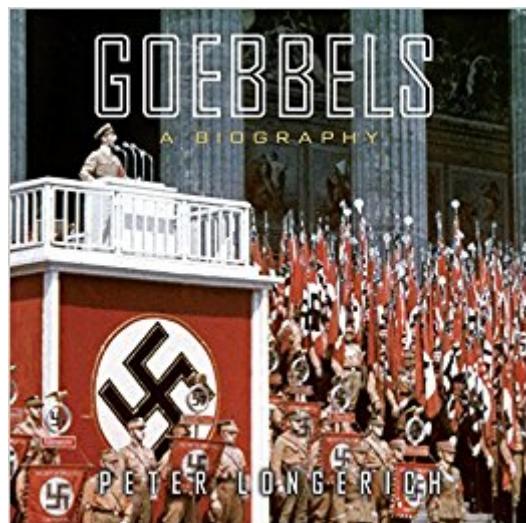


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Goebbels: A Biography



Synopsis

As a young man, Joseph Goebbels was a budding narcissist with a constant need of approval. Through political involvement, he found personal affirmation within the German National Socialist Party. In this comprehensive volume, Peter Longerich documents Goebbels' descent into anti-Semitism and ideology and ascent through the ranks of the Nazi party, where he became an integral member Hitler's inner circle and where he shaped a brutal campaign of Nazi propaganda. In life and in his grisly family suicide, Goebbels was one of Hitler's most loyal acolytes. Though powerful in the party and in wartime Germany, Longerich's Goebbels is a man dogged by insecurities and consumed by his fierce adherence to the Nazi cause. Longerich engages and challenges the careful self-portrait that Goebbels left behind in his diaries, and, as he delves deep into the mind of Hitler's master propagandist, Longerich discovers first-hand how the Nazi message was conceived. This complete portrait of the man behind the message is sure to become a standard for historians and students of the holocaust for years to come.

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Customer Reviews

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."  "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 • "Supremely enlightening. •The New York Times • "Admirably thorough and packed with facts . . . Students of World War II will likely find this the last word on its immediate subject. •Kirkus Reviews • "Splendid . . . Longerich gives [Himmler's biography] a depth and breadth it has previously lacked. •The Daily Telegraph • " "[An] epically gripping portrait. •The Independent --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

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Peter Longerich's biography of the late Nazi Minister of Enlightenment and Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, is thorough to the extreme. The 705 pages of the hardbound edition catalogue in extraordinary detail virtually every move, mood, machination, self-justification and perturbation to appear in Goebbels' voluminous diaries. This encyclopedic effort has its own rewards for the serious student of the Nazi regime, but it becomes overwhelming to the point of asphyxiation for the average reader, one hoping for both an overview and insight into the man and his motives. Longerich uses the multiple volumes of the Goebbels diaries (some elements of which evidently became only recently available) as the framework for his biography. In part, he employs this vehicle of necessity and in part to demonstrate the relentless narcissism of the protagonist: this is a recurring theme of the book and there is plenty of justification for the claim. Perhaps, rather than labeling Goebbels as a narcissist, a better classification tool for interpreting and understanding Goebbels' relentless pursuit of recognition by his idol and leader, Hitler, and his quest for public acknowledgement as the right hand man of the "savior" of Germany, would instead be Eric Hoffer's construct of the "true believer": this (in oversimplified terms) being a man who finds definition and fulfillment in an absolute and unwavering commitment to an all-consuming, entirely self-justifying cause (almost any will do: Nazism or Stalinist Communism are two that come to mind), the sole

criteria used being the opportunity to avail oneself of total, absolute, unswerving commitment to the Cause. Of note, the “cause” can (and oftentimes does) change as convenience and circumstances dictate. Indeed, Goebbels was initially a “socialist” (a term whose protean nature Goebbels frequently used to his advantage). He initially affected “shabby trench coats and proletarian leather jackets” and later on, failing to convince the Munich Party center of the desirability of affiliating in some way with Stalinist Russia and recognizing in Hitler the strong-willed, commanding and charismatic personality through whom he could obtain both redemption and direction, settled on the Nazi program as defined by the Leader as however circumstances required it to be defined. Not expressly noted by the author (but remarked on at length by other experts) was Hitler’s careful and deliberate policy of creating agencies and leaders with overlapping and sometimes conflicting mandates, this in order to prevent the emergence of potential countervailing centers of power and opposition. Evidently, none of this became evident at any time to Goebbels (nor, for that matter, to most of the Nazi leadership). Goebbels maintained fealty until the (literal) end-of-the-line, lead on by Hitler who, in contrast to his acolyte, seemed to have considerable psychological insight into the personality type and shrewdly manipulated it from the get-go (the “time of struggles” in the 1920s until the “seizure” of power in 1933) and maintained control all the way through the well-deserved Nazi Gauleiterämmerung of 1945. Despite Longerich’s assessment that there was no enduring political theme, agenda or consistent set of political maxims in the Goebbels oeuvre, there actually appears to have been a few: pragmatic adaptation to whatever expedients were required to further insinuate himself both with Hitler and to maneuver himself further into the leadership pantheon, this latter effort being one Goebbels continued to avidly pursue at the expense of his numerous “colleagues” and subordinates right up to almost the last minutes of the regime’s lifetime. His enduring quest for power, status and titles was almost matched by his sartorial affectations and intellectual vacuity, all of which are painstakingly demonstrated in his own diary entries and by objective data acquired by Longerich. Despite accruing many of his titular objectives, he demonstrates another consistent feature: he was a thoroughgoing dilettante. He frequently devoted himself to his new-found passion with near maniacal zeal, only to abandon his objective when the next gemstone was dangled by Hitler on the near horizon or when the Leader (oftentimes without consulting his putative “intimate advisor”) sprang a new program without warning on his

