

The frustrated Austrian corporal and biggest mass murderer in history still haunts the world

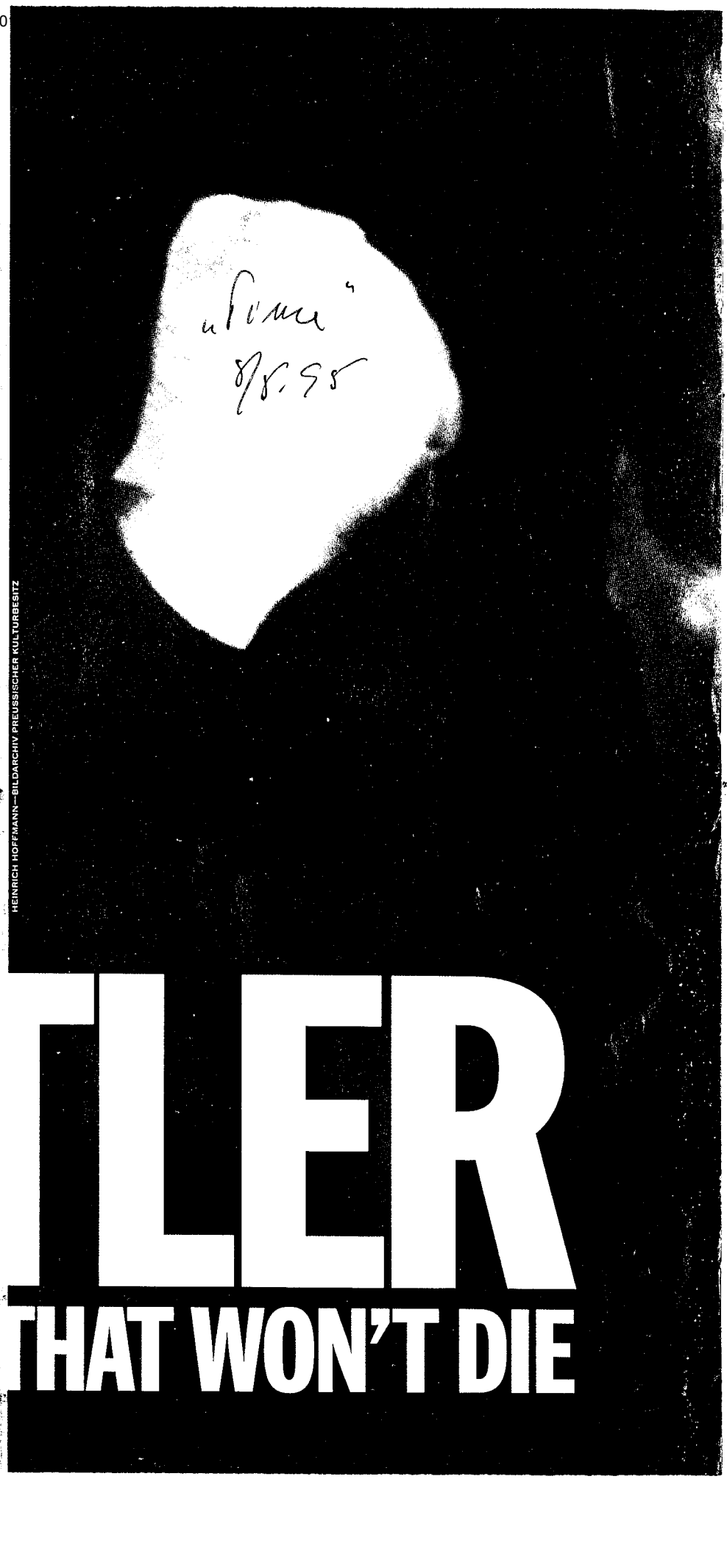
By JAMES WALSH

IN 1945, AFTER THE NAZI "THOUSAND-Year Reich" had imploded 988 years ahead of schedule, George Orwell toured a U.S. Army camp for German prisoners of war. The Briton's attention fixed on one particular captive, a senior SS officer who, without much question had been in charge of torturing and murdering Jews. Surveying this specimen, Orwell was struck by how shabby and even pathetic he seemed. Revenge, the essayist considered, "is an act which you want to commit when you are powerless and because you are powerless." He concluded, "Somehow the punishment of these monsters ceases to seem attractive when it becomes possible: indeed, once under lock and key, they almost cease to be a monsters."

