

Goebbels: A Biography

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NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY THE TELEGRAPH  From renowned German Holocaust historian Peter Longerich comes the definitive one-volume biography of Adolf Hitler's malevolent minister of propaganda.

In life, and in the grisly manner of his death, Joseph Goebbels was one of Adolf Hitler's most loyal acolytes. By the end, no one in the Berlin bunker was closer to the Führer than his devoted Reich minister for public enlightenment and propaganda. But how did this clubfooted son of a factory worker rise from obscurity to become Hitler's most trusted lieutenant and personally anointed successor?

In this ground-breaking biography, Peter Longerich sifts through the historical record—and thirty thousand pages of Goebbels's own diary entries—to provide the answer to that question. Longerich, the first historian to make use of the Goebbels diaries in a biographical work, engages and challenges the self-serving portrait the propaganda chief left behind. Spanning thirty years, the diaries paint a chilling picture of a man driven by a narcissistic desire for recognition who found the personal affirmation he craved within the virulently racist National Socialist movement. Delving into the mind of his subject, Longerich reveals how Goebbels's lifelong search for a charismatic father figure inexorably led him to Hitler, to whom he ascribed almost godlike powers.

This comprehensive biography documents Goebbels's ascent through the ranks of the Nazi Party, where he became a member of the Führer's inner circle and launched a brutal campaign of anti-Semitic propaganda. Though endowed with near-dictatorial control of the media—film, radio, press, and the fine arts—Longerich's Goebbels is a man dogged by insecurities and beset by bureaucratic infighting. He feuds with his bitter rivals Hermann Göring and Alfred Rosenberg, unsuccessfully advocates for a more radical line of "total war," and is thwarted in his attempt to pursue a separate peace with the Allies during the waning days of World War II. This book also reveals, as never before, Goebbels's twisted personal life—his mawkish sentimentality, manipulative nature, and voracious sexual appetite.

A harrowing look at the life of one of history's greatest monsters, Goebbels delivers fresh insight into how the Nazi message of hate was conceived, nurtured, and disseminated. This complete portrait of the man behind that message is sure to become a standard for historians and students of the Holocaust for decades to come.

Praise for Goebbels

"Peter Longerich . . . has delved into rarely accessed material from his subject's diaries, which span thirty years, to paint a remarkable portrait of the man who became one of Hitler's most trusted lieutenants."—The Daily Telegraph

Praise for Heinrich Himmler

"There have been several studies of this enigmatic man, but Peter Longerich's massive biography, grounded in exhaustive study of the primary sources, is now the standard work

and must stand alongside Ian Kershaw's Hitler, Ulrich Herbert's Best and Robert Gerwarth's Hitler's Hangman: The Life of Heydrich as one of the landmark Nazi biographies. As the author of a celebrated study of the Holocaust, Longerich is better able than his predecessors to situate Himmler within the vast machinery of genocide. And he brings to his task a gift for capturing those mannerisms that are the intimate markers of personality."-London Review of Books

"[An] excellent and comprehensive biography."-The New York Review of Books
Peter Longerich is professor of modern German history at Royal Holloway, University of London and founder of Royal Holloway's Holocaust Research Centre. He has published extensively on Nazi Germany, including the acclaimed Holocaust: The Nazi Persecution and Murder of the Jews, The Unwritten Order: Hitler's Role in the Final Solution, and Heinrich Himmler."I can't go on suffering like this. I need to write this bitterness out of my soul. Else is giving me a notebook for day-to-day use. So on October 17 I'm going to start my diary."¹ It was in 1923 that Goebbels came to this decision-a resolve he maintained consistently, right up to the last weeks of his life. The diary became his constant companion.

