Zelle has written a curious book. At the most basic level, he asks whether Joseph Goebbels, Hermann Göring, Heinrich Himmler, and Albert Speer, men Zelle identifies as the most powerful individuals in the »Third Reich«, occasionally doubted Hitler and whether their public personae were, at least intermittently, facades behind which they hid their doubts and criticisms. In addition, he sets out to describe these men’s attempts to cut the bond to the charismatic Hitler and to imagine a Germany »after and without Hitler«. The author posits that his focus on doubts and scepticism opens a new explanatory window into their »bizarre and contradictory behaviours, misperceptions, and illusions« (p. 12).

To some extent, this is where the trouble begins: Goebbels and Göring might have had crises of confidence in Hitler or harbored doubts about one policy or another, but neither man took any action. So why study their beliefs in such detail if nothing came from them? What do we learn from this, aside from the fact that, for one reason or the other, they were able to set aside their doubts and to remain true to Hitler? The situation is slightly different when it comes to Himmler and Speer: both men took some actions at the very end of war. Whether these were a function of earlier doubts or rather of political and personal expediency is debatable. And if the topic is doubt, then where is Rudolf Hess?

Zelle approaches the four biographical sketches, which are preceded by a chapter on Hitler’s ideology, thematically; this wise choice suits the author well. Zelle mostly uses well-known sources: speeches, protocols, and, quite extensively, Goebbels’ diary, arguing that he brings new insights to them. Yet this approach risks reading evidence teleologically and overplaying it, a concern permeating this review. And to explain the men’s oscillating behaviours, Zelle’s last chapter brings social psychology into the mix, another interesting choice.

The biographical chapters are fluidly written and hold the reader’s interest. In the chapter on Goebbels, one sees in compressed form something well-known: Goebbel’s abiding love for and devotion to Hitler. Yet, Zelle also shows how Goebbels »adjusted« some of his beliefs to Hitler’s ideology. He argues that Goebbels needed a bit of persuasion to accept some of Hitler’s views and still retained some of his own, albeit in a modified form. And sometime Goebbels returned to his earlier viewpoints years later. The author sees Goebbels’ behaviour during the Sudeten Crisis as paradigmatic: Goebbels feared a war and discussed his fears as well as his doubts about Hitler in his diaries. However, Hitler always managed to calm Goebbels’ fears and re-persuaded him in private meetings that the Minister of Propaganda cherished. Consequently, Goebbels’ public persona remained intact. This general pattern remained stable.
in later situations as well – Goebbels had his occasional doubts and criticisms, wrote them down in his diaries oftentimes camouflaged as the opinions of others or as originating with the foreign press – but his personal connection to Hitler and thus his devotion remained intact until his and his family’s deaths.

The chapter on Göring follows a similar trajectory. Göring committed himself early and fully to Hitler. The relationship was defined by Göring’s obedience and obsequiousness even if he did not attempt to achieve full ideological congruence with Hitler. Indeed, Zelle argues that while seeing himself as Hitler’s most reliable follower and making possible Germany’s rearmament in the 1930s, Göring regarded Hitler’s great war policies as »ruinous« (verderblich). Yet, he kept these doubts private. Zelle identifies the Sudeten Crisis as the turning point in Göring’s relationship with Hitler; apparently, quite a few Nazi leaders experienced a personal crisis within the political one. Göring began to oscillate between contradictory behaviours: obedience on the one hand and an attempt to »find his own way« on the other hand. This conflict, in turn, led to absurd conduct and another pattern: Göring’s retreat into his private life filled with the looting of art, ever more gaudy uniforms, and addiction. Be that as it may, Göring kept doing his job. Reprimanded by Hitler on occasion for the failure of his air force, Göring, who allegedly did not believe in victory, seemingly made »working towards Hitler,« as Kershaw has famously put it, into an art form: military decisions were not geared towards potential success but towards Hitler’s real and anticipated wishes. In turn, Hitler did not withdraw his support from Göring. In that sense, they were two co-dependent peas in a pod.

Speer, too, was smitten by Hitler and quickly moved into his immediate circle, soon becoming Hitler’s architect and favored play-date. Speer experienced a relaxed and collegial Hitler who enjoyed spirited discussions about architecture. In short, they were friends. Speer embarked on his second Hitler sponsored career as Minister of Armament with knowledge and experiences from his first: he involved Hitler in many decisions, thus catering to Hitler’s self-image. Zelle focuses on Speer’s doubts, which Speer voiced carefully in conferences but did not pursue against Hitler. Zelle finds a more critical Speer in his various memoranda of 1944 and early 1945. Similarly, Zelle makes much of Speer’s role softening Hitler’s March 1945 Nero Order. Where Zelle sees Speer’s courage, this reader sees Speer using his good relationship with Hitler to moderate an order that did not make sense to a man who, while remaining attached to Hitler, had been working towards a reasonably smooth transition into the post-war period.

Himmler was an exception of sorts: he was more excited by Nazi ideology than by Hitler’s personality and Zelle is interested in sketching Himmler’s multifaceted interaction with Hitler. He sees doubts and scepticism everywhere but three areas interest the author in particular: Himmler’s contacts with the resistance; his alleged early understanding that the war was not to be won and the contacts he forged with the Western Allies; and his role in the Holocaust. To pick but one example: Zelle argues that Himmler’s anti-Semitism was less radical than Hitler’s but that he eventually followed Hitler’s lead. He then assembles evidence that Himmler found it difficult to exterminate all Jews, but saw it as his responsibility and a necessary sacrifice he had to make. The author even suggests that Himmler was affected by the
suffering of his victims. In particular, Zelle reads Himmler’s Poznan Speech that way, a dubious proposition that cannot be sustained by textual evidence. Something similar is true when it comes to his discussion of Himmler’s alleged awareness that the war could not be won and his attempts to make contact with representatives of the Western Allies. Zelle follows the teleological post-war crumbs Spitzy, Schellenberg and others leave. Rather than interrogating the sources, Zelle, in an effort to make his case and make it stick, tends to overplay their value or to interpret them very liberally. The argument seems to be driving the evidence.

In his chapter on social psychology, Zelle reiterates his observation that these men, after meeting Hitler and adopting his ideology, oscillated in their behaviour; in a sense, he sees them as seduced by authority and power. Their oscillating conduct becomes a function of their doubts, scepticism, and contradictory roles. Along the way, the author refutes statements that few, if any, professional historians have made recently, so, for example, that these men were »born perpetrators«. Yet something curious happens because of Zelle’s focus on their doubts and second thoughts: it removes these men from the many crimes they committed. At the end of the day, what is the measure of a (wo)man? It is not what we may or may not believe in private but what we do in public.

Reviewing the review, I realize its critical and nitpicky tone. My scepticism and doubts notwithstanding, Zelle’s book is an interesting read. And even if one ends up disagreeing with quite a few of its approaches and arguments, it provides ample food for thought.