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# Introduction

Do we need a new biography of the most notorious demagogue of the twentieth century? Joseph Goebbels was a man who lived most of his adult life in the full glare of publicity, much of it self-created. When, in 1926, he arrived to take charge of the Nazi Party in Berlin, he quickly became a controversial public figure, delighting in the title of 'super bandit' which was bestowed on him by his opponents. From 1932 until shortly before his death in 1945 Goebbels was seen regularly by German cinema audiences in newsreel film, and his speeches were heard by millions of radio listeners. After the Nazi accession to power in 1933 Goebbels and his growing family were frequently photographed for the German press. Internationally Goebbels was indissolubly linked with the mass hysteria of Nazi rallies, and with the persecution of the Jews. Well before the collapse of the 'Third Reich' in 1945, Goebbels' name and public image had become synonymous with the most paradoxical aspects of Nazism, its doctrine of racial superiority, its unconcealed aggression towards the outside world, and its huge popularity inside Germany. The uniquely shocking circumstances of Goebbels' death, and the decision he took with his wife Magda to kill themselves and all six of their children in Hitler's bunker as the Soviet forces closed in around them, have served only to heighten the repugnance he evokes.

The first biographical study of Goebbels was published in 1933 by a subordinate in his own Propaganda Ministry; others who worked under him between 1933 and 1945 have since produced other accounts of varying quality and reliability.<sup>1</sup> The émigré journalist Curt Riess wrote the first post-war biography of Goebbels in 1948, and he was followed in 1960 by Roger Manvell and Heinrich Fraenkel, who similarly drew extensively on the oral testimony of people who had known Goebbels.<sup>2</sup> The German historian Helmut Heiber, who later performed such valuable work in transcribing and publishing Goebbels' speeches, published a more scholarly biography of Goebbels in 1962.<sup>3</sup> Viktor Reimann's 1971 biography also used many of Goebbels' published works between 1925 and 1945 to explore his ideas in greater detail.<sup>4</sup> In the meantime ideas about Goebbels and images of him have become commonplace. There is hardly a book or documentary film about Hitler and the 'Third Reich' in which Goebbels does not make a cameo appearance. His distinctive appearance, and clichés related both to his diminutive stature and to his physical disability, are universally known. He is

one of those historical figures whom even reputable historians quote without providing a reference, as though statements or actions attributed to him are self-evidently accurate.<sup>5</sup>

Our knowledge of Goebbels has been substantially altered though by the rediscovery and publication of the diary he kept between 1923 and 1945. Fragments of these were published in English translation as early as 1948, and other small sections appeared at intervals after this.<sup>6</sup> It was not until the 1980s that much larger sections from the original handwritten and dictated diary entries were made accessible to scholars, and published.<sup>7</sup> A huge project, to transcribe, edit, and publish as much as possible of Goebbels' diary, was started then by the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich and the Federal German Archive; it was given extra impetus in the early 1990s by the release of microfilmed sections of the diary from the Russian State Archive in Moscow, and was completed only in 2006. A scholarly edition of 29 volumes, covering the period from October 1923 to April 1945, is now available.<sup>8</sup> Much new material has thus come to light only very recently, and it is clear that the image of Goebbels which has been disseminated since the 1930s, and is now deeply embedded in wider public consciousness, is in many respects seriously flawed. Numerous books and articles about Goebbels have been published at the same time as more and more of his diary has become available – notably the biography by Ralf Georg Reuth – but inevitably they have failed to keep pace with the new material.<sup>9</sup>

This extraordinary personal record does not stand in isolation. Goebbels was a prolific writer and journalist, and from 1925 onwards he published a stream of pamphlets, books, and articles.<sup>10</sup> Dozens of his speeches were transcribed and published before 1945, and others have been published since then.<sup>11</sup> We can now compare, literally day by day, what he was saying and writing in public, with the amazingly frank record of his personal and inner life.

