

Making God: Joseph Goebbels and the Veneration of Hitler

by

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This thesis focuses on Joseph Goebbels and his desire to create a pseudo-religion around Adolf Hitler for the purpose of rousing and maintaining popular support. Goebbels has been analyzed extensively in terms of his personal life and actions within the Nazi Party, but his influence on religion is scarcely covered. Through analysis of Goebbels' novel, *Michael*, his own diaries, and the speeches that he gave on Hitler's birthday each year between 1933 and 1945, I argue that Goebbels wove together religious imagery and political language in an attempt to make his vision a reality.



Making God: Joseph Goebbels and the Veneration of Hitler

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## Ch. 1 - Historiographical Literature Review

Religion is something that in life is unavoidable. It is in every country, and it has most likely touched everyone's life in some form or another. This truth can be seen even in seemingly unlikely circumstances, such as a National Socialist Regime that promoted the systematic murder of over eight million people, six million of whom were Jewish, between the Nazis' coming to power in 1933 and the end of World War II in 1945. During this time, Christianity was experiencing a split in Germany, as seen below. It is through this split that Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi Propaganda Minister, saw an opening to create a pseudo-religion around Hitler, and thereby harness the support of the masses. Through Goebbels' work, the Nazis turned religion, what many consider a beacon of hope, into an extension of their malice.

This topic of Christianity's role in Nazism has only recently come under serious scrutiny, because the Nazis destroyed many of their own records, and German citizens after the war attempted to conceal pastoral involvement, which has led to multiple cases of uncatalogued documents. Indeed, scholars such as Doris Bergen and Susannah Heschel both make mention of this phenomenon during their searches, which unfortunately has extended the process of research on the topic of Christianity in the Third Reich.<sup>1</sup> However, this is not to say that there are no sources in the years between the end of the War and Bergen's and Heschel's work. Rather, this difficulty warrants mentioning because it indicates that significant developments are made with each successive work published.

It is necessary to provide some background about religion in the Third Reich before describing the works that discuss the phenomenon. There are two major points to consider, and

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<sup>1</sup> Heschel, Susannah. *The Aryan Jesus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). Xii. and Bergen, Doris L. *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press Chapel Hill, 1996). Xii.

additionally a general overview of events that occurred between the seizure of power and the beginning of the war. Firstly, there is a necessity to define the two most important factions of the Protestant Church: The Confessing Church and the German Christians. The Confessing Church is typically identified as the Church of resistance against the Nazis, while the German Christians are defined as the pro-Nazi Church. The German Christians bought into the Nazi idea of “Positive Christianity,” a Nazi doctrine that suggested Christianity was a German religion to be followed by Germans.<sup>2</sup> These definitions do have some flexibility, and the authors discussed later challenge these assertions. Secondly, it is important to note that there were Pagan groups associated with the Nazis, if only marginally, and they, at least according to some scholars, influence the actions of the Nazi hierarchy in relation to Christians. As for the overview of events, it will suffice to say that overall, Nazi affinity with and acceptance of Christianity waned as the end of the war approached. The 1920s included no actions against Christians by the Nazis. The 1930s proved more complex since initially the Nazis attempted to keep the Christians involved, but in 1933 their attitudes shifted and policies against religion began to take shape. By the 1940s, Christianity had been turned on its head.<sup>3</sup>

A few terms are necessary to understand, as well. These are *Kirchenkampf*, which is a German term meaning ‘church-struggle’ and describes the tension between the Confessing Church and the German Christians. Also, the noun *Volk* (people, nation) and the adjective *völkisch* (nationalist), neither of which translates precisely into English, essentially represent the idea of community and unity among the Germans, but became an important part of Nazi terminology and ideology. The German Christians specifically used these terms to argue for

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<sup>2</sup> Conway, John. *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches 1933-1945* (Liverpool, England: C. Tinling & Co., 1968) 5.

<sup>3</sup> Conway, *Persecution of the Churches* used in entirety to create rudimentary timeline.



racial cleansing of the Church in order to protect the *Volk*.<sup>4</sup> One final point to clarify is what is meant by the term popular support, as this is essential to the argument presented by this thesis. When used, this term describes the relationship between the people and the Fuehrer that Goebbels sought to achieve. His intention was to convince the people that without Hitler Germany would not function, and therefore they should place all of their love and interest at his feet. This support on occasion took the form of votes in elections, or religious zeal, but in all cases Goebbels wanted it to be fanatic.

To best show the development of argument throughout this field of inquiry, the church-struggle will be addressed first, followed by the influence of Goebbels. The main theme at the outset of this scholarly literature was that Christianity and Nazism, while related, were not intertwined to the degree that later works suggest. However, as more evidence has become available and previously unviewed writings have been analyzed, the theme has shifted. Now the majority seem to agree, that at least on some level, Christianity played a role in Nazi ideology, but few have addressed the role Goebbels played.

In *From Luther to Hitler*, written in 1941, in the midst of the war, William McGovern does not address the actual role of Christianity during the time he is writing about, but does discuss the role of Martin Luther as a large part of why Germany became a totalitarian state. McGovern wrote that Luther “started with a plea for individual liberty and for freedom of conscience; yet his doctrines led directly to the belief that monarchs have a right to dictate religious dogmas to the private individual.” He also quotes Luther as saying that “all men should be subject to the iron will of their secular lord.”<sup>5</sup> McGovern connects Luther and his ideas to the

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<sup>4</sup> Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 8.

