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TOBY THACKER, *Joseph Goebbels: Life and Death* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), xiv + 407 pp. ISBN 978 0 230 22889 4. £19.99

'Do we need a new biography of the most notorious demagogue of the twentieth century?' (p. 1). The fact that Toby Thacker, Lecturer in Modern European History at Cardiff University, poses this burning question right at the beginning of his work shows that, as far as the answer is concerned, one can be confident of divided opinions. What the author subsequently does manage to present plausibly, however, is that it is the stereotypical image of the Nazi Propaganda Minister, seemingly indelibly etched into the public memory, that is urgently in need of revision in the light of new sources.

What Thacker has in mind here in particular is the recently completed new edition of Joseph Goebbels' diaries. Their publication was indeed eagerly awaited since the last volume, eventually published in 2006, covered the sensitive period from October 1932 to March 1934. Referring to Ian Kershaw's earlier assertion that the wide availability of the Goebbels Diaries certainly justified a new Hitler biography, Thacker's argument, as obvious as it is valid, is that this applies even more to the writer of the diaries himself.

At the same time, however, Thacker practises modesty. He does not want his study to be seen as *the* Goebbels biography, nor does he seek to examine every facet of his subject's life. What is rather surprising in this context, however, is that it is precisely Goebbels' activities as propagandist and minister that the author has decided to treat more marginally, referring amongst other things to Ernest K. Bramsted's work of 1965.¹ For the obvious question is this: which aspect of his life is more deserving of critical re-evaluation in the light of the diaries than his activities as Party propagandist and Reich minister? Thankfully the author does not stick to this self-imposed restriction, and in chapters 6 to 12 does, in fact, focus on Goebbels as the more or less classical prototype of the Nazi *homo politicus*.

More than earlier Goebbels biographers, however, Thacker is at pains here to link Goebbels' private and political life and to reflect the effects that each of these had on the other. In this way, by choosing a distinctly different and to some extent integrative perspective, and

¹ Ernest K. Bramsted, *Goebbels and National Socialist Propaganda: 1925-1945* (East Lansing, Mich., 1965), published in German as *Goebbels und die nationalsozialistische Propaganda: 1925-1945* (Frankfurt am Main, 1971).

Book Reviews

by using the now complete edition of the diaries, the author seeks to dispel at least some of the myths and legends surrounding Goebbels, which he discussed and considered at the beginning as a sort of stock-taking of the image of Goebbels still prevalent today.

Yet since the biographer deliberately proceeds strictly chronologically, following the text of the diaries, his depiction of his subject in the early chapters remains rather pale. Ultimately he has nothing new to say about the period of Goebbels' life before he became *Gauleiter* of Berlin. With its emphasis, certainly not misplaced, on those factors that played a particular role in building Goebbels' character – physical disability, material insecurity, and perceived isolation because he was not accepted for military service – this biography initially follows in the footsteps of all earlier biographies.

Eventually, however, on the basis of Goebbels' decision to answer the call to Berlin, Thacker manages to show convincingly that the holistic approach he takes to Goebbels' personality can indeed produce new and plausible explanations. For example, by linking Goebbels' inner conflict over his very personal 'Berlin issue' with the fact that virtually at the same time his unstable relationship with Else Janke came to its crisis-laden end, he shows that Goebbels' decision to go to Berlin was not simply based on obsequious obedience to his *Führer*, Adolf Hitler. In fact, his departure from his native Rhineland was motivated, at least in part, by a desire to regain the emotional equilibrium that had threatened to be lost completely as a result of the vicissitudes in his highly problematic relationship with Else Janke.

The sections which then deal with Goebbels' activity in Berlin up to the seizure of power in January 1933 once again seem to be fairly conventional, even though Thacker uses the diaries to illustrate various sensitive situations during this phase in which Goebbels was clearly at odds with Hitler in matters of day-to-day politics. Yet since these differences are constantly restricted to reflections in the diaries they can by no means be regarded as proof that Goebbels was less politically and ideologically bound to Hitler. On the contrary, precisely because Goebbels expressed his doubts in secret, for example, about whether Hitler's decision to take part in the elections was right, yet accepted it without any noticeable criticism, this is actually an argument in favour of a close political-ideological identification with Hitler.

What Goebbels saw as particularly beneficial about this relationship with Hitler becomes clear in the light of the constantly escalating conflict between Goebbels and the brothers Otto and Gregor Strasser. For, as Thacker rightly points out, around 1930 Goebbels was so fixated by his opponents that conversations with Hitler generally started with a tirade against the Strassers. It does not take a great deal of imagination to see in this behavioural pattern an attempt to curry favour with the *Führer*, at a time when Goebbels possibly saw his position as under threat from the Strassers. What also fits in here is that Goebbels took Hitler's supposed intransigence on this issue as his cue to call the whole relationship of trust into question, though it should be noted, once again only within the confines of his diary-writing self-help therapy.

Another passage that attracts particular attention is the one in which Thacker describes the case for high treason against Goebbels heard at the Leipzig imperial court. The Berlin *Gauleiter* had been accused of making treasonable statements in a speech or of indirectly inciting Nazi Party (NSDAP) and SA members to treason. The accusation was based on detailed records of the said speech, to which the Munich police had access. However, when the Leipzig imperial court approached the Munich officials with a request to view these papers, or to be given copies, it was rejected. '[T]hey replied that the record of the meeting was derived from a confidential source who could not be exposed' (pp. 114–15.) This should be quite an eye-opener for the present-day observer of day-to-day politics in the Federal Republic — one only has to think of the circumstances surrounding the recent failed attempt to ban the far-right National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD). Here, too, it was informers and representatives of the police or the Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz whose mere existence, in the eyes of the Federal Constitutional Court, prevented the banning procedure for formal reasons. One is reminded somewhat of Karl Marx's aperçu according to which all world-historical events always happen twice, the first time as tragedy, the second as farce. It is regrettable that Thacker himself does not deal at greater length with this striking coincidence. However, it can probably be explained by the fact that at the time such a clearly domestic topic as the attempt to ban the NPD did not attract a great deal of media attention outside Germany.