When he started to write his diary, in October 1923, Goebbels was an unemployed ex-student, and lived almost as a recluse in his parents' house. He had unfulfilled literary and theatrical ambitions, and imagined himself as a cultural critic.<sup>12</sup> He had no interest or involvement in party politics, nor could he imagine any of the public roles he would assume in the future. His diary was first and foremost a record of his inner emotions, his relationship with his girlfriend Else Janke, and his relationship with the arts. This included his love of and involvement with music, something overlooked by all previous writers on Goebbels. Casting himself as the melodramatic personification of a larger cultural and spiritual crisis, Goebbels as a young diarist reflected upon his inner self in a way which, as a recent historian has noted, is typically only brought about by the sustained intervention of a therapist.<sup>13</sup> In later years, as Goebbels moved into public prominence, he used his diary also as a documentary record of larger events. The hugely successful publication of an edited section of his diary in 1934, and of an earlier account of the 'struggle for Berlin' which drew

heavily on his diary,<sup>14</sup> encouraged Goebbels to develop this side of his writing further, and, particularly in the war years, he spent hours every day dictating what he thought were events and details of historical note. With his close access to Hitler, and to the apparatus of the German state and the Nazi Party, as well as to international news media, he was uniquely well-informed. He never lost the habit of recording his emotions alongside public and political developments. Wherever he went, on business or pleasure – and Goebbels was an exceptionally active individual – he still found time to keep his diary. In over twenty years, the longest gap in his diary is of twelve days around Christmas 1938, when he was physically ill and at a psychological low point.

How far should we trust the diary of one of the great liars of history? Even as a young man, in his autobiographical fiction and in the written ‘memories’ of his youth, Goebbels made conscious efforts to mythologize his own life. In 1936 he concluded a lucrative deal with the Nazi Party publishing house Franz Eher for future publication of his diary, and this project was undoubtedly in his mind in the years after this. As Propaganda Minister of the ‘Third Reich’ after March 1933 Goebbels often displayed a brazen contempt for the truth which appalled contemporary observers and became the subject of jokes amongst the German public. His distortions and misrepresentations became one of the distinguishing features of Hitler’s Germany.

Ironically, Goebbels’ diary is remarkably trustworthy. We should bear in mind that the only section published in his lifetime was carefully edited, and that he intended to do the same with future publications which in fact never materialized. Goebbels actually took great care to record accurately places he went to, with times, and details of who was present. When cross-referenced with published and unpublished archival material, with newspapers and magazines from inside and outside Germany (both supportive of and hostile to the Nazis), with the mass of surviving photographs and films, and with the testimony of other witnesses, the accuracy of his diary as a factual record is invariably confirmed. It can indeed be used to highlight inaccuracies and vagueness in many other contemporary accounts, or in memoirs which were compiled years after the event. The diary contains many subjective expressions of Goebbels’ judgement on matters large and small, and on people and affairs he was involved with, and he is remarkably free with his criticisms of others, not just his opponents, but his Nazi colleagues, up to and including Hitler. He felt no compulsion to replicate in his diary the unqualified faith in ‘final victory’ which he publicly proclaimed up to the last days of the Second World War. Indeed, Goebbels’ apprehension about the possibility of war is apparent from 1935, and an underlying sense of pessimism is present from the moment Germany found itself in a wider conflict with Britain and France in September 1939. After the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 it is not difficult to detect in Goebbels’ diary, under the celebration of successes and the pride in German achievements, a growing sense of despair.

