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The Devil in the Details

Goebbels: Mastermind of the Third Reich by David Irving. Focal Point, 722 pp., £25.00

Gordon A. Craig

In writing the history of National Socialism, there is no better way of attracting attention than flying in the face of received opinion. Thirty-five years ago, A. J. P. Taylor demonstrated this in a book on the origins of the Second World War in which he argued that there was nothing extraordinary about Adolf Hitler as a statesman, that his diplomatic methods had differed in no significant respect from those of other European leaders, and that his programmatic statements about foreign policy, in *Mein Kampf* and elsewhere, were of no particular importance.¹

That caused a great roiling of the waters, but it was nothing compared to the pronouncements of David Irving, who has over the years been challenging historians of the Nazi period with claims that Adolf Hitler had not authorized the killing of the Jews, offering to pay a thousand pounds to anyone who can produce a signed piece of paper that would prove the opposite. He has also argued that the Holocaust never took place, being a Polish invention, and that Auschwitz was a labor camp with an unfortunately high death rate but nothing remotely resembling gas ovens. Such obtuse and quickly discredited views, which Irving repeats with relish at public meetings as well as in his publications, have proven to be offensive to large numbers of people, and expressions of indignation persuaded St. Martin's Press in New York, which had agreed to publish Irving's new life of Joseph Goebbels, to withdraw from its contract.² To this decision, a number of people who should know better have reacted with praise and have indeed suggested that Irving deserves further treatment of this kind.

Silencing Mr. Irving would be a high price to pay for freedom from the annoyance that he causes us. The fact is that he knows more about National Socialism than most professional scholars in his field, and students of the years 1933-1945 owe more than they are always willing to admit to his energy as a researcher and to the scope and vigor of his publications. His first book, *The Destruction of Dresden*, was not always scrupulously balanced in its judgments, but there is no doubt that it encouraged historians to take a more critical look at Allied bombing in the last stages of World War II and supplied important data to support such investigation. Similarly, his book *Hitler's War*—despite its attempts to protect Hitler from any responsibility for the Holocaust and its implied argument that the Führer might well have won the war if his generals had only been intelligent enough to appreciate and exploit his military genius—remains the best study we have of the German side of

the Second World War and, as such, indispensable for all students of that conflict. Similarly, his discovery, after a long search in the National Archives in Washington, of the diaries of Professor Theo Morell, who served as Hitler's private doctor from 1941 to 1945, provided useful information for the not inconsiderable number of people who have interested themselves in Hitler's physical ailments and their possible effect upon his policies,³ and he has been generous in making his private files, which include other unpublished findings, available to other scholars.

It is always difficult for the non-historian to remember that there is nothing absolute about historical

tion on the part of its readers, not even to the extent of persuading them that his subtitle is an accurate estimate of its subject's position in the Nazi hierarchy. It is clear enough as we watch Goebbels as propaganda minister trying to riddle out Hitler's intentions (and sometimes, as on the eve of the Night of the Long Knives on June 30, 1934, getting them hopelessly wrong) that the Führer was the *fons et origo* of all inspiration and authority in the Third Reich. But Goebbels was the instrument through whom his decisions were communicated and explained and justified to the Germans and to other peoples within the reach of his broadcasts; and Irving's book adds significantly to our knowledge of how he went about doing this.

of his own profound misgivings about Hitler's brinkmanship only after the Munich agreement has removed the threat of war...

Even so, what Irving has dredged out of the diaries is revealing, not least of all about the character of their author. The devil, after all, is in the details.

1.

Joseph Goebbels was born in 1897 in Rheydt, an industrial town in the Rhineland, the son of an ardent Catholic who worked as a clerk in a local factory. At an early age, he contracted osteomyelitis, which left him with a lame right leg that developed into a club foot. Isolated from his contemporaries because of this, he gave himself over to omnivorous reading, was encouraged by his father to go to the University of Berlin, and won his doctor's degree in 1921. The country was still traumatized by military defeat and economic collapse and offered few opportunities to a provincial intellectual with no practical skills. The young Dr. Goebbels was soon a violent anti-Semite, convinced that the Jews were responsible for his own problems and for all the personal tragedies of the *Inflationszeit*, and to express this belief, which became the strongest passion in his life, he turned to right-wing politics.

