

Biography

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How and why would a historian write a biography of a man considered, almost universally, to have been singularly evil, in the words of Victor Klemperer, ‘the most poisonous and mendacious of all Nazis’?¹ Joseph Goebbels (1897–1945) is notorious as the Propaganda Minister of the ‘Third Reich’, a brilliant public speaker who used his talents to encourage hatred of the Jews, to build support for Hitler, and to justify the most horrible excesses of the Nazi regime during the Second World War. In the public mind, he is typically imagined as the sinister manipulator of radio and cinema, who used these technologies to brainwash a whole population, and to turn them into fanatical supporters of the ‘Hitler myth’. No television documentary on the Nazis is complete without archive film of Goebbels speaking to huge audiences, jeering about his opponents, excoriating foreigners and rousing his listeners into a hysterical frenzy. When all was lost for the Nazis at the end of the war, he was not content to kill himself, but, together his wife Magda, murdered his six young children. He is one of the monsters of the twentieth century, identified with the worst abuses of dictatorship.

We have, of course, moved on from the nineteenth century, when biography was largely confined to the stories of ‘great men’, kings, diplomats, statesmen and artists. We are now equally used to seeing biographies of tyrants and despots, or of historical figures like Stalin or Cromwell, who are seen by some as heroes, and by others as villains. And biography, as a historical form, is making a comeback after decades in which it was seen as better suited for popular consumption than for serious academic readers. In this chapter, I draw on my own experience to ask what biography as a form can offer to history, above all in exploring the relationship between an individual and the times in which that person lived and died. I examine the kinds of evidence which biographers use, and how this can shape the kinds of biography which are produced. Drawing largely on examples from the history of Nazi Germany and the twentieth century, I explore recent developments which have brought new vitality to biography, and placed it again at the forefront of historical enquiry.

Goebbels as a biographical subject

As a historian of modern Germany, there appeared to me to be numerous legitimate reasons for writing a new biography of Joseph Goebbels when I embarked on this project in 2006. This was a man, however unpleasant, who had undoubtedly exercised a major influence in one of the most significant episodes in modern history. He was critically important in the late 1920s and early 1930s in building popular support for Hitler and the Nazis, and in helping them come to power. His skilful use of propaganda after 1933 was vital in building support for Hitler's foreign policy, and for the reconstruction of German society at home. During the Second World War, Goebbels was of vital importance in maintaining popular support for the regime, particularly after the disaster at Stalingrad in 1943, and as the British bombing of German cities intensified. And from 1925 onwards, Goebbels had played an influential role within the Nazi movement, constantly putting hatred of the Jews at the centre of the Party's programme, and demanding, after 1933, that they should be relentlessly persecuted. In 1941, Goebbels, who had a uniquely close relationship with Hitler, urged him to take the opportunity provided by the war to move to what the Nazis called the 'Final Solution', the murder of all of the Jews under their control, and until the end of the war, Goebbels sought to prosecute this end.² Goebbels also presents the historical biographer with a paradox: he was, unlike many of the leading Nazis, an intelligent, cultivated and well-educated man. He loved literature, music and theatre. He was a talented and energetic writer who had dreamed of being a playwright and a poet when he was younger, and he was a father who cared for his children. As an individual, Goebbels encapsulates and embodies one of the most difficult problems confronting historians of modern Germany: how could a people, a society which was in many ways so 'advanced', so 'developed', so 'modern', embrace the violence, the cruelty and the banality of Nazism?

This highlights a further dimension to biography. Although primarily concerned with one person, a biography which takes account of the wider circumstances in which an individual lived offers potential insights into a period of history, and particular aspects of that period. In the case of Goebbels, his path from a lower middle-class childhood in the Rhineland through to early adulthood in the troubled early years of the Weimar Republic offers a unique view, through the prism of one individual's experience, of Germany's transition from Empire through defeat in war to a chaotic and unsettling new post-war world, one in which extreme views flourished. Goebbels was not an early member of the Nazi Party, so his personal history tells us nothing about the Party's beginnings in Munich, but from March 1924 onwards, his fate was intimately bound up with that of the Party; his biography offers new light on the institutional and structural development of an organization which is often overlooked by

students concentrating their attention on its charismatic leader. It need hardly be stressed how much a biography of Goebbels has to offer to the student of propaganda in the twentieth century.

