentions. His attitude on the afternoon of the day upon which the telegram announcing my nomination arrived had shown me that he obviously expected to be named as Head of the State. Here was a source of potential danger. Himmler had armed forces at his disposal all over the country. I had none. How would he react to the changed circumstances? Now that the responsibility for the appointment of ministers was mine, there could be no question of any collaboration between him and me. The objects I had in view would not permit me to burden myself with any political encumbrances. Although at the time I knew but little of the crimes he had committed, it was obvious to me that Himmler, as far as I was concerned, was intolerable. This I had to make quite clear to him, and one way or the other, I had to have a swift and final showdown with him. On the evening of April 30, shortly after the receipt of the telegram I told my ADC to telephone to Himmler, from whom I had parted in Lübeck only a few hours before, and ask him to come to Plön forthwith. To my ADC he retorted with a blunt refusal, but when I myself spoke to him and told him that his presence was essential, he eventually consented to come."

"Himmler could not understand that the respect which had once been offered to his power would not extend to his weakness."

"At about midnight he arrived, accompanied by six armed SS officers, and was received by my aide-de-camp, Luedde-Neurath. I offered Himmler a chair and myself sat down behind my writing desk, upon which lay, hidden by some papers, a pistol with the safety catch off'. I had never done anything of this sort in my life before, but I did not know what the outcome of this meeting might be.

I handed Himmler the telegram containing my appointment. 'Please read this,' I said. I watched him closely. As he read, an expression of astonishment, indeed, of consternation spread over his face. All hope seemed to collapse within him. He went very pale. Finally he stood up and bowed. 'Allow me,' he said, 'to become the second man in your state.' I replied that that was out of the question and that there was no way in which I could make any use of his services.

Thus advised, he left me at about one o'clock in the morning. The showdown had taken place without force, and I felt relieved."

[Karl Dönitz; 'Ten years and twenty days', p. 443-44]

A shrinking Reich

MAY 2-4, MOVING TO NEW LOCATIONS. Advancing Allied forces compelled Dönitz to move his headquarters on May 1 from Plön to Flensburg close to the Danish border, where he took possession of Marineschule Mürwik, a Navy Academy that hitherto had escaped the ravages of war. Fulfilling his pledge to end the war – but simultaneously stalling for time – Dönitz first sent an emissary to the advancing Britons under Field Marshal Montgomery, and in the night of May 4, in a tent at the Lüneburg Heide, Admiral von Friedeburg on behalf of Dönitz signed a partial surrender for occupied Holland and Denmark as well as North-West Germany.



Luneburger Heath; von Friedeburg in the center. Montgomery i second from left. Wikipedia.

Pursuing his luck, the next Dönitz emissary, Generaloberst Jodl, went to the SHAEF [Supreme Headquarters Allied Expedition Force] in Reims, France, to achieve surrender to the Western powers only. General Eisenhower, however, flatly required unconditional surrender on all fronts, including the Russian. If the demand was not met, the war would continue, the western front would be sealed and the Allied would reject all individuals surrendering to them and send them back to the Soviet side.



Surrender at Reims

Finding himself out of options, Dönitz eventually authorized Jodl to put pen to paper and sign the surrender on May 7, effectively ending the Second World War [in Europe] the day after.

An administration in limbo

MAY 5; ARRIVAL OF THE VICTORS. The Britons seized Flensburg on May 5, but the Dönitz administration was allowed to function for another two weeks¹⁰. The Grand Admiral and Reichspräsident now saw his prime task as trying to alleviate the suffering of the German people and commence the first small steps towards rebuilding the country. To that end, Dönitz had some 350 administrative subordinates on various levels to govern his fifteen square kilometer rump state along the Baltic coast. Numerous meetings were held in the new Cabinet; decisions taken, memoranda written and orders issued, but it was in most respects an exercise in futility.

In his memoir, Dönitz muses over the question whether he should rather dissolve his administration from the viewpoint that his primary task – establish an orderly peace and rescue as many German troops and [to a lesser extend] civilians from the claws of Bolshevism – has now been completed. Being a president without a land and unable to govern anything, the maintaining of the Flensburg Government seems redundant.