Half a century later, that cannot be said of the supreme Nazi who averted capture, eluded justice and, in a profoundly more elusive way still, seemed

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TILER

THAT WON'T DIE



somehow to escape history. Adolf Hitler remains not only a monster but also a specter that continues to haunt the world. He is the definitive monster who will not go away, the evil that will not die. As leaders of the former Allied powers attend ceremonies next week to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Third Reich's defeat, the triumphalism at times will seem oddly misplaced. Leafing through a newspaper, flicking the TV remote control, will yield a scattershot of testimony to Hitlerism's enduring power, from genocidal spasms in Bosnia and Rwanda to the subways of Tokyo and the streets of Oklahoma City.

Anyone who doubts the ideological debt owed by the Oklahoma bombing to Hitler need only examine how closely the lunatic fringe of Western-states "militias" parallels the example of the 1920s Freikorps and Sturmabteilung: the proto-Nazi goons better known as Brownshirts. The very name of one extreme American gun cult, the self-styled Aryan Nations, says it all. Racism aside, the mystical symbols and prophecies of millenarian conflict used in such circles appear to have been lifted directly from a Hitlerism how-to manual.

AS FOR THE SUBWAY POISON gassings that convulsed Japan in March, the employment of sarin, a toxin developed by Nazi-era German chemists, seemed to be Hitler's latter-day calling card as well. In truth, the godfather of the shadowy Japanese religious sect publicly suspected of responsibility for the attack has made no secret of his admiration of Hitler. To find more dedicated heirs to the Final Solution's architect, though, the postcommunist, free-trade, open-skies and computerized world must look at the orchestrated psychopathologies that have driven the "ethnic cleansings" of Bosnia and Rwanda. These shattering episodes of calculated brutality, following by some 15 years Cambodia's disaster under the Khmer Rouge, are case studies in the living legacy of history's ultimate totalitarian.