The evidence for a biography of Goebbels

A further compelling reason for writing a biography of Goebbels was the availability of new evidence. All historians are dependent on evidence, and biographers are particularly interested in personal documents, what is called 'life writing', that is to say diaries, journals and letters. In the chaos at the end of the Second World War, Goebbels' own diary had almost completely disappeared. Fragments of his diary from 1942 to 1943, and from 1925 to 1926 were found, transcribed, and published in German and in English; later the final few weeks of his diary, from January through to April 1945 were found and published in a widely selling edition.³ Not until the final years of the Cold War did it become clear that the diaries which Goebbels had kept almost uninterruptedly from 1923 until the end of his life had survived almost intact, micro-photographed onto glass plates and kept hidden in the Soviet State Archives in Moscow. After complex negotiations, the diaries were returned to the Federal German Republic, where over the next decade, a team of historians worked painstakingly to transcribe the material, and to publish all of it in a huge edition of twenty-nine volumes containing some fifteen thousand printed pages. This project to publish what is undoubtedly one of the most significant historical documents of the twentieth century was only completed in 2006 with the publication then of the earliest section of the diary, starting from October 1923, and dealing with the critical period in Goebbels' life when he made the transition from being an unemployed loner to a new life as a Nazi Party activist.⁴

Diaries come in many forms. Some consist of nothing more than fragmentary notes giving times and dates of meetings and appointments. Some contain details of public events, and the perceptions of the writer about those events. Others are more intimate and personal, with reflection on the inner life of the writer. Many are intermittent, with much more written at some points in an individual's life than others, and with gaps of varying length. Joseph Goebbels took to writing almost daily from October 1923, using his diary as a private space to reflect on his own mental state and on what was happening around him. When he moved into political activism and then into public life, he used his diary to record larger events and to portray the people around him. By the early 1930s, when he had become a politician of national importance, he was becoming aware of the potential value of his diary as a historical document, and he began to write with future publication in mind, taking care to record his impressions of political developments. He continued this habit as a Minister after March 1933, now recording summaries of international affairs. After July 1941, as the war

intensified, Goebbels included every day a military communiqué from the headquarters of the *Wehrmacht*, and dictated his diary to a stenographer. He had by this time developed the habit of setting aside time every day to work on his diary, and the entries became correspondingly longer. This habit – one might call it a compulsion – ended only in April 1945, a few days before Goebbels moved with his wife and children into Hitler's bunker under the Reich Chancellery.

There were before 2006 several biographies of Goebbels, many of dubious reliability, but none were written with access to all of this extraordinary material. Several, lacking evidence from the early 1920s, took at face value, and rehearsed Goebbels' own *later* suggestion that he had joined the Nazi Party in Munich in 1922 after seeing Hitler speak at a public meeting.⁵ I found this to be only one of several completely inaccurate ideas about Goebbels which were frequently repeated, even in recent books about him and about Nazi Germany.⁶ The newly available evidence does not only tell us about Goebbels. Ian Kershaw wrote in 1998 that one of the main reasons for his writing a new biography of Hitler, which was published to great critical acclaim, was because of the new insights available from Goebbels' diary.⁷ How much greater then the potential for a new biography of Goebbels himself!

Inevitably, readers will ask whether Goebbels' diary is to be trusted. The man was, after all, one of the great liars of history. Clearly, this is a document to be approached with the greatest scepticism and care. Where possible, the 'facts' presented in it must be cross-referenced with other sources to test their accuracy. When this is done, Goebbels' diary is found to be extraordinarily accurate. Most aspects of the history of Nazi Germany are well documented, as this was a highly literate country with a particularly developed publishing and media sector. A mass of photographs, of film, and of sound recordings have survived to complement a rich written record. Hundreds of memoirs have subsequently been produced, and there is now a flourishing oral history movement which has added to our knowledge of this period. Goebbels was a careful and detailed chronicler, and his record of events stands up to close scrutiny. Of course, the subjective impressions he recorded of people and events are just that, and should be taken as such. Goebbels even wrote with surprising candour about some of the most ghastly Nazi crimes, such as the gassing of the Jews and the implementation of a policy of 'extermination through labour' for slave workers in Nazi Germany. True, his comments on these topics were brief and oblique, offering little detail. Nonetheless, there is consensus among serious historians of Nazi Germany that as a factual record, Goebbels' diary is extremely accurate, and that it is one of the most important documents from the period. No historian of Nazi Germany can ignore it.