<sup>5</sup> McGovern, William M. *From Luther to Hitler: The History of Fascist-Nazi Political Philosophy* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1941) 31.

creation of a fascist state in Germany not only because Luther was German, but also because his argument that men should always listen to their secular lord pushes the Church out of secular affairs. Additionally, McGovern mentions Luther's belief that, although God reigned supreme, he also placed certain men into positions of power, and therefore those men should be followed and obeyed. This belief becomes incredibly important concerning the German Christians who exalted Hitler as a messiah. Although McGovern worked with incomplete sources since the war was occurring while he was writing, his work on Luther's influence is largely echoed by another contemporary author. Robert S. Wistrich, editor of *Demonizing the Other: Antisemitism, Racism, and Xenophobia*, also implicates Luther as an influence on the Holocaust and briefly provides his own opinion of the Nazi position relative to Christianity. He states, "Martin Luther's mythologizing of the Jews as completely diabolical, provided an even more powerful arsenal of images for Nazi antisemitism" than the Nazis could produce without this endorsement.<sup>6</sup> McGovern's assertion that Luther was an important influence on Nazi Society has stood the test of almost sixty years. Wistrich also adds that "despite their underlying Christophobia, for example, the Nazi leaders made a thorough and systematic use of Christian anti-Jewish stereotypes."<sup>7</sup> Here Wistrich is making known that in his view the Nazis' were not interested in Christianity for moral reasons, but instead because they knew their regime required popular support. While this assertion is not original to Wistrich, it is one of the most contentious points in the debate over Christianity during this period. Following McGovern, John Conway addressed the topic of Christianity and Nazism and came to a similar conclusion as Wistrich.

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<sup>6</sup> *Demonizing the Other: Antisemitism, Racism, and Xenophobia* edited by Robert S. Wistrich. (Australia: Harwood academic publishers, 1999) 3.

<sup>7</sup> Wistrich, *Demonizing the Other*, 3.

Conway's book, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches*, written in 1968, was one of the first of its kind. Conway used this work to begin unraveling the complicated and often confusing world of religion in the Third Reich. He argues that in his rise to power, Hitler was inherently hostile to the Church privately, but publicly supported it. Conway argues that Hitler and his underlings were aware of the need for popular support, and knew that the Churches not only had people, but also influence, in the communities of Germany. In fact, he explicitly states that "Hitler's opposition to the Church was...not so much ideological as political."<sup>8</sup> He cites Hitler's speeches as evidence of the reasons the Church supported Hitler, and discusses Hitler's use of anti-Bolshevik rhetoric to appeal to the Churches, saying that they had to be protected from the atheistic element of Bolshevism. Conway also notes Hitler's initial refusal to support the radical policies against the Church suggested by the writer Artur Dinter, Nazi official Gregor Strasser, or the staunch pagan Alfred Rosenberg.<sup>9</sup> However, Hitler would eventually make an about-face concerning the Churches. Once the German Christian movement began gaining support, Conway argues that Hitler saw it as a threat to his Reich. Conway argues that this perceived threat prompted Hitler's intention to stay separate from the Churches from then on, and in the event that Church groups attempted to invoke Nazi support, they were denied.<sup>10</sup>

Not only did Hitler begin to repudiate the German Christians, but Conway argues that he also began to notice the Catholic and Pagan influence in the Party. In order to gain the popular support of the Catholics, which was ultimately the deciding factor of the Nazi Party's victory in the 1933 Reichstag elections, Hitler implemented a Concordat with them. The Catholics believed that signing this document would prevent the Nazis from infiltrating their faith, but this was not

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<sup>8</sup> Conway, *Persecution of the Churches*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

to be. Conway argues that once the Catholics supported the Nazis in the elections, Hitler did not intend to abide by the Concordat. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, Conway views Röhm-Putsch, or Night of the Long Knives, not only as a maneuver to consolidate power, as it is generally viewed, but also as a direct attack on Catholics. During the Putsch, in which Nazi Party members killed Ernst Röhm and others who opposed them, three Catholic priests were killed, which Conway considers the real goal. He also contends that this Putsch was designed as a scare tactic to keep other Churches in line.<sup>11</sup> Finally, Conway makes what may be his most important and contentious point. He argues that Hitler's disdain for the Catholics is related not only to envy of the Catholic following, but also to his childhood.<sup>12</sup> This idea that Hitler hated the Catholic religion and religion in general becomes a major focus for other authors. Conway's overall position in his work is that the Nazis were only interested in Christianity and religion in general, if it provided popular support, and if it did not, or if the Churches became too large for their liking, then the Nazis would swiftly deal with them.

Before continuing on to Doris Bergen's work, which is the next text surveyed here, it is important to note the seeming gap in scholarship. Conway's work was published in 1968 and Bergen's in 1996, but a few noteworthy works appeared in between them. For example, Ernst Christian Helmreich's *The German Churches under Hitler: Background, Struggle, and Epilogue* provides a similar narrative to Conway's, and J.R.C Wright's *'Above Parties': The Political Attitudes of the German Protestant Church Leadership 1918-1933* focuses more on the Weimar Republic than the Third Reich and therefore falls a bit outside of the frame and focus for this

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 87.

essay. Work on this subject continued during the 1970s and 1980s, but Bergen's is the next book to make major strides in studying this field.

In her book, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich*, Bergen approaches the *kirchenkampf* from the side of the congregation rather than from the side of the Nazis. Bergen argues that the German Christians specifically were not created by the Nazis and were often at odds with them even though they were supportive of Nazi policies. She argues that the German Christian movement often tried to combine its message of religious revival with the message of national revival from the Nazis. Bergen supports Conway's assertion that the Nazis were not interested in allowing the Churches into their organization because of the fear that it would alienate their non-Christian members, and as such, the Nazis continually opposed this union. To add to the confusion, Bergen observes that the German Christians were not a single body of believers, but rather multiple small groups scattered across the Reich that all went by the same name, *Deutsche Christen*.<sup>13</sup> She nevertheless studies them as one group, and identifies the similarities rather than the differences. One of her most interesting points is that Bergen argues against the assertion that the Nazis only used Christianity for political gain, and instead argues that the Nazis wanted to use Christianity to control the people via control of the religion. Also, she shows that the German Christians did not promote the expulsion of non-Aryan Christians from the Church, or from Germany, in order to make their religion palatable for the Nazis, but instead indicates that this idea was a critical part of their faith in relation to the *Völk*.<sup>14</sup> What this means is that Bergen views the German Christians as separate from the Nazis, but parallel in their aims.