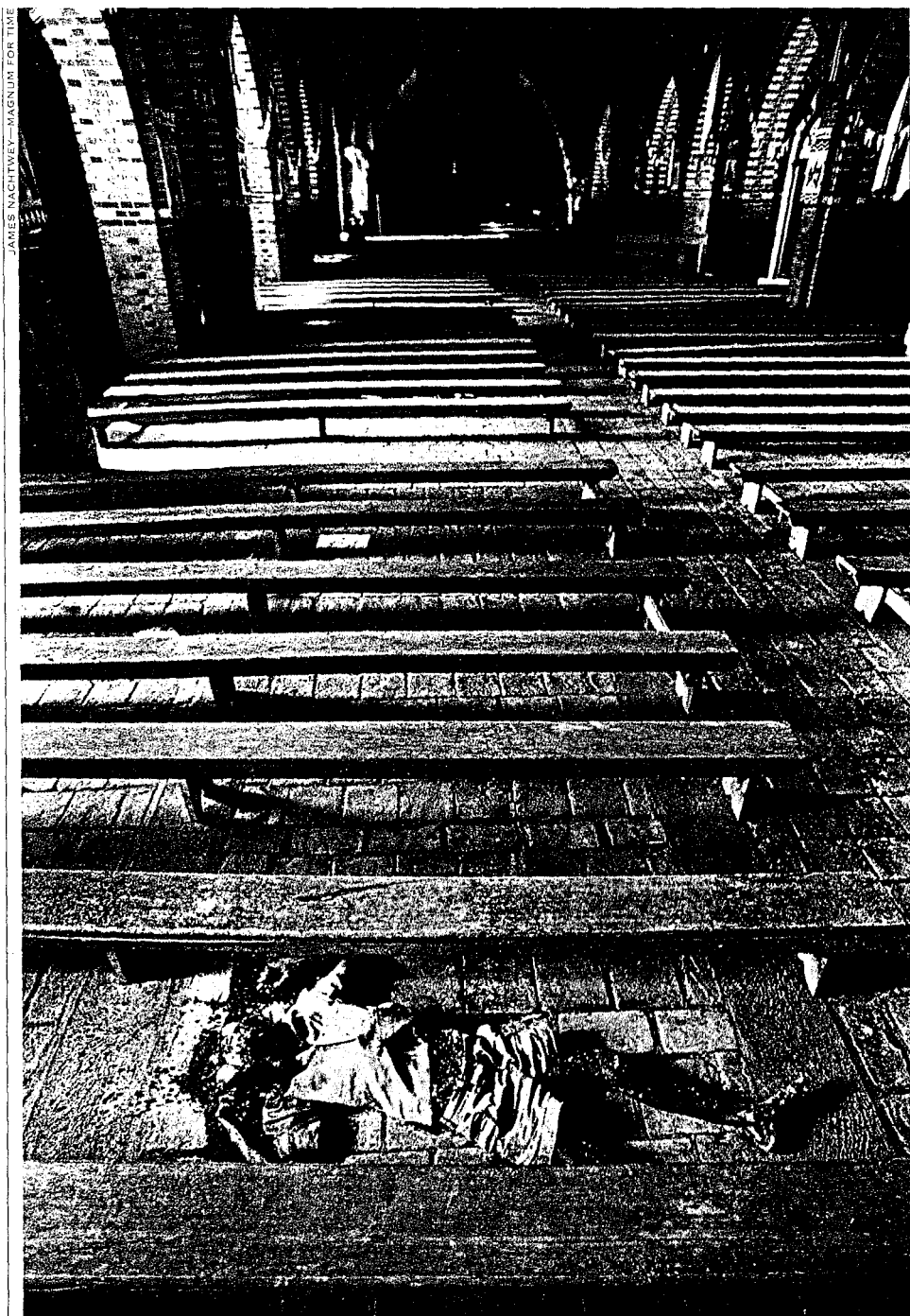
Orwell, a supremely decent man, could not have anticipated the degree to which an enemy who rained V-2 rockets on London would produce repercussions from beyond the grave and across 50 years. Maybe if Hitler had stood trial in Nuremberg, whispering to his counsel alongside Hermann Göring, facing his accusers in irons, the mythology he cultivated about himself would have died with him. Better yet, if he had sued for peace, or fled, when defeat was at hand, the mystique would have been punctured. No humiliation of

the biggest mass murderer in history could ever compensate for his crimes, but it would have afforded some catharsis.

As things happened, he cheated fate. The suicide tableau enacted inside the Hitler bunker as Soviet troops were closing in prevented the world from coming to grips with him conclusively. In a perverse way, the cyanide capsule and bullet through the brain secured his larger-than-life legend, as this apostle of mass psychosis surely wanted. Even if his body was soaked in gasoline and burned—even if, as newly disclosed Moscow archives tell it, his charred remains

were buried secretly by the Soviets near Magdeburg, East Germany, then exhumed by KGB orders in 1970 and incinerated to extinction—he was not quite stamped out. Had his heart survived, no doubt silver bullets and wooden stakes would have been used. Still, the power of Hitler to obsess our century has remained undiminished.

Partly this is a result of the necessary Jewish "never again" effort to memorialize the Holocaust. In part too it is a consequence of World War II itself, the stuff of so much stirring human drama as to suit every kind of storyteller. The European





ETER NOSTALL—BLACK STAR

SLAUGHTER OF INNOCENTS

The crushed body of a first boy, one of some 500,000 victims of the genocidal spasm last year, lies inside the supposed refuge of a Catholic church in Ntaramwe, Rwanda.

SHADES OF 1945

Victims of the Serb ethnic cleansing campaign in Bosnia, emaciated Muslim prisoners of the camp in Tropolje in 1992, looked the world with memories of Auschwitz.

