Minister of Propaganda throughout the Hitler years, Josef Goebbels had no rival in the black art of lying to the public. Down the centuries, cynical rulers had habitually exhorted their subjects to commit crimes for the sake of empire and power. Goebbels went further, pioneering a modern technique of presenting crime as the pathway to virtue. Still today the memory lingers of this man, gnome-like in his brown shirt and swastika armband, on the platform of an auditorium in Nazi Germany whipping up mass audiences apparently only too eager to accept what was in fact incitement to robbery and mass murder.

Could Goebbels have been compensating for some inadequacy? One of six children of humble parents, he had a difficult start in life. In particular he suffered from a neurogenic clubfoot. An unsuccessful operation left him permanently lame. A dissatisfied student, Goebbels tried his hand at novellas, lyric poetry, and a dramatization for the stage of the story of Judas Iscariot. None of this was good enough to find a publisher. Capable of perceiving the endless possibilities of literature, he did not have the talent to contribute to it. In normal circumstances, he would almost certainly have sunk without a trace, and it might even have been possible to feel pity for him.
Reaching adulthood in the early 1920s, Goebbels began the routine of writing up a diary every single day, and he continued to do so right through the war when his job obliged him to write weekly editorials and articles. The thirty-two volumes of the diary are housed in the Institute of Contemporary History in Munich, and Peter Longerich has made good use of them. He attributes to Goebbels “a manic compulsion to write.” Goebbels’s account of the events he was living through is of course primarily self-serving, but quite unconsciously he reveals himself to be a toady and an opportunist.

At the outset, Goebbels had experimented with both Catholicism and revolutionary socialism. Then at a conference in 1925 he encountered Adolf Hitler. “What a voice. What gestures, what passion,” he recorded in the short staccato sentences that are the hallmark of his style. He asked himself, “Who is this man? Half-plebian, half-god! Is this really Christ or just John the Baptist?” Once Hitler was chancellor, Goebbels was guided by his belief that “Our national destiny rests in good hands.” Hitler’s opinions about street fighting, art and German music, people and politics and strategy, became Goebbels’s opinions. Goebbels burnt books written by more talented men; Hitler banned or destroyed paintings by more talented artists. Appointed Gauleiter of Berlin, Goebbels masterminded on Hitler’s orders the 1938 Kristallnacht pogrom, and as soon as this was feasible he rounded up the city’s Jews to be killed in the death camps: “A fairly barbaric procedure. Not to be described in any detail . . . not much is left of the Jews themselves.” The voice of Hitler himself can be caught through a diary entry like that.

Goebbels’s access to Hitler and his undoubted skill in the role of Hitler’s spokesman gave him status and, no less importantly, money and royalties with which to acquire the homes, motor boats, and fast cars that he had set his heart on. But this same access allowed Hitler the final word in Goebbels’s private life. He ordered Goebbels to break off his affair with Lída Baarová, a glamorous Czech actress, and to repair his marriage to Magda Quandt. There is some evidence of a triangle, or, as Longerich puts it, Magda was to become “the woman who would take her place at Hitler’s side.” After spending a week alone with Hitler in the Eagle’s Nest at Berchtesgaden, Magda wrote to Goebbels guardedly that “it was all very nice.” Even during the war Hitler would spend long evenings in the Goebbels home and show an interest in the children, “a kind of family member,” to quote Longerich again.

When it came to current affairs, however, Hitler treated his Minister of Propaganda more like a servant than the indispensable colleague projecting his false image as Europe’s greatest statesman. Goebbels was almost completely excluded from the process of making decisions. He was not told that Germany was intervening in the Spanish civil war, for instance, and he was informed of the 1938 Anschluss with Austria only after the event. Hitler kept him in the dark about his intentions at the time of the 1940 blitzkrieg in the west, and gave him only a week’s warning of the June 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union. Hitler safeguarded his own position by playing his ministers off against each
other, deliberately embroiling them in disputes about their responsibilities. Goebbels knew how to steer his way through this atmosphere of quarrelling. When Hitler criticized him publicly “in front of all the officers and adjutants,” Goebbels gave himself away in his diary to which nobody else then had access, “he has the right to do so; he’s a genius.”

A narcissist is one who admires himself without reserve. Answering to that description, Goebbels keeps hammering at the brilliance and success of his speeches and writings, congratulating himself with comments like “Exhilarating feeling of commanding the masses” or, again, “Berliners treat me with a love and affection that could hardly be bettered.” As a historian, Longerich gives a very detailed and convincing portrait of Goebbels, but he resorts to psychoanalysis for the different interpretation of a narcissist as someone in need of constant recognition. Whether this was the case with Goebbels is not proven. What he took as applause concealed the suspicions of his equals and fear on the part of the general public of what he might do. He sent a writer by the name of Ernst Wiechert to a concentration camp for proposing to contribute money to the wife of Pastor Martin Niemöller, and he treated a man distributing anti-Nazi leaflets as “A piece of filth. . . . We’ll see if he’s got any backers. Then execution.” When Count Wolf-Heinrich von Helldorf, the police chief of Berlin, was hanged after the July 1944 plot to kill Hitler, Goebbels did nothing on behalf of one of his oldest friends. He boasted, “by liberating Berlin from Jews I have carried out one of my greatest political acts.” Finally defeated, he made his own children pay for his Nazism by killing them. A special definition of “narcissist” is all very well, but “monster” is a better fit.

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