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<sup>13</sup> Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 8.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

Bergen also takes a new stance on the Confessing Church, which many, including Conway, cite as the church of resistance. Bergen notes the fact that Wilhelm Niemöller, a leader in the Confessing Church, became a Party member in the 1920s and sympathized with the German Christian movement. Bergen says that he only left the German Christians because he disagreed with their politics. His brother, Martin Niemöller, followed a similar path. Since both are, at least before Bergen's study, recognized as leaders in the Confessing Church movement, this revelation concerning their affiliation with the Party detracts from the idea of the resistant Church.<sup>15</sup> Bergen does not reject all previous scholarship, however, and even builds upon the work of McGovern in relation to Luther. She writes that Luther can be pointed to as a precursor for Nazi anti-Semitism because the Nazis used his writings. Luther's insistence that the Jews were separate and different from the Germans made it very easy for the Nazis and the German Christians to conflate Luther's meaning to suit their needs.

Before identifying problems with Bergen's work, one final point must be made about her understanding of the meaning of being Jewish in the Third Reich. Bergen discusses how the German people used the word Jewish not only to identify people that followed the Abrahamic religion, but also to identify atheists and Marxists. In the minds of German Christians, Catholics also sometimes fell into this category.<sup>16</sup> Essentially, being Jewish was not explicitly related to religion, but instead was about doing anything that could supposedly harm the *Volk*. This extended meaning brings us to some of the problems with Bergen's assertion that the German Christians, and to some degree the Confessing Church, were separate from the Nazis. The facts are that the German Christians urged their congregations to support the Nazi mandates against

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 32.

Jews, they supported the war efforts, they created programs to make the Nazis feel welcome in the Church, and the German Christians were inherently involved in the racial purity process since they maintained the baptismal records which were used to determine the religion of people in Germany. The German belief that religion and race were codependent was important to them and clearly shows that the Church was part of this process. In the end, Bergen explains the failure of the German Christian movement as their attempt to remove Jewish influence from the Church by disregarding the Old Testament and claiming that Jesus was an Aryan. However, this claim moved them even closer to the Nazi movement since the Nazis were happy to claim that Jesus was Aryan.<sup>17</sup> Overall, Bergen did an excellent job of chronicling the German Christian movement, but her assertion of a separation between this movement and the Nazis is weak at best. However, it did provide other authors a jumping off point for continued study of the German Christians and their influence on the Party.

Richard Steigmann-Gall's work, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945*, took a slightly different approach. Instead of arguing that the two movements were separate, Steigmann-Gall instead leans to the opposite. He states, "Nazism was not a result of a 'Death of God' in secularized society, but rather a radicalized and singularly horrific attempt to preserve God against secularized society."<sup>18</sup> To begin, Steigmann-Gall argues against Conway's idea that Hitler was a Christian only in public, stating that this view stemmed from a work written by Hermann Rauschning, a work that Steigmann-Gall argues should be considered incorrect.<sup>19</sup> Beyond this, Steigmann-Gall does not provide much reasoning, and he even ignores

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>18</sup> Steigmann-Gall, Richard. *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 18.

<sup>19</sup> Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 28.

Conway and wrongly claims that Rauschning's is the only work to consider Hitler this way. However, he does not disagree with the perception that Hitler was interested in Christianity only for popular support, and even suggests that Hitler saw Christianity at the center of the National Socialist movement.<sup>20</sup> He continues his work by discussing the role of Joseph Goebbels himself and of Protestant pastors such as Artur Dinter, and identifies the instances that started them towards a religion bereft of Jewish influence. He argues that Hitler wanted to focus on the perceived Jewish problem, but the Church leaders were more concerned with Catholic influence. Here Steigmann-Gall leaves an opening to discuss Hitler's agreement with Dinter on the idea that Catholics and Jews were working together to conspire against Germany in 1926; Steigmann-Gall fails to consider the possibility that Hitler's motivation could have been to avoid alienating Christians from his movement. Dinter in fact was ultimately expelled from the Party because of his continual attempts to turn Nazism into a religious revival, an idea which Hitler would have no part of. This disagreement further suggests that Hitler was only interested in popular support because just as he agreed with Dinter to avoid excluding Christians, he would not make Nazism a Christian movement for fear of alienating the Pagan members of the Party.

In his fifth chapter, Steigmann-Gall calls Conway by name, saying that he "believes that the Nazi endorsement of a *Reichskirche* [Reich's Church] in no sense implied a pro-Protestant sentiment."<sup>21</sup> Steigmann-Gall goes on to suggest that Conway thinks that the Nazis were interested in making the Church a puppet of the state. However, he next treats the Nazi attacks against the Protestants in Germany, thereby jeopardizing his assertion that the Nazis were pro-Protestant. He explains this discrepancy by saying that the attacks were never as severe as those

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 155.



against the Catholics, but this claim does not reduce or eliminate the evidence of attacks against Protestants. Overall, Steigmann-Gall's book is well researched and provides a much more detailed look into the workings of the Pagan sector of Nazism, but stumbles when trying to prove that Nazism wanted to protect God through its movement. While it is true that the German Christians and the Pagans believed in a God or Gods and carried these beliefs through to the end, it is unfair to suggest that this was the Christian God that their hero Martin Luther believed in. Additionally, Steigmann-Gall concludes: "Nazis maintained that it was not enough to be in a religious organization: one had to serve *Volk* and *Führer* in the New Germany," which suggests a movement that was more interested in secular gain than religious.

Susannah Heschel would be the next scholar to address Christianity and Nazism in her work, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany*. Her work focuses on the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Life, which was established by the German Christian movement in 1939. This Institute's mere existence in the Third Reich suggests, as Heschel points out, that the Nazis were interested in having the support of the German Christians. Heschel suggests that the Institute was focused on "the one issue central to the Nazi regime: antisemitism."<sup>22</sup> Heschel stresses that Nazism and the German Christian Movement are not exactly the same, but that they do coalesce around a common point. This is similar to Bergen's argument that the two movements were separate but parallel. Heschel also appears to agree with Conway and Steigmann-Gall on the point that Nazism was interested in Christianity simply from a populist standpoint. Heschel wrote, "the Nazi Party could not reject Christianity – not only because it would offend the moral and social sensibilities of Germans, but also because the antisemitism of Christianity formed the basis on which the party could appeal to

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<sup>22</sup> Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus*, 6.