By 1924, he was calling attention to himself by his rabid speeches at gatherings of *völkisch* groups, and in 1925 he met Adolf Hitler and found in him a kindred spirit and a leader, writing, "This man has everything it takes to be a king. The born tribune of the people... the coming dictator." Hitler was struck by the young man's talents and by his loyalty, an important quality in the still unresolved struggle for leadership in his movement. He kept his eye on Goebbels and, in 1926, seeking to give new momentum to a Nazi party that was having no impact in working-class politics in the national capital, he made him Gauleiter of Berlin.

Goebbels retained this post until the end of his life, and his pride in it was apparently shared by his wife. Irving tells us that, in the last days in the Bunker, when Hitler offered to have his pilot, Hans Baur, fly her to safety in Obersalzberg, she answered, "Mein Führer, my husband is gauleiter of Berlin. Life without my husband would have no purpose for me..." As for Goebbels himself, he had every reason to take satisfaction in the turnaround he effected in "Red Berlin," by ending the feuding between the Nazi Party and its local SA unit and then carrying the fight to the Communists in provocative marches into working-class districts and pitched battles in the streets, simultaneously waging a vicious anti-Semitic campaign against the city government. His constant adulation of Hitler in his paper *Der Angriff* had an important part in building up the Hitler myth at a time when the republican parties were disintegrating. Recognizing this, Hitler in April 1930 asked him to coordinate Nazi propaganda all over the country during the crucial battles that lay ahead.

In his spirited account of how Goebbels rose to this challenge, Irving not only credits him with having per-



truth. What we consider as such is only an estimation, based upon what the best available evidence tells us. It must constantly be tested against new information and new interpretations that appear, however implausible they may be, or it will lose its vitality and degenerate into dogma or shibboleth. Such people as David Irving, then, have an indispensable part in the historical enterprise, and we dare not disregard their views. Recently, when Christopher Hitchens talked with Raul Hilberg, author of the classic text *The Destruction of the European Jews*, he found him unambiguous on this point. "If these people want to speak," Hilberg said, "let them. It only leads those of us who do research to re-examine what we might have considered as obvious. And that's useful for us. I have quoted Eichmann references that come from a neo-Nazi publishing house. I am not for taboos and I am not for repression."

David Irving's biography of Goebbels will not induce much reexamina-

As a biography, it has its deficiencies and is far less satisfactory, for example, than that of Ralf Georg Reuth which was reviewed in these pages two years ago.⁴ Irving claims that his book is the first to be based on a thorough knowledge of all of its subject's diaries, which are now in print, but in attempting to demonstrate this he stays too close to their text to be able always to elaborate usefully on the events described. What seems to be an attempt to leave nothing out makes some pages so crowded that they are virtually incomprehensible, and Irving's own exasperation about this sometimes finds curious expression. Discussing Goebbels's diary for 1938, he writes:

Probably [Goebbels] no longer knows why he is writing a diary. Few diarists do. It would take a psychiatrist to explain the narcissistic self-pity, the recurring proclamations of dire physical exhaustion, and the broad hints at Magda's infidelities (which were clearly not intended for publication in this form). The text is often stupefyingly banal, and he no longer reveals all to the diary that was once his "dear therapeutic conscience." Thus the new 1938 volume... tells

¹See my article, "The True Believer," *The New York Review*, March 24, 1994, pp. 7-13.

²David Irving, *The Secret Diaries of Hitler's Doctor* (Macmillan, 1983); and my article, "Hitler Without His Diaries," *The New York Review*, July 21, 1983, pp. 4-6.

³Christopher Hitchens, "Hitler's Ghost," *Vanity Fair*, June 1996, p. 74.

⁴A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1961).

²The edition under review was published in London under Irving's own imprint.

