

Goebbels: A Biography

By Peter Longerich

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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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Editorial Review

Review
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***

“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***

About the Author
Coming soon...

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“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 Dahlenerstrasse.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 early death was marked by a memorial publication to which Goebbels contributed. He praised above all Bartels’s dedicated teaching and especially his tales of heroes, which brought home patriotic ideals to his pupils.23 Goebbels took his Abitur (Baccalaureate) examination in 1917, and as the top student in his class he gave the customary speech at the formal leaving-certificate award ceremony. Naturally, this speech too was full of patriotic sentiments: “The land of poets and thinkers must now prove that it is more than that, that it has a valid claim to lead the world politically and intellectually.”24

Initially he wanted to study medicine, but his German teacher, Herr Voss, dissuaded him. “So: German and history. It doesn’t matter which.” But regardless of the choice of subject, what did matter was that he should go to university, not least because by doing so he would avoid civilian service (from 1916 on, all men over seventeen were required to perform “auxiliary service for the Fatherland”). During his last years at school, he acquired a girlfriend, Lene Krage from Rheindalen: “First kiss in Gartenstrasse. [.?.?.] Wonderful boyhood bliss. Naturally get married. A matter of honor.” With his Abitur came a “leave-taking from Lene,” which he considered temporary: “Shut in the Kaiserpark at night. I kiss her breast for the first time. For the first time, she becomes the loving woman.”25

All in all, one can say that in his childhood and youth he was by no means deprived of the recognition he so eagerly sought: He had successfully completed his education, finishing at the top of his class, in fact; in spite of his family’s straitened circumstances, he was able to choose his subject of study freely; he had friends; and he even had a girlfriend.

A None-Too-Zealous Student

With two friends from school, Goebbels set off to study at the University of Bonn at the beginning of April 1927.26 His situation was far from favorable: “Money worries. Often hungry. Private lessons for ill-mannered youths.” He recorded in his “memory pages” that the university made little impression on him. He seems to have spent less time there than in the Catholic student fraternity, Unitas Sigfridia, which he joined as soon as he arrived in Bonn. He became the Leibbursche (“buddy”) of his new acquaintance Karl Heinz (“Pille”) Kölsch, whom he proclaimed his “ideal.”27 In the Sigfridia he adopted the name Ulex (after a character in a novel by Wilhelm Raabe, his favorite author). At the society’s gala evening in June 1917 he made his mark with a talk about the writer, whom he had admired ever since he was a schoolboy. Goebbels recommended Raabe as a model to his fellow students as someone “who fought for his ideals, fought for his worldview.”28 Fraternity members spent many such convivial evenings together, in taverns and at celebrations and bowling parties. Group excursions took place on the weekends. Student social life suffered from wartime conditions, however. The number of active members had dwindled to five, and there were complaints in the fraternity magazine about the constantly declining quality of the beer. The coffers were empty, although Goebbels, promoted to secretary of Unitas, had no hesitation in writing to comrades on active service to beg for contributions.29

During the university vacation, Goebbels was temporarily enlisted to undertake office work for the Fatherland Auxiliary Service, but he soon managed to free himself from this obligation.30 A shortage of

funds forced him to return to Rheydt. Lene was waiting for him there: “A night in Rheindahlen with her on the sofa. Stayed chaste. I feel myself to be a man.” He could not escape his financial woes: “Unpaid bills from Bonn. Argument at home. Father helping out. Intellectual experience at Bonn practically nil.”31 In the end he succeeded in raising some funds. The Catholic Albertus Magnus Society of Cologne agreed to support his studies, eventually loaning him a total of 960 Reichsmarks.32

During this time in Rheydt he wrote two novellas: Bin ein fahrender Schüler, ein wüster Gesell .?.?. (I am a wandering scholar, a wild fellow .?.?.)[1] and Die die Sonne lieben (Those who love the sun). In 1924 he called these efforts “bombastic and sentimental. Almost unbearable.” This verdict was shared by the Kölnische Zeitung, which declined to publish them.33 However, Bin ein fahrender Schüler, like Michael Voormann written in 1919, provides an interesting insight into Goebbels’s self-image. The hero is called Karl Heinz Ellip (the nickname of his friend “Pille,” to whom he dedicated the novella, spelled backward) but has adopted the name Ulex: Ellip explains that he chose the name because his model was the hero of Raabe’s novel, “a true German idealist [.?.?.] deep, a dreamer, as we Germans are.” Ellip/Ulex is “a tall strong lad” characterized by a “sunny, cheerful disposition.” The only child of a North German landowner, he is studying (out of pure interest) German and history in Bonn, among other places. Ellip is called back to the family home, Elpenhof, where the mother he loves more than anything in the world is on her deathbed. Profoundly shaken by her final throes of agony, he suffers a fatal heart attack the same night that she dies. He is buried next to her.