Germans with its racial and nationalist ideology.”<sup>23</sup> Heschel moves on from here to discuss Siegfried Leffler whom she identifies as a “figurehead of the Institute” by 1939.<sup>24</sup> Heschel notes the fact that Leffler was in favor of Jewish expulsion and murder in 1936, several years before it became official Nazi policy. The fact that Leffler was a German Christian working at the head of an Institute backed by the Nazis, and that he supported Nazi policy even before it was theirs, suggests that this religious movement was more closely related to Nazism than Heschel, or Bergen for that matter, is willing to explicitly admit.

Heschel then covers the race element in German Christian theology in much the same way that Bergen does. She places some of the blame for the Holocaust at the feet of the Church because of its willingness to accept Nazi policies that worked against the Jewish citizens of Germany. She argues that the Church backed their policies in order to garner support from the Nazis, but that in doing this they sacrificed their religion. Heschel argues that this sacrifice led to both the aryianization of Jesus, and the depiction of the war as a life-or-death struggle against Jewish influence.<sup>25</sup> She argues that the Christian approval and acceptance of Nazi political goals was just as important to the outcome of the Holocaust as was the actual implementation by the Nazis. This idea of placing blame on the Church is elaborated in *Complicity in the Holocaust: Churches and Universities in Nazi Germany* by Robert P. Ericksen.

Ericksen begins by discussing the development of the research surrounding the involvement of pastors in Nazism. His goal is to accurately depict the role of pastors in Nazi Germany, rather than show their role as they would prefer it to be seen. He sees the Churches as complicit because of their refusal to actively work against the Nazi policies that led to the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 19.

Holocaust. Ericksen argues against Conway's acceptance of the Confessing Church as the resistant group, and instead says that while the heroism of Niemöller is noteworthy, it does not reflect the actions of others in the Confessing Church.<sup>26</sup> He also says that the Nazis "did not want to interfere with its [the Church's] self-management."<sup>27</sup> This argument runs counter to Conway and Bergen. However, he agrees with McGovern, Wistrich, and Bergen that Luther should be seen as a critical influence on the creation of antisemitic Nazi policy. Similar to Conway, Ericksen mentions that the Concordat signed with the Catholics was simply a ploy for Catholic support in the Reichstag elections. However, he disagrees with Conway that Hitler's dislike of Catholics stemmed from his childhood, but rather suggests that it resulted from the Catholics' willingness to criticize NSDAP before 1933.<sup>28</sup>

Ericksen's work ends much as it began, with the assertion that the Church played an important role in the development of the Holocaust. He restates his book's purpose, saying that the Church was complicit because, as a whole, it never "seriously challenged Nazi policies as they brutally escalated, especially in the mistreatment of the Jews."<sup>29</sup> He asserts that it liked the Nazi Party's policies and that it is unfair to place all the blame on the Party. Instead, Ericksen takes the more uncomfortable route of saying that all German people who did not actively attempt to prevent the Holocaust are complicit in it and especially those in the Church since they had people that they could organize against it.

To this point, mention of Goebbels in literature concerning the church struggle has been quite marginal. To some degree, the scholarship has been presented here intentionally to show

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<sup>26</sup> Ericksen, Robert P. *Complicity in the Holocaust: Churches and Universities in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 26.

<sup>27</sup> Ericksen, *Complicity in the Holocaust*, 26.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 231

that, as mentioned above Goebbels' involvement in religious issues is not yet fully covered. However, a few works do tackle the subject of Goebbels and his relation to the Church, and the first one analyzed here is Ian Kershaw's *The 'Hitler Myth': Image and Reality in the Third Reich*.

Kershaw's specific interest in the image of Hitler relates directly to the work of Goebbels and provides insight into how effective Goebbels was in creating pseudo-religious symbolism around the Führer. The premise of Kershaw's work is that the Nazi propaganda machine was uniquely designed to create the Hitler myth, that is, the belief that Hitler was greater than any other man and would be the sole savior of Germany. This myth was put in place to convince even those citizens who were not in favor of the Nazi regime that Hitler was worthy of their adulation. Particularly interesting in this work is that Kershaw implies, but never explicitly states, that those who believed the Hitler myth placed Hitler in a religious context. In other words, Kershaw is unwilling to term these people as a separate denomination of religion in the church struggle, but his wording does employ religious imagery. Two examples of this wording are found as early as his tenth page on which he writes, "however strange the deification of Hitler by the people of a modern industrial nation may seem to us, its causes contain a message which is not altogether comforting," or a few pages later when he writes "the *völkisch*-nationalist Right offered a kind of secularization of belief in salvation."<sup>30</sup>

As he continues, Kershaw makes further inroads to understanding the need for Goebbels and his propaganda in relation to the pseudo-religion surrounding Hitler. He writes that the spread of the Hitler myth was particularly important during the elections of 1932 and, although it

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<sup>30</sup> Kershaw, Ian. *The 'Hitler Myth': Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) 10, 18. Additional mentions of this intentional blending of nationalistic ideology and religion are found throughout this work.

is not explicitly stated, that it was valued as propaganda at this crucial moment.<sup>31</sup> Kershaw lists his reasons, which include dissatisfaction with the Weimar Republic, underestimation of Hitler, and Hitler's embodiment of the necessity for authoritarian leadership, to explain why the German people supported Hitler so fervently. Interestingly enough, Kershaw does not place religious connotations in this category of necessity, even in the light of his own religious overtones. The work continues through the life of the Third Reich, mentioning somewhat vaguely the role of Goebbels, but Kershaw's view on his influence shines through at the end of the book. Kershaw states that "Goebbels raised up the Führer to be the 'German God.'"<sup>32</sup> This statement is the most obvious example in his entire work that there is a link between Goebbels and the religiosity surrounding Hitler, but Kershaw did not follow this thread.