There were many reasons for the pain and bitterness from which Goebbels was suffering in the autumn of 1923. The plain facts are that at this juncture the almost twenty-seven-year-old Joseph Goebbels was an unsuccessful writer who had just been fired from a job he loathed in a Cologne bank and was now completely penniless, having retreated to his parents' home in Rheydt on the Lower Rhine. Else, a young schoolteacher, was his girlfriend. But the relationship was troubled, and after an argument the couple, overshadowed by money worries, had canceled a vacation on the Frisian island of Baltrum. Goebbels saw himself as a "wreck on a sandbank"; he felt "deadly sick." He had spent days in "wild desperation drinking."² The general political and economic situation added in no small measure to his depression.

His hometown of Rheydt was part of the territory west of the Rhine that had been occupied by British, Belgian, and French troops since the end of the Great War. Passive resistance to the French army, which since the beginning of the year had extended its occupation beyond the Rhine to the Ruhr, had just collapsed. Inflation had reached its absurd high point: Money earned in the morning was worthless by the evening. Extremist groups of the left and right were gearing up for civil war; separatists in the Rhineland were preparing to secede from the Reich. Rocked by a series of grave crises, the German Republic seemed on the verge of falling apart. "Politics are enough to make you laugh and cry," noted Goebbels.³

He had longed for the crisis as for a cleansing fever: "The dollar is climbing like an acrobat. I'm secretly delighted. We need chaos before things can get better."⁴ It was to help him cope with this state of personal and political tension that he turned to his diary. After a few months he set about writing a short biographical introduction to it, an outline of his life written in the summer of 1924, hastily thrown together and in part reduced to key words; he called it his "memory pages." This is the most important source of information we possess about Goebbels's early years.⁵ It was the same depressed mood in 1923-²⁴ that led him both to take up the diary and to give this short account of his life. In his despair, Goebbels

asked himself who he was, what made him the way he was, and what he wanted to achieve in life.

The Rheydt Years

He began his life story thus: "Born on October 29, 1897, in Rheydt, at that time an up-and-coming little industrial town on the Lower Rhine near Düsseldorf and not far from Cologne." We learn that his father, Fritz Goebbels, born in 1862, was a lowly clerk in a wick factory and that in 1892 he married Katharina Odenhausen, seven years younger than himself and employed at the time as a farmhand. Both came from humble circumstances, artisan families.⁶

The Goebbelses were good Catholics, as they say on the Lower Rhine. They had six children in all: Konrad (b. 1893), Hans (1895), Maria (who died at six months in 1896), Joseph (1897), Elisabeth (1901), and Maria (1910).⁷ In 1900 their father managed to acquire a "modest little house" in Dahleenerstrasse.⁸

Joseph's childhood was overshadowed by ill health. Later, as an adult, he recalled among others a protracted illness (inflammation of the lungs with "terrifying delirium"). "And I also remember a long family walk to Geistenbeck one Sunday. The next day on the sofa my old foot complaint returned. [. . .] Excruciating pain." There followed, Goebbels tells us, lengthy treatments and further investigations at the Bonn University Clinic, but "foot lame for life" was the inexorable verdict. The consequences were dire: "My youth from then on pretty blighted. One of the pivotal events of my childhood. I was thrown back on my own devices. Could no longer play with the others. Became solitary, a loner. Maybe for that reason the complete favorite at home. I was not popular with my comrades." Only one friend, Richard Flisges, stood by him.⁹

What Goebbels says about his illness suggests that his "foot complaint" was a case of neurogenic clubfoot, a deformity that is often particularly associated with a metabolic disorder in childhood. His right foot was turned inwards; it was shorter and thicker than his healthy left foot.¹⁰

Goebbels's account of his elementary education, which began in 1904, makes for equally sorry reading. He remembered a teacher called Hennes, "a lying hound." There was another, Hilgers, who was "a villain and a swine who mistreated us children and made our school life hell. [. . .] My mother once discovered the stripes from his cane across my back when she was bathing me." However, Goebbels did admit that his difficulties at school may have had something to do with his own attitude: "At the time I was so stubborn and independent-minded, a precocious lad the teachers couldn't stand."¹¹