ASIA'S REICH

Under Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge, Cambodia in the late 1970s enacted unspeakable horrors of civilian mass executions as mountains of bones piled over fugates.



PHILIP JONES GRIFFITHS—MAGNUM

war especially, in the Western world at least, is our modern tale of Troy, an all-purpose canvas for sagas of heroism and treachery, intrigue and adventure, love and loss. Looming always over this blood-and-thunder backdrop is the figure of the frustrated corporal from Austria who had metamorphosed into an archfiend bent on devouring civilization.

The fact that Hitler's most horrendous iniquity—"a crime without a name," as Winston Churchill memorably termed it—went largely unacknowledged by his adversaries during the war does not get much

recognition in these melodramas: although the war's closing weeks vividly brought home the atrocities of the death camps, the Führer's earlier image among the Allies was almost indistinguishable from World War I's lurid depictions of bloodthirsty "Kaiser Bill" and the supposed bayonettings of Belgian babies. Before 1945, Hitler was popularly imagined by his foes as a dangerous stooge. Monsterdom came later.

What an aftermath that has been, though. Over the years since the war, Hitler has stood at stage center of countless histories, biographies, psychobiogra-

phies, novels, films and television documentaries. He has emerged from vivisection in sociology texts to goose-step into cartoons. He has been demonized, satirized and to some extent sanitized, in the sense that modern descendants of the age of reason have struggled to explain him away.

Under this clinical lens, as journalist Ron Rosenbaum notes in the *New Yorker* magazine, "Hitler becomes just another kind of serial killer, the most prolific one of all time, yes, but basically a kind of workaholic Hannibal Lecter—a figure explicable in the psychobabble of serial-killer pseudoscience as the victim of a dysfunctional family." The immediate postwar decades spawned in the U.S. a virtual cottage industry in studies of "authoritarianism" and its mind-set: how easily everyday Jacks and Jills can be induced to zap laboratory subjects with jolts of electricity under the process of "just obeying orders" from the experimenter. Meanwhile, historians who take comfort in believing all events are predetermined by disembodied socioeconomic forces have tended to rationalize Hitler as a logical product of his time and place.

All these theories doubtless command some truth. Obviously, the past is prologue, and Hitler did not spring out of some Biedermeier woodwork as a full-blown anti-Christ brandishing canisters of Zyklon-B. Outside of a very few countries—chiefly the U.S., France and Britain—the traditions of liberal democracy in the early years of this century were unknown and alien. Lessons from World War I, Hitler's formative experience politically, animated and enraged any number of Germans who believed their country had been "stabbed in the back" by the surrender and Versailles settlement, which levied exorbitant reparations. The ensuing one-two punch of astronomical currency inflation and economic crash prepared the ground for the Weimar Republic's ruin.

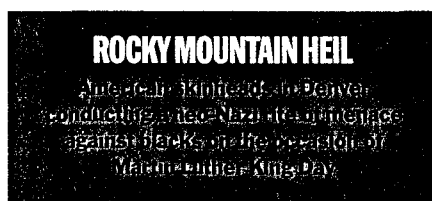
Later generations of Germans tried feebly to paper over the extent to which ordinary citizens, from milkmaids to industrialists, had been complicit in Nazism's ascension. And yet the 1932 elections that opened the doors to power for Hitler had evoked a solid electoral majority for the two parties most inimical to the Republic: the National Socialists and the Communists. Only a third or so of voters remained committed to liberalism's flame, which was dying in any case because politics was ordered along strictly confrontational class lines.

The upheavals of industrialism had also contributed to the outcome. The old social order under which the ideals of liberalism were framed in the 18th century crumbled steadily under the weight of the biggest mass movements since the völker-



wanderung—the migration of peoples accompanying the collapse of the Roman Empire 1,500 years earlier. Peasants left farms for the cities, waves of workers crossed continents and oceans, and the churning underclasses embraced socialism as a means to press their demands for economic justice. As historians have documented, Nazism's greatest appeal, after the Great Depression struck in 1929, was among white-collar, middle-class people who felt most threatened by the new age.