Another book that provides some information concerning Goebbels and religion has already been examined in this survey, Steigmann-Gall's *The Holy Reich*. His conclusion provided a direct correlation between religion and service to the Reich. As was also mentioned above, Steigmann-Gall makes the argument that Hitler's prime motivation in maintaining a tenuous relationship with Christianity was to gain popular support. This goal explains both the Nazis' use of Martin Luther as a symbol of unity and Goebbels' interest in aligning the people behind Hitler through religion. In support, Steigmann-Gall points out Goebbels' novel *Michael*, in which Goebbels elevates Christ as the greatest example of "German" socialism.<sup>33</sup> Another interesting point made by Steigmann-Gall is that Goebbels was ambivalent concerning Luther, which can be interpreted as Goebbels' own desire to avoid alienation of Protestants and his

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<sup>31</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler Myth*, 42-46.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>33</sup> Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 44.

recognition that Luther is a uniting force for the Nazis.<sup>34</sup> Thirdly, Steigmann-Gall echoes Heschel's work when discussing *Michael*. He writes that Goebbels made Jesus an Aryan and argues that being Aryan was a matter of faith.<sup>35</sup> This passage is particularly enlightening because it provides further support for the idea that Goebbels saw Hitler as a messiah for the Germans, as long as Hitler continued to embody Aryanism. Additional argumentation for this Hitler-messiah complex is found in Uriel Tal's collection of essays, *Religion, Politics, and Ideology in the Third Reich*.

Although published after his death, Tal's collection of essays is useful for the discussion of Goebbels and his role in deconstructing Christianity for Nazi use. Tal is a celebrated historian cited by several of the works included in this survey. The first essay in the collection is titled "Political Faith' of Nazism Prior to the Holocaust," and in it Tal argues that the institutionalization of salvific religion and politics occurred before the seizure of power by the Nazis in 1933.<sup>36</sup> This assertion is particularly important because it, at least according to Tal, establishes a timeline for the continual use of religious symbolism throughout the Third Reich. Additionally, in his essay "Structures of German 'Political Theology' in the Nazi Era," Tal argues that it was Hitler who initiated his own savior qualities while he was struggling with the Weimar government, but stepped away from this imagery once he took power.<sup>37</sup> This statement contradicts his later statement that Hitler believed the faith of the people, that is popular support, was necessary for his continued control over Germany, an idea similar to Kershaw's argument in *The Hitler Myth*.<sup>38</sup> What this paradox does suggest, however, is that Tal believed that Hitler,

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 31-32.

<sup>36</sup> Tal, Uriel. *Religion, Politics, and Ideology in the Third Reich: Selected Essays* (London: Routledge, 2004) 28.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 95.

and by extension Goebbels, were well aware of the need for popular support and therefore did not want to sever the bond between Nazism and religion. This common thread of popular support and its role connects all of the works included here, and explains reliance on Luther's teaching and Goebbels' interest in Hitler being seen as a savior.

The next work discussed here, and perhaps one of the most important, is Ralf Georg Reuth's biography of Goebbels, simply titled *Goebbels*. Originally printed in German, this volume is unique in that it includes Goebbels' relationship to Nazi religiosity. Similar biographical works such as Anthony Read's *The Devils Disciples* or research focused on Goebbels' propaganda work like Ernest K. Bramsted's book *Goebbels and National Socialist Propaganda: 1925-1945* ignore this aspect of Goebbels. Reuth covers the biographical information in a predictable linear fashion, beginning with Goebbels' birth and ending with his suicide in the Führer-bunker in 1945. However, it is what he includes about Goebbels' religious beliefs and actions that is most interesting. He states that Goebbels "wanted to elevate National Socialism to a religion in Christianity's stead," and argues that Goebbels' "descriptions of Hitler and his effect on people so often drew on religious vocabulary and imagery."<sup>39</sup> This assessment by Reuth plays directly into both the idea that Goebbels intended to create a religion around Hitler, and the idea that popular support was important for this message to come to fruition. Additionally, according to Reuth, Goebbels contended "belief could move mountains, and this belief would create a new Reich in which true Christianity would be at home."<sup>40</sup> This perspective, taken together with Steigmann-Gall's assertion that Goebbels saw Christ as the model socialist, and Conway's discussion of Nazi Positive Christianity, underlines the fact that

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<sup>39</sup> Reuth, Ralf Georg, translated by Krishna Winston. *Goebbels* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1993) 222.

<sup>40</sup> Reuth, *Goebbels*, 82.

Goebbels was not speaking of Christianity in its proper doctrinal framework, but instead in a twisted form. Overall, Reuth shows that Goebbels' interest in Christianity and his adulation of Hitler were intertwined and led to the creation of the German God that Kershaw describes.

It is now important to gain some perspective from Michael Burleigh, who argues for the existence of pseudo-religious messaging in Nazism. This work is treated here rather than before the inclusion of Goebbels because it is better understood after introducing the pseudo-religious ideals of Goebbels. Burleigh's *Sacred Causes: The Clash of Religion and Politics, From the Great War to the War on Terror* argues that Hitler was a self-appointed priest, and supports this idea by arguing that Hitler's focus on "fashioning a 'new man' or establishing heaven on earth" created a religion within Nazism.<sup>41</sup> His fourth chapter, "Apocalypse, 1939-1945," tackles this issue specifically while the rest of his book focuses on other religious issues elsewhere in the world. He argues that the most significant factor concerning how the pseudo-religion around Nazism overtook the Protestant Church was that the Protestants "had no external hierarchy...or theological resources to enable it to withstand even the most outrageous aspects of Nazi policy."<sup>42</sup> This assertion falls opposite to the argument that the Church was responsible for allowing Nazi policy. According to Burleigh, because the Church did not have any support outside of Germany, as the Catholics did in Italy, the Protestants were unable to withstand the manipulation of the Nazis. The Church succumbed to the same pressures as the rest of society. Burleigh does not suggest that the Protestant Church was itself culpable in allowing this pseudo-religion to form. However, in Burleigh's assessment, individuals within the Church did not do enough to defend it from the Nazi encroachment.

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<sup>41</sup> Burleigh, Michael. *Sacred Causes: The Clash of Religion and Politics, From the Great War to the War on Terror* (New York: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2007) xii.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.