Albert Speer, Karl Dönitz and Lutz Graf Schwerin von Krosigk

Speer, who openly nurses the confidence that there is a future position for him in an Allied context, supports Dönitz in this view, but Schwerin von Krosigk, the new ‘Chancellor’, points to the fact that regardless of the president's impotence in administrative powers he is still the nominal leader in what is left of the Reich¹¹. Only the Wehrmacht has surrendered, the Reich is intact!

Thus, was the view of Krosigk, Reichspräsident Dönitz represented German national unity and a counterbalance to the Allied diversion of Germany into four occupation zones. Resigning now would be recognition of the division and the sovereignty of the military governments set up by the victors in each zone.

**“Our government was not only impotent;
the victors did not deign notice to it”**

Dönitz ultimately leaned to the latter view, stating in his own words;

“For this reason alone, if for no other, I had to stay until I was removed by force. Had I not done so, then, implicitly at least, I should have supplied the political pretext for the division of Germany that exists today [1958]. Resignation, then, the voluntary renunciation of the position which the Allies had recognized was legally mine, would have been the one great mistake which I could have made after the capitulation.”

[Dönitz, p. 472]

Albert Speer, who in his memoir often is bluntly honest [when the issue is not about his own culpability], probably describes the situation aptly:

"We composed memoranda in a vacuum, trying to offset our unimportance by sham activity. Every morning at ten a cabinet meeting took place in the so-called Cabinet Room, a former schoolroom. It looked as if Schwerin-Krosigk was trying to make up for all the cabinet meetings that had not been held during the past twelve years. We used a painted table and chairs collected from around the school. At one of these sessions the acting Minister of Food brought a few bottles of rye from his stores. We fetched glasses and cups from our rooms and discussed how to reshuffle the cabinet to bring it in line with the changing times. A hot debate arose over the question of adding a Minister for Churches to the cabinet. A well-known theologian was proposed for the post, while others regarded Pastor Niemöller as the best candidate. After all, the cabinet ought to be made 'socially acceptable.' My tart suggestion that a few leading Social Democrats and liberals be brought forth to take over our functions went unnoticed. The Food Minister's stocks helped to liven the mood of the meeting. We were, I thought, well on the way to making ourselves ridiculous; or rather, we already were ridiculous. The seriousness that had prevailed in this building during the surrender had vanished."

[Albert Speer; 'Inside the Third Reich', p. 664]

Speer, no doubt, had aspirations of a possible cooperation with the United States [as i.e. Wernher von Braun managed], hoping they would find him useful. These hopes gained some justification when he, in mid-May, was approached by officers of the USSBS, United States Strategic Bombing Service, spearheaded by General F. L. Anderson, who wanted his help to assess the effects of aerial bombing and the mistakes [technical] made on both sides during the war. During these discussions, Speer describes an almost comradely feeling between former foes, an atmosphere that came to an abrupt halt a few days later, as the general was apparently reproached by upper echelons.

In inceptum finis est

MAY 23, THE FINAL ACT IN FLENSBURG. Little over two weeks went by in a sort of limbo. Within the enclave, the Dönitz government had freedom of movement – the Großadmiral himself even had a limo – and the German troops guarding the Marineschule kept their light arms. Visitors came and went; German as well as Allied. An Allied 'Control Commission' took up residence and office on a former HAPAG¹² passenger liner, the 'Patria', moored in the harbor and meetings, initially quite friendly, were held. The future of Germany was discussed. The Britons supplied food and fuel, but otherwise seemed to take little notion of the 'government' and Speer even had a chance to visit his family in Glücksburg.

**"Then, apparently, on May 15
Eisenhower demanded my removal in the interest
of friendship with Russia."**

The idyllic atmosphere, however, was soon to change. Dönitz recounts:

"On May 22 my aide-de-camp and friend, Lüdde-Neurath, told me that the leader of the Allied Control Commission had demanded my presence, accompanied by Friedeburg and Jodl, the next morning aboard the steamship 'Patria' on which the commission lived. 'Pack you bags!' I remarked briefly. I had no doubt that we were now to be removed from office and taken into custody.

When we stepped on to the gangway of the Patria things were very different from what they had been on the occasions of my previous visits to the Control Commission. There was no English Lieutenant-Colonel at the foot of the gangway to receive me, there was no presenting of arms by any of the sentries. On the other hand, there was a host of Press photographers.