Use of these newly available diaries begs a question. Do we need extensive 'life writing' to underpin a biography? Is it possible to write a good biography of a historical figure who has not left a diary, or extensive

personal correspondence? Here, the comparison with Hitler is instructive, and suggests that the answer is yes. Hitler did not keep a diary, and as an adult wrote very few letters. We have very little surviving personal writing by him. There are, of course, literally thousands of official documents, protocols of meetings, memoranda, public pronouncements, transcriptions of speeches and broadcasts, to say nothing of his monologues which were recorded by people around him. This material lends itself to a very different kind of biography, one where an individual is seen much more from the outside, as a public persona. Isaac Deutscher, in the preface to his classic 'political biography' of Stalin, wrote: 'It is impossible to narrate the private life of Stalin, since only one private letter of his has come to light'.⁸ Even the most recent biography of the Soviet leader by Stephen Kotkin, drawing on evidence from a wide range of people who knew Stalin, has presented him as a professional revolutionary, a man of extraordinary determination who exercised an immense influence on twentieth-century history, but says little about his inner life. Kotkin notes that he avoids 'speculative leaps or what is known as filling in the gaps in the record of Stalin's life'.⁹

Where there is an extensive and frank personal record, as with Goebbels, the potential exists for a biography which seeks to reveal the inner life of its subject. And, we should add, there is no shortage of surviving material revealing Goebbels as a public figure. As a practising journalist, he wrote between 1919 and 1933 no fewer than 791 articles in different newspapers!¹⁰ Transcriptions of his speeches run to hundreds of pages. As with any individual, there are lacunae. Most frustratingly, we have no sound recordings of his early speeches, and we are left largely to imagine what extraordinary qualities he must have had to rise from nowhere in the 1920s to become the Nazi Party's favourite speaker, second only to Hitler himself.

Biography and 'great men'

Is biography a historical form appropriate only for reconstructing the lives of significant figures? To this day biography – both academic and popular – is dominated by accounts of famous people, those who by dint of personality, talent and circumstance have stood out from their fellow men and women, and who typically have enjoyed remarkable lives, whether in politics, sport, the media or in other fields. Well into the twentieth century, biography as a literary form was considered more or less exclusively fitted to record the lives of exceptional figures in history. This idea chimed well with the popular nineteenth-century idea that history was made by 'great men', a preoccupation which resulted in numerous biographies of leaders such as Napoleon and Frederick the Great, imagined as colossal figures who had taken history into their own hands and reshaped it through the force of will and personality. Even when Lytton Strachey pioneered the idea of 'critical biography' in the early twentieth century, challenging hero-worship with a

satirical approach to his subjects, he concentrated his attention on what he called 'Eminent Victorians'.¹¹

Several developments in the twentieth century have changed this. As discussed in Martin Wright's chapter in this volume, the emergence in the 1960s and after of 'history from below' turned historical attention towards ordinary people, and led in subsequent decades to new forms of social history which concentrate on the experience of everyday life. Women's history has sought to recover the lives of women, so long hidden from view, and opened up new fields for biography.¹² In the 1980s, historians further developed the idea of prosopography, or collective biography, hoping by studying similar groups of people to understand better the lives of others like them.¹³ By turning to oral testimony, historians have sought to record the voices of people who did not leave copious written records. The whole field of micro-history, which sought to turn away from the great events around which earlier narratives had been structured, and to examine historical situations from a local and small-scale perspective, deliberately used as a major source of evidence the life-writing of hitherto obscure and unknown individuals.¹⁴ In recent years, biographers have often consciously sought to reconstruct the lives of ordinary people, men and women, sometimes using them to challenge existing accounts which focus more on the rich and famous. In 2014, this has been particularly apparent in the numerous commemorations of the First World War, many of which have centred on reconstructing the biographies of ordinary people who were involved, and who were previously unknown to posterity.¹⁵