Goebbels also wrote with extraordinary candour about some of the most gruesome Nazi crimes, not least because he did not think of them as crimes, but as great or necessary achievements. It is difficult to imagine any future histories of the Holocaust which will not rely heavily, as the best recent treatments of this subject already do, on key passages from Goebbels' diary. One example, drawn from another area of Nazi racial and economic policy, serves to illustrate his alarming frankness. During the trial of surviving Nazi 'major war criminals' before the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg, the Assistant French Prosecutor introduced a document relating to a meeting between Goebbels and the then Minister for Justice, Otto Thierack, held in Berlin at 1.00 p.m. on 14 September 1942, to discuss the treatment of foreign labourers. The document presented this summary of part of their discussion:

Concerning the extermination of asocial elements, Doctor Goebbels is of the opinion that the following groups must be exterminated: All Jews and gypsies; Poles who have to serve 3 or 4 years penal servitude; Czechoslovakians and Germans who have been condemned to death or hard labor for life or placed in protective custody. The idea of extermination by work is best.<sup>15</sup>

One might expect that Goebbels, if he did refer to this meeting in his diary, might have been deliberately obscure about the proceedings. This is the relevant part of his diary record for that day:

Thierack wants to resolve the question of asocial elements by putting the habitual criminals with the longest penal sentences in punishment companies and packing them off to the East. There they will carry out work under the harshest conditions. Those who succumb to this work are no great loss. At any rate I advise him urgently not to judge simply mechanically and schematically by the length of the prison sentence, but to leave room for individual judgements here. There are many cases, in which very hard punishments must be pronounced, but where we are not however dealing with elements that are completely unusable for the life of the state. Thierack represents here a very ambitious, also a national socialist viewpoint. I think I will be able to work well with him.<sup>16</sup>

Goebbels' diary is clearly less detailed than the official minutes of the meeting. From the position of the passage above in a long entry we can confirm the time of the meeting in the middle of the day. Goebbels does not refer to the different racial or national groupings mentioned in the minutes, or to the differing scales of punishment suggested for them, but he does not conceal the topic of discussion – 'asocial elements' – or his callous endorsement of the idea of 'extermination

by work'. If on this occasion he suggested that the proposal for 'extermination' came from Thierack, rather than from him as the minutes of the meeting suggest, he was often – as we shall see – happy to identify himself as the proponent of the most shocking ideas.

Goebbels was of course selective in his diary. Frequently he referred to events and people in a terse and abbreviated form. Although he wrote in some detail about his personal relationships with his girlfriends before 1931, and after that about his relationship with his wife Magda, he was reticent about his extra-marital affairs. Although these have undoubtedly been exaggerated by almost all commentators, we know that in the mid-1930s he had a passionate and sustained affair with the actress Lida Baarova. There are only cryptic references to this in his diary. Although Goebbels recorded that he quarrelled frequently with his wife, he rarely indicates what the subject of these disputes were. Another lacuna is Hitler's relationship with Eva Braun, which Goebbels strangely did not mention until 1943.<sup>17</sup> Goebbels also did not report uncomplimentary views of himself, unless it was to mock them. He was an enormously self-assured man, and although as an adolescent and in early adulthood he experienced a prolonged period of existential uncertainty, he did not expose his own ideas to critical examination. This lack of self-reflection sets his diary as a literary creation entirely apart from that of someone like his near contemporary Victor Klemperer. Nonetheless, critically interpreted, it is a unique twentieth-century record of public events and a private life.

We know now, for example, that while Goebbels posed for the cameras during the huge propaganda spectacle of the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936, he was actually tortured by the discovery that his wife was having an affair with another man. We know similarly that while Goebbels publicly celebrated the 'union' with Austria in 1938 as a consummation of German national destiny, he privately despised most Austrians, and particularly the Viennese. Although these examples suggest that Goebbels was able and willing to manipulate a public image as he deemed necessary, the fuller knowledge which we now possess confirms that he was not the pure opportunist stereotyped in the academic and popular literature on Nazi Germany, but a man of deeply held convictions. After years of preoccupation with structural factors, historians of Nazi Germany have arrived at a recognition of the importance of individual agency and of ideology. Belatedly, some are beginning to realize that leading ideologists, like Goebbels – and Hitler himself – may have meant what they said and wrote. The fact that so many of their ideas may be fantastic and morally repellent does not absolve the historian from the obligation to try to understand them, and the contexts in which they arose.