Goebbels began his second semester in Bonn in October 1917, sharing a room with Kölsch.34 His relationship with Lene began to cool, as he was warming to Kölsch’s sister Agnes. In the Kölsch parental home, to which he was now quite often invited, he got to know another sister, Liesel. General erotic confusion: “Liesel loves me, I love Agnes. [She] is playing with me.” The affair became more complicated in the course of the semester when a classmate, Hassan, also fell in love with Agnes. Hassan had what was known as “hassle-free lodgings”: “Agnes in Bonn. A night with her in Hassan’s room. I kiss her breast. For the first time she is really good to me. Had left the door open. Lied afterward.” Soon there was a rerun with Liesel: “Liesel in Bonn. A night with her in Hassan’s room. I spare her. She is really good to me. A good deed that gives me a kind of satisfaction.”35

“Spent hardly any time at university” was his comment on his academic progress in this semester. “Torment and agitation. Time of ferment. I seek and find nothing.”36 Nonetheless, he signed up in both semesters at Bonn for a whole series of classes on history and German studies, including a lecture on Heinrich Heine which he is known to have attended. He also signed up for courses on art history, psychology, and folklore as well as a lecture on “Venereal diseases, their causes and prevention.”37 After the second semester Goebbels and Kölsch decided to continue their studies elsewhere. Moving around from one university to another was quite normal at the time. Their Unitas comrades were sorry to see them leave: They had done so much to breathe new life into the society with their active and spirited participation.38

Goebbels spent his third semester in Freiburg, where he was greeted by Pille Kölsch, who had gone on ahead and was very eager to introduce him to an acquaintance, Anka Stahlherm. “And how deeply and completely I got to know you, Anka Stahlherm!” noted Goebbels in his “memory pages.”39 Goebbels fell in love with Anka, who was three years older than himself40 and from a solid bourgeois background. He spent the next few weeks trying to lure her away from his friend.

At Whitsun he went to Lake Constance with Kölsch and two other friends. Anka joined them later. They took several sightseeing trips; Goebbels became jealous of Kölsch, and the feeling grew ever stronger. Back in Freiburg, he recorded various friendly signals from Anka: “Gradual break between Anka and Kölsch. But greater attachment to me.” They now met more often alone; he got closer and closer to his goal: “I kiss her

[.?.?.]. Fulfillment without end." His feelings for Anka inevitably led to tensions between him and Kölsch; in the end Goebbels moved out of their shared accommodation. When Anka's brother Willy visited her, Anka did not invite Goebbels to join them: "The first argument. Social differences. I'm a poor devil. Money troubles. Big calamity. Hardly been at the university. [.?.?.] I'm hardly aware there's a war on anymore."

Anka was uncertain whether to make a final break with Kölsch. Finally there came a "big scene" with Goebbels: "She begs for my love on bended knee. For the first time I see how a woman can suffer. I am shattered." The next morning the tragedy continued, but it ended conclusively: "Anka is mine."41 He had reached his goal: "Blissful days. Nothing but love. Perhaps the happiest time of my life." Anka asked Kölsch if they could talk. He declined, whereupon, bitterly disappointed, she wrote him a goodbye letter.42

At the end of the semester, Goebbels went back to his parents' house in Rheydt.43 He spent his autumn vacation there in 1918. He had become "pale and thin." In three weeks he "laboriously" worked out an idea for a drama in five acts called Judas Ischariot. It was a—not particularly original—reinterpretation of the story of Judas in the New Testament: Judas is represented as a patriot who, although at first a fervent disciple of his Messiah, finally betrays him because Jesus will not lead a revolutionary movement to liberate the Jewish people from the yoke of Rome. After the death of Christ, Judas is ambitious to make himself leader but then recognizes the greatness of Jesus and commits suicide.44 Clearly, the first signs of religious doubt were emerging here, but at the prompting of the local chaplain Goebbels decided to put the work away in a drawer. As he wrote to Anka, he did not want to break with his "childhood belief and religion." That he owed his funding to this same chaplain may have reinforced his decision.45

Unfortunately, Anka met Agnes, who had been discarded in such an abrupt fashion, and the result was that "Anka doubted me. Letters cold and uncertain." She came to see him, and they talked things over, though much remained unresolved. She wanted to continue her studies in Würzburg, while he told her he felt like moving to Munich. He spent the next few days waiting "desperately" for a message, but in vain.46 In the end he traveled to Würzburg, set about locating Anka, and found her: "One look, and we were back together again. After a long fight for her I'm staying."47