All of these newer forms have been applied to modern German history, and in particular to the history of Nazi Germany. A flourishing social history has developed, seeking to understand how ordinary people reacted to the rise of Nazism in the 1920s and then lived – and died – in the 'Third Reich'. Many historians have concentrated on the experience of women, long considered marginal to the history of Nazism because they were largely excluded from the public sphere. Oral history, often based on local community initiatives, has complemented these developments. Most recently, academic historians have turned to prosopography, seeking to isolate groups or types of people in Germany, and to explore their experience.¹⁶ Writing the life of Joseph Goebbels, I was for the most part concerned with a figure who played a role in politics, in national and then in international affairs. When he was appointed by Hitler to the new post of Propaganda Minister in March 1933, Goebbels was proud to be the youngest man ever to serve as a Minister in Germany, and he enjoyed being at the centre of events. He did not confine his role to shaping, or trying to shape public opinion, but liked to have a finger in every pie. Particularly through his close relationship with Hitler, Goebbels sought to influence policies towards the churches, on the treatment of the mentally and physically disabled, and of male homosexuals. He made himself the public face of Nazi anti-Semitism, fronting the public boycott of Jewish business in April 1933, and the organized pogrom of November 1938

which became known as *Kristallnacht*, or ‘The Night of Broken Glass’. The story of his life between 1933 and 1939 is also the story of the Nazi effort to create inside Germany a *Volksgemeinschaft*, what Burleigh and Wipperman called the ‘racial state’, and to reshape the map of Europe.¹⁷ Between 1939 and 1945, Goebbels’ fate was intimately bound up with Germany’s fortunes in the Second World War. Building on his earlier obsession with the persecution of Jews in Germany, Goebbels took it upon himself to try to influence policy towards the Jews of Germany and in Occupied Europe. His life in these years was not that of an ordinary person. He was wealthy, lived in considerable comfort and enjoyed mixing with politicians, businessmen, artists, generals and with film stars.

But in his early life, Goebbels’ life history was much more closely linked to that of many more ordinary people in Germany, and a close study of his individual experience can illuminate much more than his own life. It seems clear, for instance, that the disability which resulted from failed operations on his foot in childhood resulted in bullying and humiliation at school, and helped to turn the young schoolboy into a loner and a bookworm. Goebbels, unlike many other Nazis, did not serve in the First World War, and was not one of the brutalized and traumatized ex-servicemen who gravitated towards paramilitary violence and male comradeship in the post-war years.¹⁸ In common with most of the civilian population he did experience great material hardship and family tragedy. One of his brothers was taken prisoner by the French, and in 1915, his sister Elisabeth died of tuberculosis at the age of twelve. For the young Goebbels, now an undergraduate student, the collapse of the German war effort, the abdication of the Kaiser, and the defeat of the German army in November 1918 came as a huge shock. For the next six years, he shared the common experience of many young German men, of struggling to find gainful employment in a chaotic economy, and of trying to make sense of an external world in which the proud German people appeared to be victims of a vengeful conspiracy. He was forced to live without money of his own, in his parents’ house. Goebbels also tried, and failed, to build meaningful relationships with women of his own age. In these years, he was not involved with party politics, and was not in any sense a public figure, but his individual experience reflects that of many others. Goebbels was one of many who knew little or nothing about the activities of the Nazi Party in Munich, or of its leader Adolf Hitler, but who came in these years to see the Jews as the antithesis of everything German, and as somehow responsible for all the country’s problems.

Biography and psychoanalysis

In seeking to understand this vital period of Goebbels’ early adulthood, I drew in my biography on a psychoanalytical concept, Erik Erikson’s idea of the ‘second birth’, a formative and frequently troubled period when the

individual makes a transition from adolescence to adulthood. How can this, and other psychoanalytic ideas, inform a historical biography? Slowly, at different speeds in different cultural contexts, the ideas developed in the late nineteenth century by Freud and other psychoanalytic thinkers have seeped through academic disciplines, and into the public consciousness. Many of them are now part of the common cultural capital of the Western world. Before Freud, biographers had accepted that adult subjects had previously been children. James Boswell (1740–95), widely credited with having written the first modern biography in 1791, had famously proclaimed his intention to narrate Samuel Johnson's life 'from his cradle to the grave'.¹⁹ But in practice, most biographers had only provided a few anecdotes from the childhood of their subjects, typically using them to show the early emergence of a particular talent or aptitude. The psychoanalytic emphasis on the determining influence of the earliest stages of childhood, and of a child's relationships with its parents, pointed towards an entirely different understanding of adult behaviour, and towards a new form of biography.