On board the Patria, Friedeburg, Jodl and I sat on one side of a table, and on the other sat the chiefs of the Control Commission, with the American Major-General Rook in the center and the British and Russian Generals, Foord and Trusov, to left and right of him. Feeling that our fate was inevitable, my companions and I kept perfectly calm. General Rook declared that upon orders from Eisenhower he had to place me, the members of the German Government and the officers of Supreme Headquarters under arrest, and that from now on we were to regard ourselves as prisoners of war.

He asked me, a little uncertainly, if I wished to enter any protest? 'Comment', I retorted, 'is superfluous.'"

[Karl Dönitz; Ten Years and Twenty Days, p. 474]

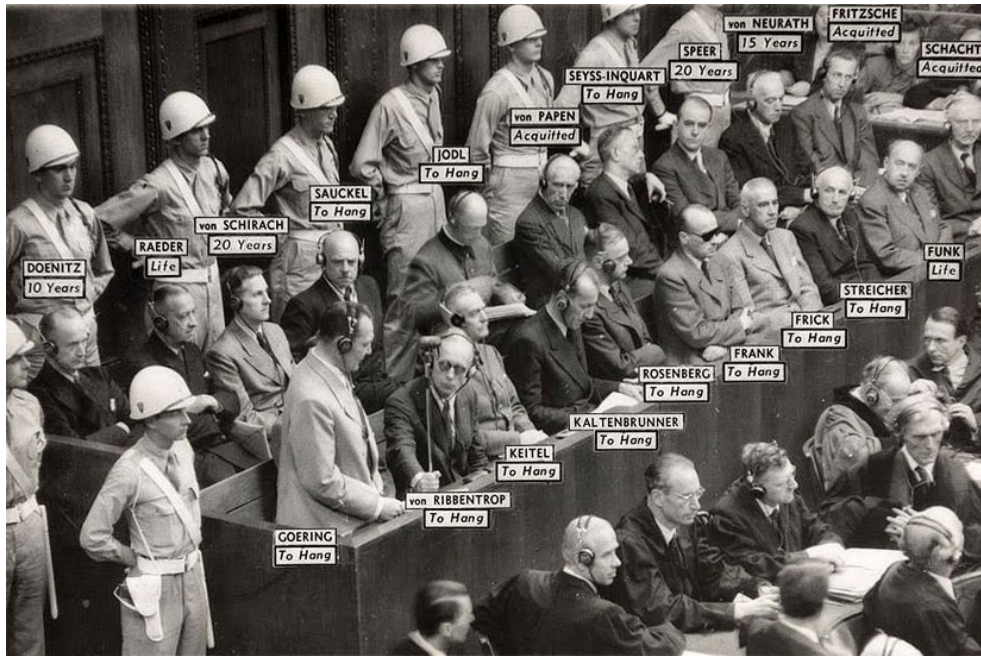


The famous photo; the Flensburg 'Government' are being marched off to captivity.

In the wee hours of May 23 Mürwik Marineschule had been surrounded, and British officers called on the government members and pronounced them under arrest. Speer was apprehended in Glücksburg where his family stayed in a friend's country house, and taken back to Mürwik. The arrest was even captured on film to be shown in British newsreels [<https://bit.ly/33sg98I>], starting with the minions and ending up with Dönitz, Jodl and Speer being marched off by British troops with fixed bayonets.

They were all whisked away in Army trucks and, via several interim confinements in France and Germany, Dönitz, Jodl and Speer eventually reached Nuremberg¹³; there to stand trial before history.

The last vestiges of the Third Reich had finally ceased to exist...



Defendants at Nuremberg. Dönitz is on the top row, far left; a story to be told some other time. Official photo, but unclear who put the names on.

Mürwick today

As no fighting or bombing took place at the Naval Academy, the premises are unscathed and virtually unchanged today and well worth a visit.



Entrance to Mürwick Naval Academy in 2007.