The winter semester of 1918–19 was Joseph Goebbels's fourth semester as a student. In fact, he had not done any serious studying up to this point. It is astonishing that the First World War and politics affected his life so little. He was caught up in his reading, his literary ambitions; he cultivated his friendships and his highly volatile love affair with Anka and enjoyed student life to the fullest. On Goebbels's evidence it is hard to see that the war was making any difference to him, and neither is there any indication that his exclusion from "front line experience" on disability grounds made him feel inferior or bitter.

However, in Würzburg he does seem to have devoted himself more to the academic side of student life. His academic record documents attendance at sessions on ancient history, German literature, philology, archaeology, Romance languages, pedagogy, and the history of architecture.48 No longer much drawn to fraternity life, he gave up his membership in Unitas.49 At night he read Dostoyevsky for the first time: Looking back in 1924, he wrote that he had been "shaken" by Crime and Punishment.

Significant political events took place in the middle of his Würzburg semester. The armistice of November 11, 1918, sealed the military defeat of the German Reich, the revolution broke out, and the Kaiser abdicated: "The revolution. Disgust. Return of the troops. Anka is crying."50 He noted that "democratic influences" were spreading. His position was clear: "Conservative, nonetheless." He voted for the Bavarian People's Party (Bayerische Volkspartei), the right-wing party of the Bavarian Catholics. For the most part, however, political developments left him cold. In a letter to his schoolfriend Fritz Prang, he adopted a sanguine view of revolutionary events: The hour would come again when the "base, meaningless throngs"

would be calling for “spirit and strength.” We would just have to “wait for that hour and not cease to arm ourselves for this struggle through untiring spiritual discipline.” Germany might have lost the war, but it seemed to him that “the Fatherland had won nonetheless.”51

Goebbels’s father wrote anxious letters. He would have preferred Joseph to attend a university in his native Rhineland. All he could do was try to support his son financially. Goebbels came back from Würzburg at the end of January 1919.52 He also spent the summer vacation of 1919 in Rheydt, which in the meantime had become occupied territory. Money worries were pressing, and to earn his keep he took up private tutoring. He spent the rest of the time writing another play, Heinrich Kämpfert. The subject sounds familiar: The penniless hero falls in love with a girl from a rich family.

Aside from his efforts as a playwright, he applied himself to writing lyric poetry. His diary and other papers contain some unpublished poems from the wartime and postwar periods. Literature scholar Ralf Georg Czapla has studied this oeuvre, finding them for the most part to be “rather uninspired constructs consisting of effusive phrase-making and empty clichés, with quite defective versification and rhyme schemes in parts.” The content consists predominantly of evocations of domestic idylls, descriptions of idealized pastoral scenes, and love poems featuring, according to Czapla, “familiar components drawn from a Biedermeier worldview.”53 The form of Goebbels’s poetry was also highly conventional, confined to borrowings from folk poems (the Volkslied). He took on more probing subjects, too: his quest for God,54 his loss of faith (to the point of cursing the Christian God),55 and his fear of death: “In vielen Nächten sitze ich / Auf meinem Bett / Und lausche. / Dann rechne ich / Wie viele Stunden noch / Vom Tod mich trennen mögen.” (Many a night I sit upon my bed / And listen. / Then I count / How many hours may remain / ’Twixt death and me.)56

Looking for a political direction, Goebbels attended a meeting of the center-left Deutsche Demokratische Partei (German Democratic Party), where his former history teacher Bartels gave a speech. He liked the style of the address, but its content left him feeling “still more opposed to the Democrats” (he no doubt meant the supporters of this party). “All my classmates are voting Center Party [Zentrum] or German Nationalist [Deutschnational]. I would have voted German Nationalist too.”57 In any case, he thought that a large part of the German public was still politically immature: About 25 percent of ballot papers in his home constituency were spoiled because the voters did not understand the voting system.58 Politically speaking, he did not feel at home in any party.59 At the end of the semester break he learned that Anka had moved to Freiburg and that his old rival Kölsch had already arrived there: “So whatever it costs, it’s off to Freiburg.”60 In Freiburg he met up with Anka, who, he established with consternation, “was no longer the same person.” Finally she admitted that she had cheated on him with Kölsch. There followed jealous scenes, attempts at reconciliation, renewed jealousy. At one point he even borrowed a revolver from a friend. “Past death,” he declared enigmatically. He made no significant headway with his studies that semester.61 Richard Flisges, his friend from grammar school, who had returned from the war as a lieutenant and was his “daily companion,” spent some time with him in Freiburg and also registered as a student of Germanistik (German literature) there. Flisges now became his closest friend.62