The diary compels us also to reassess Goebbels' wider role and significance in the history of Nazism and the 'Third Reich', above all his relationship with

Hitler. Indeed, they provide so much intimate detail of the conversations between these two men that Ian Kershaw, writing before the full Goebbels' diaries were available, felt that they – in large part – justified a new biography of Hitler.<sup>18</sup> How much more do they justify a new biography of their author! It is clear now that Goebbels had a uniquely close relationship with Hitler, one based not only on their shared experience of what they called the *Kampfzeit* or 'time of struggle' in the later years of the Weimar Republic. On the personal level, both men competed for the affections of Magda Quandt in 1931, and when she decided to marry Goebbels, the union had Hitler's blessing. He retained a particular affection for her, and the strength of this triangular relationship played no small part in the decision of all three to kill themselves in 1945 rather than to face retribution at the hands of the Allies. Goebbels and Hitler also shared a pathological hatred of the Jews, and their shared discussions of this subject on almost every occasion they met have a direct bearing on that most vexed and controversial issue, the decision to murder the Jews of Europe. Goebbels must now be placed much closer to the heart of this process than was previously thought.

Goebbels occupies a unique position in the larger history of Nazism. Alone amongst the circle of senior Nazis close to Hitler from the 1920s, Goebbels became more and more important both to Hitler and to the German public as the Second World War changed from a succession of German victories into a long attritional struggle, and ended in the trauma of invasion and defeat in 1945. Several of the 'old fighters' close to Hitler, like Röhm and Gregor Strasser, died (or were murdered) earlier; others, like Otto Strasser and later Rudolf Hess, left Germany. Some, like Göring, Rosenberg, and Ribbentrop, lost their influence and retreated into luxury or private fantasy. Heinrich Himmler is one other 'old fighter' who steadily extended his influence and power, but even after he was appointed Minister of the Interior in 1943 his activities were confined to specific areas, and he was relatively little known to the German public. Martin Bormann, a relative latecomer, also extended his power, but he was never more than a gatekeeper, and had little influence over decision making. In contrast, Goebbels, whose official responsibility from March 1933 as 'Minister for People's Enlightenment and Propaganda' suggests no more than a public relations brief, constantly sought to enlarge his role, and maintained the close contact with ordinary people which had been the hallmark of his style as a politician from 1924. He saw his own role as Propaganda Minister as one which extended into education, the media, and the arts. He meddled constantly with the operation of justice and the law inside Germany, and from 1939, across occupied Europe. Once the war started he saw himself as the guardian of morale on the German home front, and involved himself tirelessly with issues which Hitler neglected, such as the provision of housing, food rationing, the regulation of labour, and, increasingly, the whole complex of problems which arose from the British (and

later American) bombing of German cities. Hitler himself became increasingly distant from the German people, living in the isolation of his field headquarters in East Prussia, and appeared in public ever more infrequently. By 1943 Goebbels had difficulty even getting Hitler to agree to broadcast to the German people. In contrast, Goebbels stepped up his popular journalism, his broadcasting, and his public speaking. After 1943, as the aerial offensive against Germany intensified, he supervised the provision of relief for bombed cities, and made it a point of honour to visit them, and to speak in public, often in ruined buildings. He did not rely on the comfort of selected audiences and prepared venues, and was always willing to improvise speeches, in front of factory workers, or in the street or marketplace. He – and his wife Magda – were the recipients of a flood of letters from ordinary German people, on subjects large and small, complimentary and critical.

In December 1944, with his field headquarters in East Prussia threatened by Soviet troops, Hitler returned to Berlin. From then on, he saw more and more of Goebbels, and the two of them retreated further into their self-created world. The report prepared for Stalin in 1948 from interrogations of two of Hitler's closest adjutants, and only recently made accessible, is absolutely clear about this final period, stating: 'Hitler received him [Goebbels] daily and discussed every question with him for hours on end.' In a subsequent passage, the report continues: 'He [Goebbels] had enormous influence over Hitler, and in the last weeks of the war enjoyed his unlimited trust.'<sup>19</sup> At the very end, when all the other senior Nazis around Hitler fled, Goebbels alone chose suicide with him, and – again with his wife – took the decision to kill their children as well, all of them too young to have had any responsibility for the crimes their parents were implicated in.