It still functions as an Officer Academy and is off limits to civilians on a daily basis, but until the outbreak of the corona pandemic in 2020, ‘Open Door’ arrangements took place four to six times a year. As the situation gradually normalizes the world over, this praxis will probably resume so keep an eye on this website: <https://bit.ly/2UBAvat>

Recommended reading

Beevor, Antony: **Berlin, the downfall 1945**. © 2002, Penguin Books
Bernadotte, Count Folke: **The Fall of the Curtain**, © 1945, Cassell
Churchill, Winston: **Den Anden Verdenskrig**, © 1954, Steen Hasselbalch
Dönitz, Karl: **Ten Years and twenty Days**, © 2000, Cassell Military
Hastings, Max: **Finest Years. Churchill as Warlord, 1940-45**, © 2009, Harper Press
Kershaw, Ian: **The End, Germany 1944-45**. ©, 2011, Penguin Books
Knopp, Guido: **Hitlers Hjælpere**, © 1996, Schönberg
Le Tissier, Tony: **Berlin Battlefield Guide**, © 2008, Pen & Sword
Richie, Alexandra: **Faust’s Metropolis**, © 1998, Harper Collins
Schellenberg, Walter: **The Memoirs of Hitler’s Spymaster**, © 2006 André Deutsch
Speer, Albert: **Inside the Third Reich**, © 1970, Macmillan Company
Witte, Peter & Tyas, Stephen: **Himmler’s Diary 1945**, © 2014, Fronthill Media

Armchair General Magazine, February/March 2010
Militär & Geschichte Magazine, No 4, June/July 2021
Axis History Forum

Notes

¹ On June 29, 1945, a week after commencing Operation Barbarossa, Hitler issued a secret decree naming Hermann Göring his successor, should anything happen to the Führer. The decree was in effect until April 1945.

² Speer detested Göring, hitherto the designated successor to Hitler, and attempted to keep him out of the job.

³ That Dönitz turned out to be the anointed one came as a surprise to most, not least because the Admiral was not an old croonie. He joined the NSDAP only in 1944.

⁴ Bormann had the good fortune, at this point in time, to control the only radio-set left within the Berlin Citadel, namely the Party transmitter in Wilhelmstrasse.

⁵ In Berlin only few – if any – heard the tidings. Electrical service had stopped and only few functioning battery-radios were available.

⁶ As Dönitz never received the written copy of Hitler’s will, he was spared the knowledge that he was expected to continue the fight to the bitter end.

⁷ Hitler’s list contained names such as Martin Bormann [Party Minister], Joseph Göbbels [Chancellor] and Arthur Seyss-Inquart, the scourge of Holland, as Foreign Minister, while skipping the unfaithful Albert Speer, the prodigal son who had disobeyed his masters ‘Nero-order’; champagne-salesman and unsuccessful diplomat Joachim von Ribbentrop, who had fallen from grace, and, of course, the ‘traitors’ Göring and Himmler.

⁸ Various obstacles hampered the efforts of the officers, Johannmeier, Lorenz, and Zander who were detailed to carry copies of the testament to Field Marshal Schörner in the south; to the Party Headquarter in Munich and to Dönitz in Plön. None of them made it, but it's a great story that can be told some other time.

⁹ As we recall, Hitler, in a fit of rage as he learned of Himmler's attempted offer of surrender to the Western Allies via Count Bernadotte, had expelled the 'treue Heinrich' from the Party and all his positions and effectively issued a death sentence. This happened on April 28 and was the main reason that Ritter von Greim and Hanna Reitsch were not allowed to remain in the Bunker, but were sent to Plön to ensure Himmler's arrest. [See Note; 'Flights into Hell']

¹⁰ Churchill, as always, held a very pragmatic view on Dönitz and his 'government'. "*Would you rather*", he asked Anthony Eden, "*put your hands in an ants nest?*" The key question to Churchill was Dönitz' ability to control the German people in the transition period, and to convey unpopular decisions to the vanquished. The question of the Admiral's culpability in war crimes could be dealt with later.

¹¹ The Allied had themselves recognized this fact as they required Dönitz' authorisation of the leaders of the three military branches in Karlshorst; Stumpff, von Friedeburg and Keitel.

¹² Hamburg Amerikanische Packetfahrt Actien-Gesellschaft, also referred to as the 'America Line' and founded in Hamburg in 1847. In July 1945, the Patria was converted into a British troop transport, named Empire Welland. From 1946 onwards she was taken over by the Russians as the 'Rossiya' and was in service till 1985, where she was scrapped in Pakistan.

¹³ At Nuremberg, Speer got 20 years, Dönitz got ten, Jodl, Keitel and eight others were hanged. Göring committed suicide and Bormann was sentenced to death in absentia. Three [Hjalmar Schacht, Franz von Papen, and Hans Fritzsche] were acquitted.