T. Kauf
+ Prof. Giffen has read and approved this manuscript
Myth's Craig!
21.2.97.

sueded Hitler in presidential elections of 1932 (by announcing that he would do so before he had made up his mind on the matter), but also with having undermined the Bruening government by a campaign whose unscrupulous ingenuity was unprecedented in German politics. He announced, for example, a "debate" in the *Sportspalast* between himself and the Reichskanzler, which turned out to consist of a recording of excerpts

from Bruening's speech, each answered by Goebbels with devastating interjections. In the six months that followed—the period of the Papen and Schleicher governments—he was Hitler's loyalest and most uncompromising supporter during the crisis in the party caused by the attempt by Gregor Strasser, one of the original organizers of the party, to make a deal with the government in return for a share of power. It was probably

Goebbels's success in persuading Hitler to ally himself with the Communists in the transport strike in Berlin in November 1932 that made the nationalists and the bankers decide to appoint Hitler chancellor rather than risk more violence of that nature.

It was not surprising, then, that as soon as Hitler had made himself the master of the coalition that brought him to power, he rewarded Goebbels by making him minister of popular

culture and propaganda with responsibility for press, radio, film, and theater. In what has been written about this aspect of his career perhaps too much attention has been paid to the amorous opportunities provided by his control of the films. Goebbels had remained a virgin until his mid-thirties and seemed bent upon making up for lost time. His relations with his wife, the former Magda Quandt, suffered from his affair with the Czech



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actress Lida Baarova and from the start of starlets who traipsed into his lodge at Lanke once Hitler, at Magda's behest, had forced him to terminate it. He also had romantic memories of his youth and of his early sweethearts and when one of them, Anka Stahlherm, had marital difficulties, he helped her out and later, during the war, when her husband was killed, had her appointed editor of the fashion magazine *Dame*. But there were limits to this kind of nostalgic generosity. When Anka wrote a piece about how, when they were young, the minister had given her a copy, lovingly inscribed, of the ballads of Heinrich Heine, he demoted her to staff writer.

2.

Irving is less interested in airing these affairs than he is in demonstrating how efficient Goebbels proved to be as minister. One hundred of his initial appointees had been awarded the party badge in gold before they joined his staff, and the verve of these tough young Nazis, guided by the bureaucratic skills of senior civil servants, enabled him within six months to "force everybody working in the field of German cultural endeavor to toe the party line—from journalism, writing, and publishing right across the spectrum to the opera, theater, and film." An imposing chamber of culture set about eliminating atonal, and "Jewish" and "Negro" music, as well as surrealist art and cubism and dadaism, and as early as November 1933 Goebbels declared "the old decadent, worm-eaten liberalism finished." It was only later that even he began to suspect that what was left was deadly dull, and young Germans began to cultivate American swing music as a form of protest.

Irving makes it clear that Goebbels had a natural affinity for radio. He recognized from the beginning its key importance to any effort to present cultural information to a broad public, and he urged German industry to see that radio sets were cheap enough to be affordable for every family. Irving writes:

Broadcasting prospered in Nazi Germany as in no other European country at that time. From four million listeners in 1933 the figure would soar to twenty-nine million in 1934 and ninety-seven million in 1939.

Once the technical capacity to reach large audiences was assured, rigorous control of news broadcasts, elimination of opportunities for public dissent, dramatization of the airing of policy statements or state victories, and compulsory listening to Hitler's speeches assured a degree of control over public opinion that was impossible in the democratic lands of the West. Goebbels proved to be ingenious also in influencing foreign opinion, and during the war against France in 1940 he was as fertile in dirty tricks as he had been during the campaign that brought Bruening down. To spread alarm and despondency among the French, his broadcasters reported rumors that the Reynaud government was fleeing from Paris, urged all French patriots to withdraw their savings before the Nazis confiscated the banks, gave advice about how to avoid a non-existent cholera epidemic,

spread rumors of peace talks and then claimed that the British had torpedoed them. Goebbels's radio programs also quoted the forged diary of a British soldier describing his sexual exploits with French wives, advised the hoarding of food, and described imaginary Nazi atrocities in ways likely to encourage flight and clog French roads. In his diary, Goebbels wrote, "Magnificent! Keep tipping oil onto the flames."