Goebbels was not (and we shall see that this was a problem for him) one of Hitler's earliest supporters. He played no part in the early development of the Nazi Party in Munich before 1924. From shortly after his first involvement with the Party, in 1924, until his suicide in 1945, Goebbels was at the heart of its affairs. He probably knew more about domestic and international developments between 1933 and 1945 than anyone else in Germany. Thanks to his diary, we can now trace Goebbels' involvement in and his view of these developments, and see how they related to his personal life.

Most biographies follow a roughly chronological path, but separate areas of their subject's life for convenience. Frequently they look ahead and judge events in the light of later developments. This makes it easier to structure a narrative, but presents a false view. All men and women, and Goebbels was no exception, actually experience their lives as a continuously unfolding whole. They conduct their working lives at the same time as their personal and family relationships; they cannot choose when to experience illness or good health, and even politicians in positions of power find that they are all too frequently

at the mercy of events rather than in control of them. They can try to judge the potential effects of their actions, but they cannot be sure of them. The salient events in the rise of Nazism, the years of relative peace in Germany from 1933 to 1939, and the subsequent course of the Second World War, are so well known to us that it is difficult to avoid imposing elements of hindsight when constructing a narrative of events around Goebbels' life. I have tried nonetheless to follow, as far as possible, a strictly chronological path in this biography, blending what we can discern of his inner life, his relationships with literature, music, and nature, with women and male associates, with his outer life, from his schooldays, through a difficult and prolonged adolescence, to his emergence as a radical political speaker in 1924 and his subsequent engagement with the Nazi Party. Given the layers of mystification and deliberate deceit which have been embedded in the secondary literature on Goebbels from the 1920s onwards, I have sought at all times to base this account on reliable primary sources. Although reference is made to Goebbels' work as a propagandist, and to his involvement as Propaganda Minister with the control of the arts in Nazi Germany, these aspects of his working life are not my central focus.<sup>20</sup> Inevitably, given the vast range of domestic and international affairs with which Goebbels was involved, I have had to be selective, and readers will find specialist literatures on many of the separate incidents and themes touched upon here. Nor is this intended as a definitive study. Given the vast amounts of available material, published and unpublished, relating to Goebbels, it would be straightforwardly possible to conduct more detailed studies of any number of topics concerning him. Many aspects of his life will become clearer with future work.

Joseph Goebbels is presented here as a human being, albeit one who moved from provincial obscurity to public fame and notoriety. The reader will find here no attempt to 'rehabilitate' him, nor to relativize the nature or extent of his misdeeds. Goebbels was a man who preached hatred of his enemies, and took pleasure in dealing harshly with individuals who crossed him, whether, early in his career, in the rowdy milieu of a crowded and smoky meeting, in a street brawl, or later in his position as a government minister. He openly advocated the extermination of the Jews, and felt no shame or embarrassment in arguing that others should be literally worked to death. He tirelessly advocated the harshest punishments for those in occupied Europe who resisted Nazi authority, and for those German citizens who broke the law, often in seemingly trivial ways. A mordant sarcasm was the hallmark of his public speaking throughout his career. But Goebbels was also a devoted father, a lover of literature, poetry, music, and landscape. He was a very competent administrator, and a talented writer. Although we may be horrified by the content of his speeches, and by the ideas he propagated with such vigour, there is no doubt that he was one of the most gifted public speakers of the twentieth century. Until the last days of the war he

was – if by no means universally popular – one Nazi leader with whom many soldiers, workers, and housewives felt a genuine bond. By any standards his life was an extraordinary one. Now that we are in a position to dispel many of the myths and misunderstandings which surround Goebbels, it is time to try to understand him better. In doing so we may also gain new insights into the short-lived 'Third Reich'.

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