Karla Poewe's work builds, almost organically, upon the writing of Burleigh, in the sense that her book focuses on the pseudo-religion around Hitler, but adds in the influence of Goebbels to strengthen and enhance the argument. Her book, *New Religions and the Nazis*, from the outset states that National Socialism was "a major political and religious force in Germany."<sup>43</sup> What is particularly interesting is how Poewe traces the beginnings of this religious thought to its roots, which she observes in the work of Jacobi Wilhelm Hauer. She argues that Hauer's emphasis on being "grasped by the sacred" and the importance of a leader having a powerful personality were both embraced by the Nazis in the coming years, which in turn assisted in their subversion of religion.<sup>44</sup> She argues that when Rudolf Hess entered a Party meeting in 1937 and asserted that "all force emanates from the Volk," the transformation from a religious movement to a political religion was complete.<sup>45</sup> From here, Goebbels "added with missionary zeal a propaganda strategy that proclaimed the 'positive' qualities of *Kampf*, intolerance, and speakers capable of 'convincing' audiences with their 'sermons.'"<sup>46</sup> Taken together, these quotes from Poewe's book suggest that Nazism was provided with a full and complete environment for its creation of a new kind of religion. One weakness of Poewe's argument, however, occurs when she moves to attack the work of Steigmann-Gall. She works against his idea that the Paganist element of the Party understood the necessity of Christianity, and instead argues that the Pagans spawned antisemitic beliefs and action. The weakness here is that she does not consider the role Luther played as a hero to the German Protestants, and the impact that his antisemitic writings had. In an otherwise compelling book, this omission substantially weakens her position.

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<sup>43</sup> Poewe, Karla. *New Religions and the Nazis* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 1.

<sup>44</sup> Poewe, *New Religions*, 4.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

The final work in this survey does not address Goebbels, but rather returns to Nazi-centric religion. In his book, *A Church Divided: German Protestants Confront the Nazi Past*, Matthew Hockenos provides excellent coverage of the actions taken by German Protestants after the war to reclaim their religion. He begins his argument by stating that Nazism was able to flourish amongst Churchgoers because of a distrust of God and trust in worldly government.<sup>47</sup> In responding to this contradiction after the war, Hockenos argues that Protestant Church leaders returned to their theology, focusing on sin, suffering, and salvation.<sup>48</sup> He blames the formation of the Confession Church on the Nazis, saying that the German Christians were the official Nazified Church, and that they were behind the removal of Protestant Church leaders during the *kirchenkampf*. This statement carries weight since several other historians surveyed here have refuted the idea of the German Christians being the official Nazi Church. Hockenos' general argument is that Protestant Churchmen did not completely ignore past events, but instead tried to manage how individuals viewed these events. By returning to their "suffering-salvation discourse" the Protestants were viewing the horrors enacted by the Nazis as similar to Christ's suffering, and believed that they would be better for doing so.<sup>49</sup> He concludes that the Church conservatives sought a new beginning for the Church, but they did not find it necessary to change their previous theology, structure, or politics.<sup>50</sup>

In sum, the literature reviewed here provides coverage of a number of different views concerning the Nazis and their relation to the *kirchenkampf*, Martin Luther, and Joseph Goebbels' relation to the pseudo-religion that formed around Hitler. What ties these topics

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<sup>47</sup> Hockenos, Matthew D. *A Church Divided: German Protestants Confront the Nazi Past* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004) 2.

<sup>48</sup> Hockenos, *A Church Divided*, 3.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

together is not only the facts that these books all uncover, but also that these topics are all bound together by the Nazis' need for and development of popular support. Conway, Steigmann-Gall, Bergen, Reuth, and Kershaw, taken together, make clear that popular support was sought by the Nazis above all else. The necessity of popular support explains why Hitler sought out Catholic support in the 1933 Reichstag elections, the general acceptance of the German Christian movement, and the creation of the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Life. Additionally, it explains why Martin Luther was continually used as a rallying point. The idea of a Reich Church was refuted, but this rejection did not prevent Hitler from being venerated by Goebbels in order to further solidify popular support. Even with all the literature surveyed here, this topic is ever changing, and as new evidence is analyzed, new conclusions will be drawn. The story is far from over and will continue to develop for the foreseeable future.

This thesis summarizes the present state of the question and develops our orientation for future research. Joseph Goebbels is the focus of this study because of his unique position within the Third Reich and his ability to influence the trajectory of that government. In addition, Goebbels exposed through his novel *Michael*, his diaries, and his birthday speeches that religion was an avenue that he wanted to exploit to achieve his goal of making Adolf Hitler the messiah of Germany. Through analysis of these sources, Goebbels' intent on creating a pseudo-religion around Hitler coalesces, and demonstration of his development illuminates a previously underappreciated aspect of the Third Reich's control over their population.

## Chapter 2

### *Michael: A Novel*

Dr. Joseph Goebbels is known by many today because of his service to the Nazi Third Reich. His position as the Propaganda Minister allowed him to uniquely influence the trajectory of the Reich as a whole. Before achieving this position, however, Goebbels was living at home with his parents. As a young man, fresh from university after earning his PhD in German Philology, Joseph Goebbels decided to write a novel while searching for work. This novel was *Michael* (1929)<sup>51</sup>, which is generally viewed by literary critics today as sophomoric. However, this novel provides the reader with a window into the opinions and ideals of Goebbels at this stage in his life. He was searching for the leader that he thought Germany deserved, and essentially described a Hitler-like personality in this fictional account before actually having met Hitler himself.

Stephen Pastore, the translator and editor of the edition of the novel used here, emphasizes this coincidence in his introduction. As a novelist and translator by trade, and former president of the Emile Zola Society, Pastore has significant experience in literary interpretation and translation. He argues that the character Michael anticipates Adolf Hitler, and that Goebbels is imagining the ideal leader for a Reich whose time had not yet arrived. His interpretation is revealing, and points to some of Goebbels' later fascination with Hitler himself. Adding to the complexity of the character Michael, Pastore argues that this character exudes Goebbels' own personal thinking, and therefore Michael can be seen as embodying the feelings and thoughts of Goebbels himself at the time of writing. My own analysis of this novel shows that Pastore's position is, at least in large part, correct. This novel provides the reader with the beginnings of its

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<sup>51</sup> Although published in 1929, *Michael* was written in 1923.

author's National Socialist ideals and exposes his inner longing to find a god-like figure to lead the Reich.