SO HITLER WAS A PRODUCT OF his times. Beyond that, however, almost all attempts to rationalize the ascendancy of monsterdom and the criminal state fail, precisely because Hitler was the antithesis of rationalism. His ideology, so far as it can be dignified by that term, was such a hallucinatory patchwork of warped, half-baked and self-contradictory notions that trying to make coherent sense of them was left to postwar analysts. He identified Jews as the great enemy, plotters in a seamless conspiracy, but somehow they were both Bolshevik agitators and capitalist financiers: the Rothschilds and Trotsky in a central cabal. Jews had supposedly maneuvered the European powers into war in 1914, a diabolical act,



and yet Hitler at all other times glorified war as the highest purpose of history. Jews were a nation, in the biblical sense of a definable people, yet they were also “international” and deracinated.

The Führer was head of state and government, yet he cared nothing for politics and in fact boasted of it. He was the tribune of everyone who resented modernism. He swaddled his regime in the occult symbolism and Wagnerian atmospherics harking back to an imagined Middle Ages: one famous painting portrays him as a Parsifal-like armored knight. At the same time, he rhapsodized about the future, assigned Germany the role of destiny's darling and readily embraced the most advanced tools at hand to build his machines of conquest and industrial-scale butchery of innocents.

This peculiar contradiction has descended in a straight line to some backward-yearning movements of our own time. As the British historian Eric Hobsbawm observes in his new book, *The Age of Extremes*, Hitler “provided the proof that

men can, without difficulty, combine crackbrained beliefs about the world with a confident mastery of contemporary high technology. The late 20th century, with its fundamentalist sects wielding the weapons of television and computer-programmed fund raising, have made us more familiar with this phenomenon.”

What exactly Hitler signified as a solvable historical mystery has become almost beside the point. He was the antipolitical, the über-egotist who pursued his fantasies in contemptuous disregard for all evidence of the way the world works. As the German writer Sebastian Haffner put it, Hitler “subordinated history to autobiography.” Certainly the mania Hitler devoted to the annihilation of Jews after late 1941, when the invasion of Russia stalled and his dreams of world dominance began to falter, was the token of a personality who was perhaps not clinically mad but who inhabited the far reaches of self-absorption.

Individualism in the West is a respected tradition. Hitler, the artist manqué and the onetime rootless vagabond, could almost have been a hippie in his exaltation of what feels good as the final touchstone for what is right. Where his virulent anti-Semitism came from remains almost anyone's guess—the pogroms of Eastern Europe before fascism were never so durable

STEVEN RUBIN—J.B. PICTURES

and systematic—but Hitler delighted in murder and revenge for its own sake. Stalin, who took a backseat to no one in political killings, at least chose his victims with a measure of political logic. Hitler found his inverted glory in illogic.

Haffner's 1978 book *The Meaning of Hitler* exposed the demagogue's ultimate defiance of rationalism in deliberately engineering his beloved Germany's destruction as his personal end neared. In Haffner's view, Germany's hopeless Ardennes offensive on the Western Front was designed expressly to signal the Allies that Hitler was prepared to subject the heart of Europe to Soviet conquest and dominance. Hitler's sneaking admiration of Stalin, which was requited by the Soviet ruler, emerged to give the lie to "Judeo-Bolshevism" as Nazism's archfoe. Hitler, in bringing the Fatherland down in ruins around him, would not accept defeat on any terms by the West, the repository of liberalism. The Führer, Haffner argues, sought to end German history with his own physical extinction, "leaving behind an inspiring legend" among the ashes.