At the end of the semester, lacking a valid pass, he could not reenter the occupied zone. He then traveled to Münster, where he rented a cheap room. Every day he telephoned Anka, who was living at home with her parents in Recklinghausen. In Münster Goebbels continued his writing efforts. During his stay in Freiburg he had tried to publish a collection of poetry, but the venture failed because of the substantial subsidy the publishers had asked him to contribute in advance.63 Now he tried another genre. In Münster he wrote the autobiographical novel Michael Voormann, referred to earlier in this chapter: “With anguished soul, I am writing my own story.”64

Historians have only Parts I and III of this three-part work. In

Part I the author gives us a stylized version of his childhood and schooldays, while Part III is concerned with the Freiburg period
and his relationship with Anka, who appears here as “Hertha Holk” and who, after a long struggle, eventually becomes submissive to him: “She became a part of him.” Thereupon he returns home to write a Christ play. When the work is finished, he again sees Hertha, who confesses that she has been unfaithful to him. He leaves her and burns his play, which he had dedicated to her.65 The whole thing was obviously written to impress Anka: She could think herself lucky not to be playing the role of Hertha, who clearly bears the blame for ending the relationship with Michael and cutting short a promising literary career.

After finishing Michael Goebbels decided—ignoring the lack of a pass—to go home. He succeeded in bribing a sentry and slipped across the demarcation line. He felt “deadly sick” and tried to recover a little in Rheydt before the start of the new semester.66 Goebbels decided to follow Anka, who was planning to move to Munich in the coming semester. For this purpose he borrowed 1,200 marks from family acquaintances.67 The couple took the train south together. By chance, breaking the journey in Frankfurt, Goebbels was present at the opening of the book fair by Friedrich Ebert. “Miserable impression,” he recalled in 1924.

Goebbels was impressed by Munich: “Stachusplatz. Marienplatz. Odeons-Platz. Pinakotheks. Schack Gallery. Dürer (Apostles), Böcklin, Spitzweg, and Feuerbach.”68 Six months earlier the Munich Soviet Republic, a socialist uprising, had been bloodily suppressed by the Free Corps. Since that time the city had turned into a center of counterrevolution. Paramilitary units, secret radical right-wing organizations, and nationalist groups were engaging in a wide variety of activities. A certain Adolf Hitler, still a lance corporal in the Reichswehr (army), made a stir for the first time in February 1920, when he addressed some two thousand people at the first rally of the Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (DAP, German Workers’ Party), a small splinter group. Over the next few months he became something of a local attraction.69

There is very little about the political turmoil in Goebbels’s “memory pages,” and neither Hitler nor the DAP is mentioned at all. But he does refer to the outrage among the student body in January 1920 when Anton Arco-Valley—the assassin of Kurt Eisner, leader of the Munich revolution of November 1918—was sentenced to death (the very next day the government commuted his sentence to life imprisonment). There was uproar at the University of Munich.70

As the Munich city council had banned non-Bavarian students from moving to the university, Goebbels did not register with the police—normally a requirement—or with the university. Instead, his friend Richard signed him up for lecture courses in Freiburg. His first “argument” with Anka occurred after she had spent a few days in the mountains with friends, a trip from which for obvious reasons he was excluded.71 In his memoirs he recalled visits to the theater and the opera. Performances included Carmen, The Flying Dutchman, Siegfried, Elektra, and Der Freischütz. He saw the conductor Bruno Walter as well as the Munich premiere of Strauss’s opera Die Frau ohne Schatten. At the theaters, apart from classics like Amphitryon, Antigone, and Don Carlos, he mostly saw modern pieces, such as Walter Hasenclever’s Der Sohn (The Son); works by Strindberg, Ibsen, and Gustav Meyrink; Das Gelübde (The Vow), by Heinrich Lautensack; Hermann Bahr’s Der Unmensch (The Brute); and Gas, by Georg Kaiser. He was quite overwhelmed by it all: “Chaos inside me. Fermentation. Unconscious clarifying [process].” A performance of Tolstoy’s last play, A Light Shines in Darkness, impressed him particularly. Of this time he later wrote, “Socialism. Spreading only slowly. Social sympathy. Expressionism. Not yet pure and clarified.”72