In 1940 Goebbels created a new national weekly magazine called *Das Reich*, which was designed for the critical intelligentsia and for people who developed deep-lying doubts about the future that could not be alleviated by radio propaganda. Irving tells us that Goebbels contributed

a regular leading article which would come to be quoted around the world as a real sensor of Nazi policies. Appearing every Saturday... *Das Reich* became the flagship of his journalistic career. It was well designed, its prose was literate, its photographs superb. It was particularly popular with the officer corps. Its circulation hov-



Goebbels and friend, circa 1939-1940

ered around a million—"a rare publishing success for which I was not entirely blameless," Goebbels wrote.

One of his most dedicated readers was Victor Klemperer, a converted Jew with a Protestant wife, who lived throughout the Nazi period in Dresden, in conditions of great deprivation and, intermittently, of deadly peril. A professor of languages and literature who had been driven from his university post by the Nazis, Klemperer was fascinated by what he called LTI (*Lingua terti imperii*), the characteristic literary forms and usages of the Nazi regime and, as the remarkable diary he kept during the Nazi period demonstrates, he collected typical formulations assiduously for a book on the subject, noting, for example, LTI's richness in euphemisms for official liquidation, like "wandered off," for "executed." Klemperer was impressed also by Goebbels's skill, in his editorials in *Das Reich*, in turning setbacks, if not into victories, then at least into new demonstrations of German courage and indomitability. As the war turned

"Victor Klemperer, *Ich will Zeugnis ablegen bis zum letzten: Tagebücher 1933-1941 und 1942-1945*, edited by Walter Nowojski and Hadwig Klemperer (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1995); *Tagebücher 1942-1945*, p. 335.

against Germany, the German front never broke, it merely became elastic; and Goebbels's readers were increasingly reminded that, while their antagonists were becoming war-weary, they were not, because they knew they were fighting not for material things but for their culture."

Such arguments lost effectiveness the longer the war lasted, and, indeed, it cannot be claimed that Goebbels had any great propaganda victories during its last years. On the other hand, he never made the mistake of being facile or optimistic. A natural sense of caution prevented him from claiming victories where none existed, as his hated rival Otto Dietrich, Hitler's press secretary, did on the eve of the collapse of the German lines at Stalingrad. Goebbels also knew intuitively what stories should be played down, so that Irving writes of the plot against Hitler's life on July 20, 1944, that

he ordered the putsch glossed over, like the Hess affair [i.e., Hess's flight to Scotland]. He released no word of the plotters' aims, let alone of the true scale of the conspiracy which had extended from the eastern front to Paris and Vienna. The traitors remained for Goebbels a "minuscule clique of reactionary officers."

Finally, in all of his allocutions to the German people, he remained close to the realities of the war, insisting that it could only be won by greater and greater sacrifices.

3.

Goebbels's youthful hatred of the Jews had remained undiminished over the years. When the Nazis came to power in 1933, he had expected that this would be celebrated by the wholesale elimination of the Jews from Berlin, and this continued to be his highest priority for the next decade. In June 1935, he overcame party opposition to secure the appointment of the brutal and immoral Count von Helldorff, a vicious anti-Semite, as police president of Berlin, telling him that together they would "clean up" the capital. In November 1938, after the shooting of a German diplomat in Paris by a seventeen-year-old student of Polish-Jewish origins, he had a major part in coordinating the outrages of *Kristallnacht*, not hesitating to exceed his authority by issuing orders to party officials and SA units throughout the country. In his diary he wrote:

A few gau officials get cold feet, but I keep pulling everybody together. We must not allow this cowardly murder to go unpunished. Let things run their course.