In his last year at elementary school he underwent a largely unsuccessful operation on his foot: "When my mother was about to leave, I howled dreadfully. I still have terrible memories of the last half hour before the anesthetic and the trains rattling past the hospital during the night." But there was a positive side to his stay in the hospital: His godmother, Aunt Stina, brought him fairy-tale books, which he "absolutely devoured. My first fairy tales. There wasn't much storytelling at home. Those books awakened my first interest in reading. From then on I consumed everything in print, including newspapers, even politics, without

understanding a word." Immediately after his time in hospital, he left elementary school for the grammar school in Rheydt: Thanks to his father's intervention, he recalled, his academic record was considerably enhanced.¹² Although, according to his own estimation, Goebbels was "pretty lazy and lethargic" during his early years at grammar school, he gradually developed into an outstanding and extremely ambitious student, excelling particularly in religion, Greek, and history.¹³

At first sight, it does not seem hard to explain why he was so ambitious: He was trying to compensate for his physical deformity. Goebbels himself put forward this explanation in 1919 in a piece of autobiographical writing entitled *Michael Voormann's Early Years*, a dramatic literary version of his own childhood and youth that was clearly quite consciously modeled on a traditional German form, the novel of development.¹⁴ Michael was "a strange boy. You did not need to know him to see it when he opened his big, gray eyes wide and looked so questioningly at whoever was talking to him. There was something unusual in his gaze, a whole world of questions that no one suspected. You seldom saw him playing with other children." Michael was lazy at school. The teacher "hated him like sin," and his fellow pupils "were not fond of him." "He was so harsh and rude to them, and if anyone asked him to do them a favor, he just turned away with a laugh. Only one person loved him-his mother." Then Goebbels indulged in a description of his parents that made them out to belong to the lumpenproletariat: "She could neither read nor write, because before she married his father—a poor day laborer—she had been a farm girl. She had borne him seven sons, becoming pale and thin as a result. The fourth child was Michael. No one knew anything about his mother's family origins, not even their father." The text describes the father as "an upright, honest man with a highly developed sense of duty" who sometimes treated his mother "harshly and roughly" and from whom he had inherited a certain "tyrannical tendency."

At the age of ten, we are told, Michael suffered from a serious illness that left him with a lame right leg: "Michael was in despair most of the time; eventually he came to terms with it. However, it made him even more withdrawn, and he spent even less time with his comrades." He had now become "eager and industrious at school, for his ambition was to become a great man one day." He had been unpopular with his fellow pupils, and the gulf between them had made him "hard and bitter." It is clear that in the novel Goebbels was trying out an imaginary variation on his autobiography. Unlike Joseph Goebbels, son of a petit bourgeois, Michael Voormann is from the working class, and by excelling at school he tries to make up for the distance from his contemporaries, an isolation initially rooted in his sense of being different and then increased by his disability. Goebbels was testing out a dramatic version of his own life story: rising above the most humble origins, crippled, disdained, solitary, but at the same time highly talented, determined, and successful, even if embittered, cold, and consumed with ambition. In this telling, his later development into a genius is taken for granted. The differences between this and the memoir he composed in his "memory pages" five years later are obvious: Although he certainly describes his disability as the most important factor in his bleak childhood, he no longer wants to represent it as the real force driving him on to higher things. In subsequent literary treatments of his life story, his disability is as inconspicuous as it is in the diary, where it is rarely mentioned, although in fact he needed an orthopedic appliance to help him walk.

and medical complications frequently recurred.¹⁵ Can Michael therefore be seen as an authentic account of his life? Is this a rare and valuable autobiographical document in which Goebbels for once shows himself capable of honest soul-searching? Is he attempting in Michael to break out from his denial of a disability that has become a permanent front to the world and honestly face up to his deformity and its consequences?

His physical disability may well have intensified his adult conviction of a call to higher things, his compulsion as a boy to escape the narrow confines of his childhood milieu by excelling at schoolwork, and his self-imposed isolation. But there are other reasons for his narcissistic streak, his highly developed craving for recognition and affirmation by others.