He discussed with the Munich literature specialist Arthur Kutscher the possibility of a doctoral thesis on the subject of mime but soon rated the prospects of success for this project—about which he corresponded with Kutscher a few weeks later—as “bleak.”73 He was experiencing financial difficulties once more. He was forced to sell his suits and his watch. Anka subsidized him by pawning her gold watch. By this time he was

practically living off her, in any case.74 Once again he had doubts about his Catholicism and turned for help to his father, who in a long letter of November 1919 offered Joseph comfort and advice, trying to reassure his distraught son: Crises of faith were quite normal among young people; prayer and the sacraments would see him through it. He reminded Joseph of his sister Elisabeth's death in 1915, when the whole family had been helped by praying together. He would not cast him out (as the son had feared he might) even if he turned away from the church, but he had to ask him two questions: Did he mean to write anything incompatible with the Catholic religion, and did he intend to take up work to which the same applied? If this were not the case, then everything would fall back into place again. Goebbels was grateful for this understanding reply, which shows, however, how far he had moved away from the petit bourgeois Catholic milieu of his parents.75

His relationship with Anka suffered several crises, but the two always became reconciled again and then felt "closer to each other than before." There were marriage plans, which bumped up against what Goebbels contemptuously referred to as "conventionalities."76 He asked accusingly in a letter to Anka: "Have other people got a right to despise me and pour shame and disgrace on me because I love you to the point of insanity?"77 He was now working on a social drama called The Struggle of the Working Class. But in Munich he was too restless to finish the manuscript.78

At the end of the semester he went home: His brother Hans, a released prisoner of war, had returned as well. Hans brought with him "hatred and aggressive thoughts." For his part, Goebbels records: "Avid reading. Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, revolution in me. [.?.?.] Russia."79 In a letter to Anka he commented on the "sensational news from Berlin": Elements of the extreme right under Wolfgang Kapp had mounted a coup attempt. The "putsch" failed after a few days, but the ultimate outcome was still unclear. Goebbels was skeptical, believing that it was questionable whether "a right-wing government is good for us at this moment." He was going to wait and see how things worked out.80 Traveling through the Ruhr, Anka was caught unawares by the Kapp putsch and the workers' revolt that followed it: "Red revolution in the Ruhr. She's learning about terror there. I am enthusiastic from afar." It appears that his enthusiasm concerned the revolutionaries' terror, not the comparable terrorism the Free Corps deployed to suppress them.

In this unruly time Goebbels applied for a job as tutor on an estate in Holland as well as one "in East Prussia," but to no avail.81 Otherwise, his literary work was productive. His new play was a general indictment of the "tainted" and "crumbling" world in which a workers' revolt would sow "the seed"—the play's title—for the "generation that is coming of age, strong and beautiful, that of the new man."82

In April, a letter to Anka included a lengthy passage about a question "that is still unresolved between us: the question of communism." It was "rotten and stultifying that a world of so and so many million people is dominated by a single caste, which has the power to lead these millions towards life or death according to its whim. [.?.?.] This capitalism has learned nothing." It was responsible for the fact that "people with the most brilliant intellectual gifts sink into poverty and go to ruin."83

His reading, according to his own report, included intensive engagement with secondary literature on German studies as well as Tolstoy, Goethe, Maeterlinck, Lessing, George, K?lid?sa, Cervantes, Wedekind, Kleist, Hölderlin, and Ibsen. However, there were also Hans Sachs and the Nibelungenlied, the Early New High German writer Johann Baptist Fischer, German-speaking authors of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including Spee von Langenfeld, Abraham a Sancta Clara, Heinrich Wilhelm von Gerstenberg, Martin Opitz, Friedrich von Logau, and Paul Fleming as well as the Romantic writer Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder. It looked as though he had decided to concentrate on working for his examination.84

At Whitsun he met Anka again. She "indignantly" rejected his latest work, Die Saat, which had been

"enthusiastically" received by his friend Richard.85 Finally he learned from one of Anka's letters that Theo Geitmann, a friend from Rheydt about whom he had long harbored certain suspicions,86 had been making advances to her: "Theo has been treacherous. Loves her." Goebbels and Anka met in Karlsruhe, where she also told him about a certain "Herr Mumme." The break came after he—totally misunderstanding the situation—magnanimously proposed that they should get engaged.87 Surprisingly, there was a reconciliation in Heidelberg, which clearly did not reassure Goebbels. Anka promised once more to be faithful, and they decided to spend the next semester together.