The difficulty was, Irving writes, "that neither the broad German public nor their Führer shared his satanic antisemitism." Irving does not spell this argument out to any useful degree. There were, as we shall see, some individual expressions of sympathy for the Jews during the war; and in 1941 Bernhard Lichtenberg, provost of St. Hedwig's Cathedral in Berlin, was arrested and sent to his death for proposing to read from the pulpit a protest against recent Nazi measures. But neither then nor earlier was there anything that

Klemperer, *Tagebücher 1942-1945*, p. 577.

xx Above: mine of the jazz folk music
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could be described as a public declaration of solidarity with the Jews. In his more recent, unpersuasive attempts in the past to exonerate him from any responsibility for the Holocaust make it difficult to give much credibility to his argument here. He would have us believe that Hitler did not want to have the Jews subjected to violence but did want them to be removed from Europe, either to Madagascar or more vaguely to "the east." This was all right with Goebbels, who knew, and sometimes admitted in the diary, that this would be tantamount to extermination. The only trouble, Irving writes, was that Hitler kept finding reasons for postponing this expulsion, until the war in the east began, and it somehow started by itself, apparently without anyone ordering it, and Jews began to die in places like Auschwitz, although not, Irving assures us once again, in gas chambers. Satisfactory explanations of the deaths of the Jews are hard to come by here, as in earlier books by Irving. A lot of information dribbles out but is difficult to fit together. Even such a forthright statement of responsibility for the Holocaust as Heinrich Himmler's Posen speech of October 1943 is mentioned by Irving only in passing and without any details being given. X

Until relatively late in the war, considerable numbers of Jews remained in Germany, in Berlin and Dresden and other cities, where they were employed in war and other essential industries. Not much has been written about what their lives were like, but Irving makes clear that they were subjected to constant harassment—forced to give up their personal property, denied the right to travel in autobuses or to be seated in trams, or to own or drive automobiles, or to buy tobacco, or to have telephones or radios. Nor could they use public libraries, visit museums, go to concerts, have their hair cut at a barber's, own pets, or, when rationing began, have the same rations as other Germans. The list of prohibitions was endless, and was continually added to by the Gestapo, which was mainly responsible for enforcing observance of these regulations. But Goebbels played his part too, and it was to him that the Jews owed one of the most demeaning of their burdens. In September 1941, he persuaded Hitler that it was necessary for public safety for Jews to wear a badge identifying them as such, and he then decided that it should be a yellow cloth star with the word Jude emblazoned across it.

In his diary Victor Klemperer wrote:
 The Jewish badge, in the form of a star of David, becomes legal on 19.9. At the same time, denial of the right to leave the city limits. Frau Kreidl senior was in tears, Frau Voss had a heart attack, Friedheim said that this was the worst blow up till now, worse than having to give up one's property. I myself feel crushed and cannot regain my composure. Eva [his wife], who can walk well again, wants to take over all my errands. I will leave the house only in the dark for a couple of minutes. (And what about when the snow and ice come? Perhaps by then the public will have become indif-

ferent, but *che so io?*)³

To the considerable surprise of both Goebbels and Klemperer, the measure proved to be unpopular. When he could persuade himself to return to the Dresden streets, Klemperer discovered that hundreds of ordinary Germans went out of their way to exchange greetings with him and that some of them seemed to regard the yellow star as an assurance that they could speak with him about their own discontents and anxieties without fear of punishment.

In Berlin, Goebbels learned that people traveling in public transport were offering their seats to Jews. This evidence of sentimentality infuriated him, and to answer it he wrote a blistering article in *Das Reich* that was widely disseminated. It was entitled "The Jews Are to Blame," and argued that "the Jews wanted this war and now they have it," and that the yellow star was a "hygienic prophylactic" against insidious and relentless enemies. He would have taken more violent action, Irving argues, had Hitler not continued to restrain him. "Goebbels was powered by the unflickering light of an unwavering, in-eradicable antisemitism"; but Hitler, Irving claims, told Hans Lammers, his secretary, "that he wanted the solution of the Jewish problem postponed until after the war was over—a ruling that remarkably few historians now seem disposed to quote." Readers who would like some hard evidence of any such "ruling" will be disappointed by Irving's footnote, where he says mysteriously,

Schlegelberger's undated (but spring 1942) minute on Lammers' reference to Hitler's ruling is in BA file R.22/52; although listed in their Staff Evidence Analysis sheet, this page was removed by American officials at Nuremberg from the exhibit cited above.