As Freudian ideas have been disseminated, historians have wrestled with the consequences they might have for their own discipline. While some have welcomed psychoanalysis as offering, even demanding, totally new ways of understanding human motivation and action, others have argued that psychoanalysis presents fundamental problems. These controversies have been particularly sharp when applied to biography. If, as psychoanalysts hold, human behaviour is best understood through an analysis of repressed childhood experience and the interpretation of dreams, where is the body of reliable empirical evidence which historians and biographers normally rely on to be found? Long dead historical figures cannot easily be placed on the psychoanalyst's couch and invited to explore their memories. If adult behaviour is completely or even largely determined by childhood experience, is there any point in a biographer examining anything other than the formative stages of a life? And, given the increasing complexity of psychoanalysis as a discipline, how can a biographer without specialized psychoanalytical training hope to understand any given individual?²⁰

There have been several original and highly successful biographies of historical figures written, which have tried to overcome these problems: Erik Erikson's *Young Man Luther*, published in 1959, is still pre-eminent in the field.²¹ The Harvard psychoanalyst John Mack wrote a brilliant biography of T. E. Lawrence – Lawrence of Arabia – in 1974, which skilfully combined psychoanalytical interpretation of his subject with a historian's appreciation of the wider circumstances in which Lawrence carved out his famous career.²² Most recently, the critical acclaim accorded to Jonathan Steinberg's new biography of Otto von Bismarck (1815–98), the statesman widely credited with having unified Germany in 1871, suggests that psychoanalysis still has an important role to play in biography. Steinberg though wears his psychoanalytic learning lightly. He avoids using too much opaque psychoanalytical jargon, and concentrates on a set of ideas about Bismarck

which are easily understood, and not unduly speculative. Convincingly, he argues that Bismarck's personality was fundamentally shaped in childhood through his relationships with a weak, easy-going father, and an intellectually powerful but emotionally cold mother. Steinberg suggests that throughout his adult life as a politician Bismarck found himself playing out repetitions of this Oedipal drama, for example, in his relationship with Kaiser Wilhelm I and his wife, the Empress Augusta. 'He had', writes Steinberg, 'to re-enact day after day, year after year, the agony of his childhood, the little boy at the point of an upside-down triangle and at the mercy of the struggle between the threatening woman and weak man'.²³

Notably, and this is where the influence of psychoanalysis is strongest today, Steinberg constantly portrays Bismarck in a holistic manner, not just as a public figure, but as a human being who struggled with his health and with personal relationships. In his portrayal, we hear almost as much about Bismarck's hypochondria, his gluttony, his ill-will and his raging temper as about his consummate diplomacy and statecraft. This kind of biography, in which an individual is portrayed not merely as an adult in public life, but as a whole person, with a childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, with sexual desires, with dreams and with issues of physical and mental health, is a far cry from the hero-worship characteristic of so many nineteenth-century works.

When considering how to approach Joseph Goebbels, I faced a number of particular problems. The evidence for Goebbels' infancy and childhood is derived almost entirely from his own anecdotes, first committed to paper when he was a young man, and subsequently ossified in frequent repetition to subordinates. By the time Goebbels produced these anecdotes, he had become active in politics, and already wanted to recast his early life, in particular to suggest that he had been attracted to Nazism early in its history. When, as an adult he wrote and spoke about his parents, he felt obliged to cast them as stereotypes displaying characteristics widely recognized and celebrated in German society. His father, therefore, he described as an archetypal Prussian, 'a man of duty', a 'fanatic for work', and his mother as an idealized German matron who, unbowed by poverty, sacrificed everything for the upbringing of her children.²⁴ By any token, this is unreliable material to work from. In fact, Goebbels had struggled to maintain good relations with both of his parents, particularly after leaving university. He was painfully aware that he had not fulfilled their fond earlier hopes that he might become a priest, and, for his part, he came to despise what he perceived as their philistine and petty bourgeois values. Goebbels did record his memories of a few dreams, but I felt it unwise to construct an edifice of speculation on these insubstantial foundations. Other biographers of Goebbels, drawing largely on the revelatory comments in his diary, have gone further, and have characterized him as having a 'severe narcissistic personality disorder', seeking in this diagnosis a key to unlock the understanding of his complex personality.²⁵