Goebbels simply refused to recognize that she was taking the relationship much less seriously than he was. He spent the holidays in Rheydt, while she was with her parents in the Ruhr. She did not keep his rival, "Herr Mumme in Recklinghausen," at bay.88 Goebbels composed a farewell letter to Anka; Without her, he would go to pieces: "Love is killing me. If I had you here now, I would grab you and force you to love me, if only for a moment, and then I would kill you. Yes, you can laugh about this, but you know I'm capable of it."89

He did contemplate suicide. He wrote a will on October 1, naming his brother Hans as his "literary custodian" and his father as executor. His clothes were to be sold and the proceeds put toward paying off his debts. His brothers should each choose five of his books for themselves, and the rest should be sold, with the income to go to his sister. He also bequeathed her the rest of his few possessions—for example, his alarm clock and his toiletry articles. "I am taking my leave of this world and from all those who have behaved well or ill towards me," he wrote. "I am glad to depart from my life, which for me has been nothing but hell."90 This theatrical announcement was as far as he went.

For the winter semester he returned to Heidelberg. Contrary to their agreement, he did not find Anka there. His friend Richard tracked her down in Munich, where he spotted her sitting in a café with Mumme. Goebbels went to Munich. He discovered her address but then found that she had left for Freiburg—with her "fiancé," as he was informed. In a desperate state, he returned to Heidelberg. There was a final exchange of letters.91 On her behalf, Anka's fiancé, Mumme, wrote to request the return of her letters and presents. Goebbels replied with a "categorical" refusal.92

Graduation with a
Doctorate but Failed Authorship

Back in Heidelberg, Goebbels worked toward his doctorate. His reading matter, Oswald Spengler's The Decline of the West, was not calculated to lift his mood. On the contrary, this grand attempt to situate the decline of Europe within a universal history of the rise and fall of the great cultures induced "pessimism" and "despair" in him. Beset by such dark thoughts, he plunged into work on his doctoral dissertation, which he wrote in four months in Rheydt after the end of his Heidelberg semester.93

He had originally hoped to write his thesis under the well-known Heidelberg literary historian Friedrich Gundolf. He had reported to Anka that his reception by the great man at the beginning of June had been "extrordinarily kind" and that the professor had given him valuable advice.94 It did not worry Goebbels that Gundolf was a Jew. The literature expert, who belonged to the elite group around the poet Stefan George, was working at the time on the posthumous reputation of a great historical figure, tracing the influence of Julius Caesar in the history of European literature. Perhaps Gundolf's feeling for historical greatness attracted Goebbels, who in his own mind had already begun his quest for a leader.95 But Gundolf, who had been relieved of teaching and examining duties, directed Goebbels to his colleague, the associate professor Max von Waldberg. That Goebbels did not see this as an affront is attested by his appreciative comments on Gundolf in a public address he delivered months later.96 He followed Gundolf's advice and attended Waldberg's seminar, where he gave a presentation and submitted a seminar paper.97

At Waldberg's suggestion, Goebbels took the dramatic work of the largely unknown Romantic Wilhelm von Schütz as his dissertation topic. The thesis, over two hundred pages in length and never published, takes the form of an overview of Schütz's works.98 Most interesting is the preface, which begins with a quotation from Dostoyevsky, and then goes on—almost in a kind of declamation—to compare the Romantic period with "the decade in which we are now living." Goebbels sees the parallels most strongly in cultural life: "Now as then, a shallow Enlightenment is spreading, finding its aim and its purpose in a trite, uninspired atheism. But it is meeting resistance from a younger generation of God-seekers, mystics, romantics. All these little people, the smallest, are crying out for leaders, but no great man appears who will embrace them all."

After submitting his thesis in Heidelberg, Goebbels prepared intensively for the oral examination. He passed in November with a grade of rite superato, which meant that his academic performance was judged no more than average. Nonetheless, he was now Doctor of Philosophy Joseph Goebbels.99 However, for Waldberg, supervising a student who was later to become so prominent brought no returns. Because of his Jewish origins he was obliged to retire in 1933, and in 1935 his license to teach was revoked. When Goebbels was being honored with great pomp at the University of Heidelberg in 1942, on the twentieth anniversary of his doctoral examination, there was no mention of Waldberg, who had died in 1938.100

Back in Rheydt, Goebbels once again earned his living by private tutoring. Early in 1922, however, he succeeded in placing a series of articles in the local newspaper, the Westdeutsche Landeszeitung. The series, which according to Goebbels caused "a great sensation" and brought him "enemies in the Rheydt press,"101 offered him the opportunity to express his deep hatred of prevailing cultural activities and to give full vent to his feelings about the zeitgeist.