The nearer Thacker now comes to January 1933, following in the steps of the diaries, the more difficult it becomes to adhere to the plan

Book Reviews

mentioned at the beginning, namely, always to analyse and interpret Goebbels' life in the context of the historical present. The reader does learn important things about Goebbels' role and function within the NSDAP: 'It was in the public sphere of campaigning that Goebbels played a critical role' (p. 125). But within the Party's real leading circle, which during the civil war year of 1932 was in constant negotiation, either overt or covert, with Franz von Papen, Kurt von Schleicher, or Hindenburg, there is no trace of him. Here Göring, Streicher, and Röhm were the key players after Hitler. Yet instead of using this quite correct assertion to relativize the hitherto clearly over-estimated significance of Goebbels within the Party, and using this to explain the fact that the ambitious *Gauleiter* was not immediately made a minister in 1933, Thacker immediately devalues these findings, for instance, by suggesting, with reference to Goebbels' diary, that in February 1932 he had decided that in the presidential elections Hitler would stand against the incumbent, Hindenburg.

In this context, the author also gives a false impression of Goebbels' infamous speech in the Reichstag of 23 February 1932. For while Thacker maintains that in this speech Goebbels was 'carefully avoiding personal attacks on Hindenburg' (p. 127), he did, in fact, attack the President directly and quite harshly. With the emerging support of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) for Hindenburg in mind, Goebbels stated: 'Tell me who praises you, and I'll tell you who you are! Praised by the Berlin gutter press, praised by the party of deserters.'² This last remark must have been particularly hurtful to Hindenburg the soldier.

In the literature on Goebbels or the Nazi seizure of power this speech is rightly also referred to in order to explain why Goebbels was initially *persona non grata* with the NSDAP's conservative coalition partners in January 1933 and was therefore not made a minister. Referring back to the diary, Thacker quite rightly depicts the palpable disappointment of the ambitious Goebbels, who felt he had been abandoned by the world and, even worse, betrayed and sold out by Hitler.

However, when Thacker blithely explains Goebbels' later appointment as Propaganda Minister by claiming he was overlooked

² *Verhandlungen des Reichstags: V. Wahlperiode 1930*, vol. 446, *Stenographische Berichte* (Berlin, 1932), 57. Sitzung, 23 Feb. 1932, pp. 2,243–66, at 2250d.

only as a 'temporary arrangement' because Hitler 'had greater plans for him' (p. 140), this, particularly in the light of the diaries, seems like a criminal under-estimation of the centrifugal forces and conflicting interests in Hitler's coalition government that was still young and fragile. For while Thacker ultimately makes the person of Hitler the prime mover in later events, he fails to do justice to his own express claim not to consider events from the end backwards. In terms of power-politics in January and February 1933, Reich Chancellor Hitler was not the *Führer* of later years who made his decisions autonomously.

This restricted perspective also pervades the other chapters which look at the course of Goebbels' life, especially as reflected in his personal relationship with Hitler. Here Thacker comes to the conclusion, possibly rightly, that from 1925 onwards Goebbels had a closer relationship with Hitler than any other leading Nazi (p. 168). But what ultimately remains unanswered is what significance this personal relationship really had for Goebbels' power position in the day-to-day conflicts with Göring, Dietrich, Ribbentrop, Rosenberg, Ley, Bormann et al. For however close and confidential Goebbels and Hitler clearly were, this personal attachment was obviously not translated into Hitler's political backing for Goebbels.

It was not until the second half of the war, when Hitler was increasingly avoiding the public and Goebbels, travelling through the bombed-out cities, became the dominant public representative of the regime, that he finally managed to acquire significant political power. The zenith of this trend was his appointment as *Generalbevollmächtigter für den totalen Kriegseinsatz*, an office which, as we know, Goebbels exercised with a certain satisfaction and thirst for action. It sometimes seems here as though for Goebbels, though he was aware of the desolate military situation, the fact that he had finally gained political recognition glossed over the bleak future prospects. In the end—and his appointment as Reich Chancellor in Hitler's will appears to confirm this—Goebbels the mere communicator had himself become the crucial political player.

The fact that Goebbels, the latecomer to political power, nonetheless committed suicide after his wife Magda, having previously murdered their children, shows that at this point all he was really interested in was his own reputation. Bormann, Himmler, Göring, or Speer might have fled the sinking ship, but Goebbels wanted his sui-

Book Reviews

cide to be understood above all as the final proof of his vassal-like loyalty to Hitler. This willingness to make what really was the ultimate sacrifice, as well as the fact that he carefully preserved his diaries throughout the turmoil of the war were, Goebbels was convinced, the foundations on which his posthumous reputation would be built.

At the end of his study Thacker recapitulates once again the common stereotypes which still today inform the image of Goebbels, at least amongst the broader public. One cannot but agree with him when he says it is 'high time that the different, enduring misunderstandings of Goebbels are challenged' (p. 311). And indeed, here and there he has demonstrated where this potential for revision could be found. To this extent his biography really is a first step towards a reassessment of the role and significance of Joseph Goebbels in National Socialism. Yet as Thacker himself concedes at the beginning of his book: *the Joseph Goebbels biography it is not (yet).*

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