The design of this novel initially shocks the reader. It is written as if it is a diary, which seems to fit Goebbels, considering his lifelong penchant for keeping diaries. What this style of presentation ultimately shows, however, is a lack of organization throughout the work. Each entry in the novel bleeds into the next, and often the subject matter will jump wildly, in staccato fashion, from topic to topic, reflecting a sense of the writer's dysfunction and his feelings of alienation. His dysfunction and feelings should not detract from the novel's importance in identifying and understanding Goebbels' ideals at this time in his life. This novel was written after Goebbels joined the National Socialist Party in 1922, but he did not become infatuated with, and driven by, the movement until 1926.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, the opportunity exists for readers today to witness and comprehend the development of Goebbels' idealistic vision for the messiah of the Party. It is important to reiterate that Goebbels did not know Hitler intimately when he was writing this novel. In 1926, Hitler was recently released from prison, and although he gave himself the title of Fuehrer at this time, he was nowhere near the man he would become. Goebbels may have known of Hitler at this time, but he did not know him personally and therefore was only imagining his ideal leader of the Party in *Michael*, not describing an existing person.

Before delving into the information included within this fictional diary, one should take note of what is shown on the cover. Goebbels titled his novel with intention. The name Michael

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<sup>52</sup> Goebbels, Joseph. *Michael: A Novel*. Translated by Gunther Sonnenschein. Edited by Stephen R. Pastore. (San Diego, CA: Grand Oak Books, 2016) 10.

is biblical in its own right, and means “who is like God?”<sup>53</sup> This etymology is interesting because in this novel Goebbels essentially asks who this Michael is. He then goes on to describe the character Michael as a savior of Germany, a man who becomes a savior. The archangel Michael follows a similar path, and so Goebbels is conjuring a specific image within the readers mind, which should not be ignored. Goebbels was setting the stage for what became his ultimate political and social goal, to see the leader of Germany loved by the people and backed by their religiosity, though the full articulation of this goal was, in reality, still in the future.

Michael served in the German military during World War I, and the novel opens with him returning home to Germany. As he rides the train back into his homeland, Michael thinks, “My eyes drink in God’s beauty,” as he looks out upon the countryside.<sup>54</sup> Once he reaches his unnamed destination, he describes the “clean streets which only exist in Germany,” as he walks to the university.<sup>55</sup> Even from these two early passages, the nationalist trend of thinking is clear. Michael has done little more than ride a train and walk down the street, but already Goebbels wants the reader to think of Germany as the jewel of Europe. Michael goes on to discuss his university courses, and notes that “there is a great deal of writing, even more talking, and, it seems to me, awfully little learning.”<sup>56</sup> These themes of disillusionment with the manner of German education and with German class structure are found throughout the work, which may be interpreted as Goebbels speaking through Michael. Since Goebbels attended several different

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<sup>53</sup> Abarim Publications. “Michael meaning.” <http://www.abarim-publications.com/Meaning/Michael.html> (accessed 10/30/2018).

<sup>54</sup> Goebbels. *Michael* 22.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

universities, and consistently complained about each of them,<sup>57</sup> it comes as no surprise that the protagonist of this story feels the same way about education and the educated elite.

As the novel continues, Michael makes a telling statement: “We can only make ourselves into what God has put into us,”<sup>58</sup> which is rich with implications for the real world in Goebbels’ view. It suggests that regardless of how a person is born, or the position they are put into as a worker, the individual can only become as good as god will allow them. At least in Goebbels’ mind, if a leader—ultimately a leader like Hitler—was able to come to power, then god desired him to reach that station in life. To Goebbels such leaders were not gods but were instead only favored by god. However, in the course of the novel it becomes more obvious that Goebbels actually does see the Hitler-figure as a god, and not merely as godlike. A good example comes when Michael is speaking to his muse, Hertha Holk. As they discuss the state of Germany following the First World War, Michael claims that “there is only one calling for the young German: to stand up for the Fatherland.”<sup>59</sup> Whether by coincidence or not, this comment shows that Michael desires to see Germany return to what he views as its former glory. This same viewpoint was held by Hitler following the end of the First World War<sup>60</sup>, which reinforces the ways that Michael acts as a precursor for Hitler himself as Goebbels’ ideas progress.

Goebbels follows this incident with one of the several diatribes on politics in the novel. These diatribes are particularly useful because they provide specific details on Goebbels’ beliefs and political thinking at this time in his life. One of the most significant points occurs when Michael tells Hertha that every soldier who served in the German Army knows more about

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<sup>57</sup> Goebbels, Joseph. *The Early Goebbels Diaries*. Translated by Oliver Watson. Edited by Helmut Heiber. (New York: Fredrick A Praeger Inc., 1963) Preface by Alan Bullock. 19.

<sup>58</sup> Goebbels, *Michael*, 25.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 29 and 30.

<sup>60</sup> Waite, Robert G.L. *The Psychopathic God: Adolf Hitler*. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993). 302-304.

politics than the men who actually serve as government officials.<sup>61</sup> Here, Goebbels argues for the same type of government that, in fact, Germany would eventually create. The desire to see the government controlled by the people who fought for the country is expected since Goebbels was personally dissatisfied with the state of Germany, and since his main character Michael served in the Army and shared character traits with Goebbels. However, Goebbels himself tried to enter the Army, but was rejected for active duty and, instead, served in a secretarial role for a time.<sup>62</sup> In strong contrast, Hitler served in the First World War, as did Hermann Goering, eventual leader of the Luftwaffe. Thus, the type of government that Michael wants both reflects an ideal in the character's way of thinking and appears to build on the author's sense of alienation and isolation.

The diatribe becomes even more of a monologue as Michael describes what it means to be a socialist and how he can make himself better for both his own good and the good of the country. He argues that in order to be a socialist a citizen must first "subordinate the *I* to the *you*, sacrificing the individual personality to the totality. In its deepest sense, socialism is service."<sup>63</sup> Again, this sentiment embodies both nationalism and the desire to see those in charge who worked for the good of the nation. Goebbels is channeling the sort of National Socialist ideology that he would ultimately come to deliver and energize as Propaganda Minister long before his consideration for that position.<sup>64</sup>

Michael then states that "God created me in his own image. I am a piece of him. The greater and more towering I make God, the greater and more towering I am myself."<sup>65</sup> The

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<sup>61</sup> Goebbels, *Michael*, 31.