In his first article Goebbels proclaimed briefly and succinctly that "the German materialism and worship of Mammon that we see before us now in unadulterated form [.?.?.] are the main cause of the ruination of our German soul."102 Goebbels then indulged in an all-encompassing critique of modern culture and the prevailing cultural tendencies. The main problem of modern culture was the "lack of a solid, secure sense of style." What was missing above all was "a great artistic individual who bears this style in himself, [.?.?.] the young hothead who will take from the troubles of our time his titanic 'in tyrannos' and hurl it into the world."

The second article, which bore the ambitious title "On the Meaning of Our Time,"103 contained a passage that the contemporary reader could easily decode as an anti-Semitic polemic: "We pay homage to an internationalism that is opposed to our national character and that alien elements have extolled as the only chance of rescue." His polemic equally targeted enthusiasm about the "Russian spirit" or "the Indian personality." He was also critical of Spengler's book: The Decline of the West had only served to reinforce the dominant underlying pessimism, whereas what was needed was, wrote Goebbels with youthful emotion, "books that comforted, raised the spirits, brought to mind those things that were eternal." In this sense, in his next contribution, "The True National Character," he put forward his reflections on "the German soul," which he characterized as "Faustian."104 The series culminated in a call "for the education of a new public," a kind of affront to the audience: "In many ways these nice art lovers are damned similar to our pack of racketeers and war profiteers."105
This article series, with its dogmatic judgments and emotionally charged notions of world improvement, demonstrates one thing above all: the tendency to overestimate oneself, to which the unemployed and unsuccessful author Joseph Goebbels had obviously succumbed in the act of writing. Completely carried away by the opportunity to present himself to the educated bourgeoisie of Rheydt and its surroundings, he even included personal elements. Thus in his last article106 he described in detail, with a characteristic mixture of retrospective self-pity and self-love, his mood on a lonely Christmas Eve in Munich in 1919. He did not neglect to make frequent references to his years of suffering as a student: Anyone "who had struggled

in the same way" would know what "serious academic youth had accomplished in their silent, heroically self-denying struggle" over the previous five years.107

In the autumn he made a short guest appearance, based on a trainee contract, as an art critic in the Landeszeitung. Losing this
position as soon as he did—allegedly because of an internal reorganization—may also have contributed to the rather condescending way in which he commented on the intellectual debates taking place in this provincial town. On the subject of a lecture at the "Society for Foundational Philosophy," for instance, he wrote that the discussion that followed the talk had shown once again "how unprofitable, on the whole, such exchanges are, between a speaker the audience hardly knows and an audience the speaker does not know at all."108

That autumn he was also offered the chance to give a talk on "Excerpts from Contemporary German Literature." He used it to settle his score with postwar literature in general ("one pathetic scribbler trying to outdo another") but dealt particularly harshly with the worst excesses of Expressionism, although he did not condemn the movement as a whole. He devoted some space once more to Spengler, taking strong exception to the prevailing "cultural pessimism" reading of Spengler (by which he himself had initially been infected). Goebbels now tended, he confided to his listeners, to read Spengler's study of the rise, growth, and decline of the great world cultures as a "source of consolation, strength, and encouragement." He regarded Spengler's assessment of Russia as the bearer of high culture in the millennium to come as "the magic word," confirming his own positive verdict on the events in Russia.109

Toward the end of the year, Goebbels endeavored to establish a drama group in Rheydt within the framework of the Bühnenvolksbund (Popular Theater League) that existed throughout the country. It was an attempt to "renew the theater in the spirit of the German-
Christian people," founded in opposition to the socialist Freie Volksbühne (Free People's Theater).110

In Rheydt, meanwhile, Goebbels had met the young schoolteacher Else Janke.111 What he initially described as a "quiet, platonic love" gradually developed from the summer of 1922 onward into a fully fledged love affair. It can be inferred from what he recalled about 1924 and the surviving correspondence that the relationship was not always harmonious. They argued, for example, because Else "did not want to acknowledge our relationship in public"; and later there was a "falling-out over my foot complaint." She told him her mother was Jewish, a revelation recorded in his words as: "She has confessed her parentage to me. Since then, the first enchantment ruined."112