4.

Despite his enthusiastic enjoyment of the fruits of capitalism—he took an almost visceral pleasure in the latest model Mercedes-Benz automobiles with which the manufacturers were careful to keep him supplied—Joseph Goebbels's national socialism was almost as deep-seated as his anti-Semitism. He was still at heart the revolutionary who had in the *Kampfzeit* admired the fighting spirit of the SA thugs in Berlin and suspected Hitler's Munich allies of wishing to convert him to conservative ways. There was nothing doctrinal about his philosophy. He was less interested in the nationalization of banks and factories than he was in the creation of a new nation in which all Germans were galvanized by a revolutionary energy that would be invincible.

He was convinced that only such a spirit could sustain the nation in its time of greatest challenge and, after the first easy victories in the war, he began to argue that Stalin and Churchill (for whom, against his will, he developed a grudging admiration) were getting more out of their peoples than Hitler was. He wrote in *Das Reich* in February 1941 about total

³Klemperer, *Tagebücher 1933-1941*, p. 663.

war and what it might mean, and six months later, in his diary, he wrote, "The German people has a right to a socialist war." No one in the party paid much attention to this until after the defeat at Stalingrad, but in December 1942 Goebbels called Hitler's attention to Great Britain's compulsory labor service for women, and said that there was no reason why German women without families and under the age of fifty should not be working, regardless of class, and that school-age boys and girls might be useful in the anti-aircraft service. Irving says that Hitler had complex biological objections to this, that Martin Bormann sneered that Goebbels was merely trying to get at the upper ten thousand who lived as if there were no war, and that Goering and manpower boss Fritz Sauckel assured Hitler that crisis measures were not necessary.

Goebbels continued his fight for complete mobilization, arguing that "the radical and most total war is the shortest," and in February 1943, in what Irving describes as an attempt to confront Hitler with a *fait accompli*, he made a remarkable speech on total war in the *Sportpalast* in Berlin, driving 15,000 people to a frenzy of enthusiasm by asking them, "Do you want total war? Do you want a war more total, if need be, and more radical than we can even begin to conceive of today?" It was, as Irving makes clear in his careful analysis of the speech and its propagation, the most eloquent speech of his career, but it was not followed up. Although Goebbels drafted new mobilization plans that were intended to comb out impressive numbers of people for war service, Hitler handed these over to committees of people who were not sympathetic with them or him. For the fact was that Goebbels was not much liked at Hitler's court.

It was not therefore until after the attempt on Hitler's life on July 20, 1944, that he got his chance. His role in foiling the conspiracy had been crucial, as Irving shows in his excellent account, and he was now regarded as the man of the hour. At long last Hitler gave him the authority he needed to bring new revolutionary energy to the war effort, and Goebbels was soon writing in his diary, "The Twentieth of July was in fact not only the nadir of our war crisis, but Day One of our resurgence." But, of course, it was, too late, and the Russians were now well on their way to Berlin.

After Stalingrad, Goebbels had told his press attaché Moritz von Schirmeister that if worst came to worst he was going to kill himself and his whole family. He never seems to have wavered in that determination, and Irving ends his book with a harrowing description of how Magda and he killed their children and then committed suicide. Before his own death, Hitler had named a successor government, with Grand Admiral Dönitz as Reich president and commander-in-chief, and Goebbels as Reichskanzler, a position in which he had many distinguished predecessors, including Otto von Bismarck. His was a brief authority in a double sense. Irving writes laconically that his "dominion extended one mile from north to south, from the Weidendamm Bridge to Prinz-Albrecht-Straße, and rather less than that from east to west." □

X
 O. Goebbels
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