The evidential record for Goebbels' early adulthood is much broader and more reliable than that for his childhood, and here I found ideas which

Erikson had applied to Martin Luther (1483–1546) extremely helpful. Erikson, better known for his concept of the ‘identity crisis’, focused on Luther’s adolescence and early adulthood, a ‘second birth’ where, he argued, the individual leaves childhood, and has to determine and to create an adult identity. Erikson argued that this period was, in certain individuals, extended over several years, and might result in a prolonged crisis before the individual found a new and settled path to follow. Strikingly, he moved beyond the consideration of the family and parental orbit to include the wider societal context in which this ‘second birth’ was played out, and argued that in times of ‘pervasive ideological unrest’, it might be exacerbated. Although Erikson was writing about the religious and ideological struggles of the early sixteenth century in which Martin Luther came to maturity, his ideas appeared to me to apply with equal strength to the turbulent period of the early twentieth century in which Goebbels reached adulthood. Arguing that for some individuals this crisis resulted in delinquency or mental illness, Erikson wrote:

others, although suffering and deviating dangerously through what appears to be a prolonged adolescence, eventually come to contribute an original bit to an emerging style of life: the very danger which they have sensed has forced them to mobilize capacities to see and say, to dream and plan, to design and construct, in new ways.²⁶

Critically, Erikson’s model suggests a close relationship between the development of the individual personality, and the wider society in which that person develops. This is much more appealing to the biographer who wants to see individuals not as entirely free agents, or as prisoners of infantile experience, but as people living and maturing in specific historical contexts.²⁷ It is particularly applicable to the young Goebbels, who, even before he was actively involved in politics, was a close observer of events and trends in society around him.

Using the idea of the ‘second birth’, it became clear to me that the paradigmatic image of Goebbels, deeply entrenched in popular consciousness and still present in academic work, as the great opportunist, the cynic willing to take up any idea which he thought might serve his cause, was entirely mistaken. Working with the new evidence available, and integrating this with a wide range of other primary sources, I realized that there were red threads of conviction, developed in this critical period between 1917 and 1924, running through Goebbels’ life until its grisly end in 1945. He was firstly a passionate German nationalist, a sense he identified closely with his understanding of German culture, and which was developed during the First World War. His later involvement with Nazism only strengthened this feeling. Secondly, Goebbels maintained an obsessive hatred of the Jews, whom he saw as enemies of Germany and German culture. This was clearly central to his world-view in the immediate post-war years, well before he

met Hitler, and was a key factor in the subsequent relationship between the two men. Thirdly, Goebbels had a genuine belief in ‘socialism’, or what he would have called ‘German socialism’. Again, this was developed in the chaotic early years of the Weimar republic, when Goebbels came to identify his own, and Germany’s economic miseries with the failings of international capitalism. When he became a politician and propagandist with the Nazis, Goebbels identified strongly with those elements of the Party – notably the paramilitary *Sturmabteilung* (SA) – with a socialist agenda. Even during the Second World War, particularly as the Allied bombing of Germany intensified, Goebbels worked with characteristic energy to try to mitigate the suffering of ordinary German civilians. Finally, from 1924 until 1945, Goebbels developed and maintained a passionate veneration for Adolf Hitler. When he wrote in 1926, in a passage addressed to ‘Dear, honoured Adolf Hitler’, that if at some stage in the future everything collapsed, he and other loyalists would stand with Hitler, singing their defiance to the world, and ready to face death, this might have appeared to some readers as bombastic nonsense.²⁸ In April 1945, when other leading Nazis such as Himmler, Göring and Speer deserted Hitler and sought to make individual accommodations with the Allies, Goebbels alone joined Hitler in the bunker under the Reich Chancellery and followed him by committing suicide as the Red Army closed in around them.²⁹

