



Volume 7. Nazi Germany, 1933-1945

Hitler's "Scorched Earth" Decree (Nero Decree) (March 19, 1945) and Albert Speer's Response (March 29, 1945)

On March 19, 1945, the hopeless state of the war effort prompted Hitler to issue the "Nero Decree," which called for the complete destruction of Germany's infrastructure. The approaching enemy would thus find nothing but "scorched earth." Hitler justified this step as a military necessity, but his intention was to destroy the German population as punishment for its defeat. There was to be no future for the nation after National Socialism. The day before Hitler issued his decree, Minister of Armaments and War Production Albert Speer (1905-1981) had submitted a memorandum opposing Hitler's plans for mass destruction. Hitler ignored it, however. In Speer's response to Hitler's decree, reproduced below, he once again expressed his fundamental opposition. In the end, Speer decided that his ministry would have to implement any measures geared toward mass destruction. Thus, together with the Wehrmacht and the administration, it could also go far in blocking Hitler's plans.

I. Hitler's Order of March 19, 1945

RE: Destruction Measures within Reich Territory

Our nation's struggle for existence forces us to utilize all means, even within Reich territory, to weaken the fighting power of our enemy and to prevent further advances. Any opportunity to inflict lasting damage on the striking power of the enemy must be taken advantage of. It is a mistake to believe that undestroyed or only temporarily paralyzed traffic, communications, industrial, and supply installations will be useful to us again after the recapture of lost territories. During his retreat, the enemy will leave behind only scorched earth and will abandon all concern for the population.

I therefore command –

1. All military traffic, communications, industrial and supply installations as well as objects within Reich territory that might be used by the enemy in the continuation of his fight, either now or later, are to be destroyed.
2. It is the responsibility of the military command posts to execute this order to destroy all military objects, including traffic and communications installations.

The Gauleiters and Commissioners for Reich Defense are responsible for destroying the industrial and supply installations, as well as of other objects of valuable; the troops must give the Gauleiters and Commissioners for Reich Defense the assistance they need to carry out this task.

3. This command is to be transmitted to all troop commanders as promptly as possible; orders to the contrary are null and void.

Adolf Hitler

Source of English translation: Hitler's "Scorched Earth" Decree (Nero Decree) (March 19, 1945), in United States Chief Counsel for the Prosecution of Axis Criminality, *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression*. Supplement B. Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1948. Speer Document 27, pp. 950-51. English translation edited by GHI staff.

Source of original German text: (Beweisstück Speer-25) Zerstörungsbefehl Hitlers vom 19. März 1945: Alle wichtigen Anlagen und Sachwerte im Reichsgebiet, die sich der Feind für Fortsetzung seines Kampfes nutzbar machen kann, sind zu zerstören (Dokument Speer-27), in *Der Prozess gegen die Hauptkriegsverbrecher vor dem Internationalen Militärgerichtshof. Nürnberg 14. November 1945 - 1. Oktober 1946*, Volume XLI, Amtlicher Text – Deutsche Ausgabe, Urkunden und anderes Beweismaterial. Nuremberg 1949. Reprint: Munich, Delphin Verlag, 1989, pp. 430-31.

II. Albert Speer's Response of March 29, 1945

[. . .] When I gave you my memorandum on March 18, I was convinced that the conclusions which I was drawing from the present situation for the maintenance of our national energy would definitely meet with your approval. For you yourself had already on one occasion determined that, in the event of a lost war, it was the task of the leadership to preserve the nation from a heroic end.

However, that evening you made statements to me from which – unless I have misunderstood you – it is clear and evident that if the war is lost the nation will also be lost. This fate is unavoidable. It is not necessary to show any consideration for the bases, which the people will need for their very primitive further existence; on the contrary, it is better to destroy even these things. For the nation has showed itself to be the weaker one and the future belongs exclusively to the stronger eastern nation. Those remaining after the struggle are in any case the less valuable ones because the good ones have been killed.

On hearing these words I was deeply shocked. And when, a day later, I read your destruction order and shortly afterwards the tough evacuation order, I interpreted these as the first steps in the implementation of these intentions.

Until then, I had believed with all my heart in a successful conclusion to this war. [. . .]

However, I can no longer believe in the success of our good cause if, during these decisive months, we simultaneously and systematically destroy the foundations of our national life. That is such a great injustice towards our people that fate could no longer favour us.

[. . .]

I therefore beg you not to carry out a step so destructive of the nation.

If you could decide to do this in some form then I would regain the faith and courage with which to continue working with the greatest energy.

You will be able to understand my inner conflict. I cannot work to my full capacity and generate the necessary confidence if, at the same time as I am demanding from the workers their fullest commitment, I am preparing to destroy the foundation of their lives.

[. . .]

Source of English translation: Jeremy Noakes, ed., *Nazism, 1919-1945*, Vol. 4: *The German Home Front in World War II*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1998, p. 660.

Source of original German text: (Beweisstück Speer-24) Schreiben Speers an Hitler vom 29. März 1945: Ersuchen um Aufhebung des Zerstörungsbefehls Hitlers vom 19. März 1945 (Dokument Speer-30), in *Der Prozess gegen die Hauptkriegsverbrecher vor dem Internationalen Militärgerichtshof. Nürnberg 14. November 1945 - 1. Oktober 1946*, Volume XLI, Amtlicher Text – Deutsche Ausgabe, Urkunden und anderes Beweismaterial. Nuremberg 1949. Reprint: Munich, Delphin Verlag, 1989, pp. 425-29.