This passage indicates Goebbels's growing anti-Semitism. Up to this point he had not been particularly interested in "the Jewish question." In February 1919, in connection with a critical appreciation of Heinrich Heine in a history of German literature, he had written to Anka: "You know I don't particularly like this exaggerated anti-Semitism. [.?.?.] I can't say that the Jews are my best friends, but I believe you cannot rid the world of them through cursing and polemics or even through pogroms, and even if you could, it would be demeaning and beneath human dignity."113 The formulation "exaggerated anti-Semitism" of course carried the implication that a "normal" anti-Jewish attitude was justified. Occasional remarks suggest that Goebbels was prone to a casual, everyday anti-Semitism, but that "the Jewish question" did not occupy a central position in his worldview.114 Yet now, early in 1923, as the crisis of the German Reich deepened, he was among the many who blamed "the Jews" for the impending catastrophe.115

Unbearable Drudgery

On January 2, 1923, Goebbels took a job in a bank. Else had strongly urged him to take this step;116 the doctor of philosophy, as he now was, seemed to have few other professional prospects. But his dislike of this new occupation set in quickly and grew steadily. In the meantime, chaos erupted around him. The French

army marched into the Ruhr in January, since the German government had ceased to pay reparations. The Reich government called on the German people to pursue passive resistance, which led to the breakdown of public life in the region, one result among many being that the trains were no longer running, which meant that Goebbels could not get to Rheydt. He spent a few “sweet hours” with Else, who constantly tried in her letters to lift him out of his depression,117 but there were always heated arguments as well.118

Goebbels desperately sought a direction, as he makes clear in his “memory pages,” written in 1924: “My vision clarified by necessity. Loathing for the bank and my job. [.?.?.] The Jews. I am thinking about the money problem.”119 He went to an opera conducted by Otto Klemperer: “The Jewish question in art. Gundolf. Intellectual clarification. Bavaria. Hitler.” It is doubtful that in 1923, in the light of his “intellectual clarification,” he had already settled on Hitler. Since he only began to gravitate toward National Socialism in the course of 1924, this seems more likely to be a retrospective smoothing out of his biography. During this period he read Thomas and Heinrich Mann. Dostoyevsky once again evoked the strongest emotional response in him. Describing his mood after reading The Idiot, he wrote, “Revolution in me” but also “Pessimism about everything.” On Richard Wagner, he noted: “Turning away from internationalism.” His reading of Houston Stewart Chamberlain’s Grundlagen des 19. Jahrhunderts (Foundations of the Nineteenth Century) took him back to “the Jewish question.” As an interim result of his quest for a solid ideological standpoint he finally noted: “Communism. Jewry. I am a German communist.”120 We have seen that these notes were written in 1924, and it is altogether likely, and correlates with his somewhat playful literary approach to his biography, that he transposed the politicization he was experiencing at this later date onto the crisis year of 1923.121

Affected by the crisis and his increasingly depressed mood, he began to detest his bank job more and more.122 In June he succeeded in publishing in the Kölner Tageblatt, a newspaper regarded as liberal, a lengthy article in which he expatiated on the “fiasco of modern German literature.” Goebbels once again used the opportunity to mount a wide-ranging attack on Impressionism and Expressionism as well as various other tendencies of wartime and postwar literature: “The serious talents, struggling tirelessly for the spirit of the new age, are ignored or shouted down.”123

In the summer he composed something like a confessional account of his life. It was titled “From My Diary,” and it seems to have been meant for Else: a thirty-two-page mixture of remarks about his failed life, aphorisms, and poems. This collection expressed above all his depression, which was particularly marked at this time. Among other things, he raged against the misery caused by passive resistance in the Ruhr and against the financial manipulators (not least in his own bank) who were profiting from the crisis.124 Neither this collection nor his article suggests that he had drawn any firm political conclusions from his negative assessment of the contemporary situation. Else was extremely concerned about him at this time, writing: “Your soul is so sensitive, perhaps too sensitive for this rough time, and so easily crushed and discouraged by this severe distress.”125

Reporting himself sick, he went off in August 1923 with Else to the coast.126 But the mood of the couple was constantly spoiled by permanent money worries and increasing tensions. On the North Sea island of Baltrum, news reached him of the death of his close friend Richard Flisges in an industrial accident. Goebbels decided to cancel the vacation.127 At the end of the year he published an obituary for his friend in the Rheydter Zeitung.128

Back in the Rhineland, he received his dismissal notice from the bank. Although various literary projects were taking shape in his mind, he went looking for employment. He found none.129 Finally he relinquished his room in Cologne and, following his parents’ advice, moved back to Rheydt.130 His relationship with Else became less tense, but it was hardly passionate: “Else is my comrade. Eros only now and then.”

Occasionally he resorted to alcohol to drown his own personal sorrows as well as consternation over recent political and economic events.131 It was in these circumstances that he began keeping the diary that Else had given him.

[1]?Translators' note: The title of a student drinking song.

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