The appeal of the consummate racist has reached across borders and decades because triumph of the ego is every malcontent's pursuit. Some people on the margins of society, who struggle to find a place in cultures and technologies transformed beyond recognition, resort to a semblance of infantilism. Everything that surrounded Hitler and his Reich seemed to come from the fantasy life of a child. The Nazi Party was like a kiddie clubhouse with secret handshakes and magical decoder rings: the refuges of small boys imagining themselves to be usurping the world of adults. The gigantism of Nazi architecture gave the impression of oversized furniture from a toddler's point of view: an attempt to convince others that Hitler's minions were the real adults.

The crucial engine of mastery was, of course, cultivation of a sense of crisis, of a "thousand-year" Twilight of the Gods, invisible enemies and secret plots. Most Germans who found themselves swept up by the simplicity of Nazism's answers, which were liberating intellectually, may have abetted the *Götterdämmerung* of a half-century ago, but they were almost constantly astonished at this very strange, very un-German figure who seemed to have dropped from the clouds. Misfits ranging from Pol Pot to antimodern gurus and power-hungry tyrants elsewhere have taken inspiration from Hitler since then because he is such a shape-shifting mystery, adaptable to all purposes. Like a tongue probing a rotten tooth, the rest of the world continues to explore the jagged edges of Hitler's black pit. A civilization of cream cakes and refined neuroses produced him, and Civilization cannot forget. ■

What Happened to Hitler's Body?

By JULIE K.L. DAM

WHEN FASCIST DICTATOR BENITO MUSSOLINI WAS EXECUTED BY ITALIAN partisans in April 1945, they strung his bullet-riddled corpse up in Milan's Piazzale Loreto for all the world to see. Would that a similar fate had befallen Adolf Hitler, for then we would have been spared the macabre industry that has sprung up to debate the Führer's ultimate fate. Or maybe not.

What did happen to Hitler in the *Götterdämmerung* of the Third Reich? The widely accepted version, put together by a British intelligence team led by historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, is that on April 30, 1945, Hitler committed suicide in his command bunker in Berlin and that his body was burned in the garden just outside, as he had expressly ordered. The British report, issued in November 1945, cited "positive, circumstantial" eyewitness evidence of the suicide and cremation.

But thanks to the Soviets, who repeatedly changed their own version of Hitler's demise, uncertainty has prevailed. After first announcing that Hitler killed himself, they switched signals and suggested that he might have escaped. But in February 1946, a secret investigation dubbed Operation Myth concluded otherwise. Captured German witnesses were dragged from prison camps in Siberia, interrogated and even forced to re-enact the events of April 30. The result: a voluminous report that largely agreed with Trevor-Roper's original verdict.

Conspiracy theorists and nostalgic Nazis aside, few have since doubted that Hitler perished in the ruins of Berlin. But questions have persisted about the disposal of his body. No reliable information emerged until the recent declassification of reams of official KGB documents. Those files—used by the BBC in preparing a new documentary, *Hitler's Death: The Final Report*, and compiled and released on laser disc this month by Moscow's Progress publishing group—seem to prove that a special SMERSH counterintelligence unit unearthed Hitler's charred corpse on May 3, 1945, and carried it off. The dental work was removed and used to obtain a positive identification. The body was then reburied near Magdeburg, East Germany. Finally, in 1970, KGB chief Yuri Andropov ordered the remains exhumed and burned for fear that if found, they would be venerated by neo-Nazis.

Is that the end of the mystery? Trevor-Roper, who published the definitive *The Last Days of Hitler* in 1947, believes it is and calls the archive material an anticlimactic "bit of decorative detail." But the speculators are unlikely to be discouraged. Even respected German historian Anton Joachimsthaler, who has just written his own book on the subject using information from German and U.S. archives, takes issue with the new Russian evidence. "The remains were torn apart, crushed, blown up" by heavy artillery fire before the Soviets arrived on the scene, he insists. He also believes "without doubt" that the Russians still possess Hitler's dental work. If so, that must be all that is left of the remains by now, no matter which theory is right.

—Reported by Barry Hillenbrand/London, Rhea Schoenthal/Bonn and Yuri Zarakhovich/Moscow



The first corpse, above, found in the bunker by the Soviets, was later dismissed as a possible Hitler double, but its existence added to the confusion