hapless follower. Other enduring themes prominent in the Goebbels psychiatric folder included his abiding nationalism, extreme anti-Semitism, “radicalism” and quest for “success at any price.” According to Longerich, much of this was rooted in Goebbels’ failed efforts to achieve status in literary society, various Freudian hang-ups (e.g., “Afraid of originated in his failure to develop independence at the ages of two and three; his dependence on his mother, the model for his future girlfriends and wife.”) Despite all of that, Longerich notes that “Afraid of he definitely experienced recognition and affection during his childhood and youth.” He had friends and love affairs, and, finally, in 1917, was free to choose the life he wanted to lead. Of course, he chose the life we now remember him for, for whatever reasons. The strength of this biography is its amazing thoroughness: this is also its main weakness. It is so comprehensive; it is such a vast catalogue of detail (some of which is minutiae); it seems as a result to tax the reader’s interest and dedication. In this respect, it is very much like Longerich’s biography of Himmler and, like that book may be compared both favorably and unfavorably to “lesser” biographies. In this case, Ralf Georg Reuth’s abbreviated biography is an easier read and conveys much of the essence of the man, his milieu and his psyche and, in the latter instance, to Peter Padfield’s Himmler biography. Some of the author’s “psychologizing” seems both facile and in need of documentation. Longerich is also somewhat dismissive of the effects of Goebbels propaganda, but seemingly he omits its major accomplishment: that is, determining the lens through which future generations would (to a greater or lesser extent), view the Nazi regime. In this respect, he succeeded brilliantly as much of the claptrap, ineptitude, incompetence, self-defeating military and occupation plans and the suffocating intellectual, artistic and cultural aridity of the program. All of that has been cleverly subsumed by its more superficial veneer, that of ruthless efficiency, military excellence and general competence (after all, the “trains ran on time.”). In summary, both of Longerich’s massive tomes (Himmler and Goebbels) are genuine monuments to diligent, comprehensive research scholarship and are landmark works of historical biography, but both are equally awesome in their complexity. They are worth reading, but are probably best approached after first digesting “popular” biographies of their subjects.

As other reviewers have noted, this is a very thorough biography of Joseph Goebbels. I especially appreciated the author's point that Goebbels was not a one-dimensional man. For example, while others were wildly optimistic following the invasion of the Soviet Union, Goebbels tried to lower expectations. There are other examples of this throughout the book. On the other hand, Goebbels was utterly devoted to Hitler to the end, very unrealistic. I knew that the leaders of the Third Reich competed with each other for power, but I did not know how much Goebbels hated Rosenberg and Ribbentrop. So why only four stars? There are several minor problems, such as page 545 "Up until 1940" (your middle school English teacher would tell you that "up" in this sentence is not needed). I didn't keep close track of these. Also, the translator used English idioms frequently. I don't speak German, so it may be that these idioms are exactly the same in German as they are in English. I only started to track these when I was already 3/4 through the book. Page 571 "suit to a tee

Drawn from a close review of his extensive diaries, this biography paints a chilling picture of a narcissistic yet brilliant propagandist who was psychologically dependent on Hitler in nearly every respect. I was particularly intrigued by the belief toward the end that a separate peace was achievable in either the west or east but Hitler refused to pursue these opportunities. Well researched and written.

I was conflicted about whether to give this book 3.5 or 5 stars, and finally opted for a four-star review. Please see my reasoning below. Reason for a five-star review: Longerich has written probably the most comprehensive biography to date of Joseph Goebbels. The author has conducted meticulous research, going through all of Goebbels' diaries and putting together a detailed accounting of the propaganda minister's thoughts and concerns. Two aspects of the biography I found most interesting were 1) Goebbels was not as close a confidante of Hitler's as history has led us to believe, and 2) much of his proximity to Hitler resulted from Hitler and Magda (Goebbels' wife) having a very close and possibly intimate relationship. Longerich's book brings Goebbels to life through the man's diaries, and is invaluable for anyone studying the propaganda minister and/or the political machinations within the Nazi party. Reason for a 3.5-star review: While Longerich's book is an excellent scholarly work, it is long and tedious if one is interested in a more leisurely historical read. I found myself skipping over entire chapter segments that went into details about gauleiter gatherings or other such topics. While in no way should this be viewed as a detraction of the book, I do want to warn the readers ahead of time so they are aware.

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