Goebbels’ attraction to these ideas about German nationalism, community, leadership, and about race can be seen, with variations, in many other German men and women who lived through this period, and suggests that his is more than an individual story. The consolidation of these ideas and their convoluted genesis encourage us to revisit the complex questions of continuity in German and in European history, rather than to imagine the ‘Third Reich’ as some kind of bizarre aberration, a departure from history. Steinberg’s work on Bismarck, concerned with nineteenth-century history, suggests something similar. Although focused on one remarkable individual, he has much to say about the development of larger attitudes and ideas in the newly unified Germany, and argues that Bismarck left a powerful legacy which can be traced into the twentieth century, notably in attitudes towards authority and decision making. He writes, looking chronologically forwards rather than backwards: ‘Bismarck’s legacy passed through Hindenburg to the last genius-statesman that Germany produced, Adolf Hitler, and the legacy was thus linear and direct between Bismarck and Hitler’.³⁰

Conclusion

Does biography still have vitality as a historical form? Does it have anything to contribute? If we judge by the great number of recent biographies in all fields of history, including those of important politicians and statesmen, of artists and thinkers, of men and women, of people both obscure and famous,

the answer must be yes. The value of biography is being acknowledged by historians working with other analytical frameworks, such as Adam Tooze, who states in the introduction to his acclaimed economic history of Nazi Germany: 'It is not for nothing that biography – both individual and collective – is one of the most illuminating ways to study the Third Reich'.³¹ Brutally rejecting E. H. Carr's idea that 'circumstances make the man, not the man the circumstances', Stephen Kotkin now argues that 'Stalin made history, rearranging the entire socioeconomic landscape of one sixth of the earth'.³² Human history is the record of what people have done, and while there will always be a place for studies of impersonal forces and structures, the analysis of the individual, and of that person's place in history, still has much to offer.

Study Questions

- Does biography distort history by overstating the importance of one individual?
- Does the tendency of biographers to identify or to sympathize with their subjects undermine the value of their work?
- How do different kinds of evidence affect different biographies? Does a good biography depend on the availability of intimate 'life-writing'?
- Can biographies offer a different way of looking at the periodization of an area of history?

Notes

- 1 V. Klemperer (1998) *I Shall Bear Witness: The Diaries of Victor Klemperer 1933–41*, trans. M. Chalmers (London: Book Club Associates), 30 July 1936, p. 172.
- 2 For fuller details, see T. Thacker (2009) *Joseph Goebbels: Life and Death* (London: Palgrave Macmillan).
- 3 See L. Lochner (ed.) (1948) *The Goebbels Diaries* (London: Hamish Hamilton); H. Heiber (ed.) (1962) *The Early Goebbels Diaries: The Journal of Joseph Goebbels from 1925–1926*, trans. O. Watson (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson); and H.R. Trevor-Roper (ed.) (1978) *The Goebbels Diaries: The Last Days*, trans. R. Barry (London: Book Club Associates).
- 4 See E. Fröhlich (ed.) (1998–2006) *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels: Teil I, Aufzeichnungen 1923–1941*, 14 vols (Munich: Saur); and E. Fröhlich (ed.) (1993–1998) *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels: Teil II, Diktate 1941–1945*, 15 vols (Munich: Saur).
- 5 See, for example, C. Riess (1949) *Joseph Goebbels* (London: Hollis and Carter), pp. 22–5.