Psychoanalysts today see the origins of narcissistic personality disorders in psychological maladjustments that occur between the second and third years of life. They refer to a failure to develop autonomy: The child is not capable of detaching itself from a solicitous and domineering mother, and its own personality fails to develop fully. The possible reasons for this failure are manifold: temporary neglect by the mother, for example, or an upbringing where the rules are inconsistently applied, sending mixed messages to the child, overprotectiveness on the one hand and excessive discipline on the other. It is easy to imagine these conditions prevailing in a large and financially hard-pressed family like the Goebbelses. While it is of course impossible to reconstruct the young Joseph's upbringing, it is reasonable to note that there are convincing explanations for his undeniable narcissistic traits.

Joseph Goebbels can serve as a textbook example of failed autonomy. A narcissist like Goebbels constantly looks for a source of recognition in order to strengthen his own identity, which he perceives as inadequate. In particular he seeks a life partner totally dedicated to himself, from whom he expects to receive—as he did from his solicitous mother—recognition and affirmation. Narcissists find it difficult to distinguish themselves from those who provide them with recognition; their personality sometimes seems to merge with that of another person. In this light, Goebbels's attempt in Michael Voormann to construct a variant of his own development is a typical expression of uncertainty about his own identity. In the novel he plays a game of experimenting with his own biography; it is not self-revelation.

Narcissists like Goebbels generally have difficulty in distinguishing between daydreams and the real world, appearance and reality, success and fantasies of success. Their relationship to the world around them is somewhat underdeveloped, their sense of self not securely anchored. They live in a self-referential way, tending toward feelings of superiority and delusions of grandeur. But because of their weak egos, they are often haunted by fear of loss and separation; they can easily experience the absence of success as failure, and for this reason they are inclined to suffer from depression.¹⁶ Therefore, Goebbels did not develop his narcissism as compensation for his disability. Thanks to the tendency to overestimate himself and to distort reality that he had acquired in infancy, to a great extent he was actually capable of ignoring his deformity. His sense of self-worth relegated it to a subordinate role.

Reading the "memory pages," it is also apparent that Goebbels did not in any way regard himself in high school as a student isolated by his disability and the ambition it induced in him. On the contrary, he remembered a series of good friends from school, friends who would continually cross his path in later life.¹⁷ According to his memoir, it was the awakening of sexuality and the erotic in him that was foremost in the adolescent's mind and constantly got him into trouble. He wrote that it was the stepmother of a friend who first aroused his "urges toward women": "Eros awakes. Well-informed in a crude way even as a boy." He remembered being in love with a girl for the first time sometime between 1912 and 1914: "Sentimental period. Flowery letters. Poems. Along with love for mature women." There was an embarrassing outcome when love letters Goebbels had written under an assumed name to the object of his desire were traced back to him. It was this episode that made his favorite teacher, Herr Voss-whom he credited with great influence on him throughout his schooldays-refuse to support his application for a competitive scholarship offered by the town. In Michael Voormann Goebbels inflates this incident into a minor case of martyrdom.¹⁸

The summer of 1914 had a powerful impact on the sixteen-year-old: "Outbreak of war. Mobilization. Everyone called to the colors. Pain of not being able to go with them. [. . .] The first of my comrades to be wounded. [. . .] Gradually lots of comrades gone. [. . .] Class beginning to empty."¹⁹ Via the army postal service, he kept in touch with his schoolmates, who were now on active duty.²⁰ In December 1915 his sister Elisabeth died of tuberculosis; some years later, his father would remind him how after she died the family gathered around her deathbed seeking solace in prayer.²¹

A few of Goebbels's school essays that have survived strike the requisite "patriotic" note, something he later found "tedious."²² Apart from his German teacher, Herr Voss, he was clearly very taken with the history master, Gerhard Bartels, who taught him in his first years at the grammar school. Bartels's ea...

Other Books

The Goebbels Diaries, 1942-43.

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