- 6 It is rehearsed, for example, in Anna Klabunde's 2003 biography of Goebbels' wife Magda. A. Klabunde (2003) *Magda Goebbels*, trans. S. Whiteside (London: Time Warner)
- 7 I. Kershaw (1998) *Hitler 1889–1936: Hubris* (London: Allen Lane), p. xii. Even Kershaw did not have access to the full diaries, but used the substantial 'fragments' which were published in four volumes (covering 1924–1941) in 1987, and in five volumes (covering 1924–1945) in 1992. E. Fröhlich (ed.) (1987) *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels. Sämtliche Fragmente, Teil I, Aufzeichnungen 1924–1941* (Munich: Saur); and R.G. Reuth (ed.) (1992) *Joseph Goebbels. Tagebücher 1924–1945* (Munich and Zurich, Piper).
- 8 I. Deutscher (1979) *Stalin: A Political Biography*, rev. edn (London: Penguin), p. 18.
- 9 S. Kotkin (2014) *Stalin. Volume I, Paradoxes of Power, 1878–1928* (New York: Penguin Press), p. 9.
- 10 See S. Richter (2010) *Joseph Goebbels – der Journalist. Darstellung seines publizistischen Werdegangs 1923 bis 1933* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner), Anhang Nr. 5, pp. 517ff.
- 11 L. Strachey (1986) *Eminent Victorians* (London: Penguin) [1918].
- 12 A good example is J. Hannam (1989) *Isabella Ford* (Oxford: Blackwell). Biographers have also presented female subjects from Nazi Germany. See J. Lomax (1988) *Hanna Reitsch: Flying for the Fatherland* (London: John Murray); and A. Salkeld (1996) *A Portrait of Leni Riefenstahl* (London: Jonathan Cape).
- 13 See, for example, B. Harvey (1993) *Living and Dying in England, 1100–1540: The Monastic Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- 14 The classic microhistory of Nazi Germany, which focused on the experience of one small German town in the month before Hitler's accession to power is H.A. Turner (1997) *Hitler's Thirty Days to Power: January 1933* (London: Bloomsbury).
- 15 See, for example, R. David (2014) *Tell Mum Not to Worry: A Welsh Soldier's World War One in the Near East* (Cardiff: Deffro); one of many recent anthologies of life-writing from hitherto unknown figures is D. Young (2005) *Forgotten Scottish Voices from the Great War* (Stroud: Tempus).
- 16 Some prosopographies have concentrated on significant male groups in Nazi Germany. See, for example, R. Smelser and R. Zitelmann (eds) (1993) *The Nazi Elite* (London: Macmillan), and B. Campbell (1998) *The SA Generals and the Rise of Nazism* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press). On women, see, for example, E. Harvey (2003) *Women in the Nazi East: Agents and Witnesses of Germanization* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press); and W. Lower (2014) *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields* (London: Vintage Books). For an oral history which explores women's memories of everyday life in Nazi Germany, see A. Owings (1995) *Frauen: German Women Recall the Third Reich* (London: Penguin).
- 17 M. Burleigh and W. Wipperman (1991) *The Racial State: Germany 1933–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

- 18 Curiously, this does not prevent Klaus Theweleit from using Goebbels as one of the subjects in his influential study of 'Fascist' paramilitaries in Germany after the First World War. See K. Theweleit (1987) *Male Fantasies*, 2 vols (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press) [1977].
- 19 R.W. Chapman (ed.) (1970) *Boswell, Life of Johnson: A New Edition, Corrected by J. D. Fleeman* (London, Oxford, and New York: Oxford University Press), p. 29.
- 20 See G. Walker (2010) 'Psychoanalysis and History', in S. Berger, H. Feldner and K. Passmore (eds), *Writing History: Theory and Practice*, 2nd edn (London: Bloomsbury).
- 21 E. Erikson (1959) *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (London: Faber and Faber).
- 22 J. Mack (1976) *A Prince of Our Disorder: The Life of T. E. Lawrence* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown).
- 23 J. Steinberg (2011) *Bismarck: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 469–71.
- 24 Thacker, *Joseph Goebbels*, pp. 107 and 327.
- 25 See in particular P. Longerich (2012) *Goebbels. Biographie* (Munich: Pantheon).
- 26 Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, p. 12.
- 27 It is of course the point famously made by Karl Marx, when he wrote: 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.' K. Marx (1979) 'Excerpts from 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon', in L. Feuer (ed.), *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy* (London: Fontana), p. 360.
- 28 J. Goebbels (1927) 'Dr Generalstab', *Wege ins Dritte Reich* (Munich: Eher Verlag), pp. 7–9. Goebbels had in 1926 published this article in the Nazi Party newspaper *Nationalsozialistische Briefe*.
- 29 For further development of these ideas, see Thacker, *Joseph Goebbels*, pp. 324–32.
- 30 Steinberg, *Bismarck*, p. 478.
- 31 A. Tooze (2007) *Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (London: Penguin), p. xx.
- 32 E.H. Carr (1958) *Socialism in One Country, 1924–1926* (New York: Macmillan), Volume I, p. 151; and Kotkin, *Stalin*, p. 739.

Further Reading

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