<sup>62</sup> Further information concerning Goering's and Goebbels' military service during WWI can be found in: Reid, Anthony. *The Devil's Disciples: Hitler's Inner Circle*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005)

<sup>63</sup> Goebbels, *Michael*, 34. Emphasis in original.

<sup>64</sup> Reid, *Devil's Disciples*, 130-136. Throughout this section of his work, Reid discusses Goebbels' literary efforts and his religious struggles. Reid attributes this time in Goebbels' life to his later political involvement.

<sup>65</sup> Goebbels, *Michael*, 35.



importance of this passage cannot be overstated. It is perhaps the most clear-cut example of Goebbels beginning to mold the imagined leader of the National Socialist movement with a religious ideology. He presents Michael as not only believing that he is part of god, but also that he can make god greater if he makes himself greater. This is similar to how Goebbels treats Hitler in the coming years, as made evident in later parts of this thesis.

Finally, Michael says to himself several diary entries after ending the conversation with Hertha that “I am in the process of demolishing the old world of faith in me...I struggle with myself to find a new God.”<sup>66</sup> Michael’s inner struggle is ultimately the same kind of struggle that Goebbels faced. Goebbels’ desire to change Germany and promote a new kind of leader for the nation was already forming, but in reality he had yet to find this person. As seen in chapter three of this thesis, Hitler became the man Goebbels sought.

The novel continues in a generally angsty style, but soon reaches another critical point in which Michael describes the need for a leader: “I feel as if someone else, a greater man, were maturing already. Someday, he will stand up among us and preach faith in the life of our Fatherland. Many people feel as I do, but only one man can put it into words.”<sup>67</sup> Once again Goebbels has described, in Michael’s voice, a sense of alienation and inferiority as well as a desire to find the proper leader for the German people. Two pages later, Michael discusses god again, arguing that god only sides with those who are determined and refuses the cowardly.<sup>68</sup> This passage parallels Goebbels’ feelings about himself and the nascent Nazi movement. The Nazis were initially a weak party in the Reichstag, and needed to create some appeal for people to join the Party. As such, this was also a time at which morale among the Party members was of

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 50.

the utmost importance, and a feeling that god was on their side would help maintain them.<sup>69</sup> Michael continues to describe his ideal god figure, writing that “Christ is harsh and relentless,” but that he “is the genius of love...the greatest and most tragic man who ever lived.”<sup>70</sup> This particular section of the novel is quite confusing because of Michael’s habit of jumping between topics. Even still, an incipient strain of Goebbels’ ideology can be gleaned from it, which means that Michael ultimately prefigures the future. The continual switch between idyllic descriptions of Germany and diatribes against Weimar officials builds on Goebbels’ own attitudes toward the contemporary regime.<sup>71</sup>

After Michael’s descriptions of the perfect god, another diatribe occurs, but this time Michael argues against the Jews. For ten pages Michael rants and continually explains why Jews are the ultimate enemy of the German state and how they have damaged Germany as a whole.<sup>72</sup> Specifically, Michael states that by forcing the “Jewish money changers out of the temple” Christ declared “war against money.”<sup>73</sup> Michael then argues that the Jew “has raped our people, sullied our ideals and paralyzed the strength of our nation, corrupting our morals and spoiling our ethics. He is the ulcer on the body of our sick populace.”<sup>74</sup> The final point Michael makes in this polemic is that “Christ cannot have been a Jew. I do not need to prove this with science or scholarship. It is so.”<sup>75</sup> To judge by his future actions, Goebbels already appears to be justifying his own feelings and bleeding them into the character of Michael. A similar desire to see the

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<sup>69</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler Myth*, 25 and 26. Included here is information on the weakness of the Nazi Party in 1926, and mention of Goebbels entry into the Party.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 56 & 57

<sup>71</sup> Reuth, *Goebbels*, 46-49. In this section, Reuth describes Goebbels’ discontent with his banking job, and provides insight on Goebbels’ unhappiness with the political state in Germany.

<sup>72</sup> Goebbels, *Michael*, 56 – 66.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 62 and 63.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

Jews driven out of Germany motivates both his own later actions and the words of Michael here, and it also helps to shape what, in retrospect, can be called the Hitler-like image within the character. There is no doubt in biblical scholarship that Christ was in fact a Jewish man, but by rejecting his ethnicity Michael, and by extension Goebbels, is willing to abandon the facts in order to create the desired narrative. This style of representing certain facts and not others served Goebbels well both in his post as Gauleiter of Berlin and later as Propaganda Minister for the Reich. In both posts he was expected to rally citizens to the Nazi cause, and did so by any means possible.<sup>76</sup>

The novel then transitions back into the idyllic descriptions of the German countryside and Michael's experiences there. He spends several of his diary entries describing the scenery and the women he encounters, and he writes a letter to Hertha, before turning back to discussion of how Germany will succeed in the future: according to him, Germany does not need multiple men, as in an army, but just one man to lead them.<sup>77</sup> Michael speaks as if he is the person who will lead the German populace: "My path: from the individual to the totality, from the phenomenon to the symbol, from the brother to the nation, and only from the nation to the world."<sup>78</sup> This claim reinforces the idea that Michael prefigures the ideology of Hitler. To this point, it is difficult to suggest that Goebbels was not thinking of someone like Hitler for the future leader of Germany.

Next, the novel moves away from discussion of political and social matters to attend to Michael's personal life. For twenty pages, Michael wanders around Munich and makes friends. One person he runs into becomes a lasting friend. This man is Ivan Vienurovsky, and he

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<sup>76</sup> Description of Goebbels service as Gauleiter of Berlin can be found in Reid, *Devils Disciples*, 154-165 and in Reuth, *Goebbels*, 78-81.

<sup>77</sup> Goebbels, *Michael*, 65.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

symbolizes Russia throughout the rest of the novel. He and Michael often discuss, and ultimately disagree on, politics and the proper social order. Ivan remains a presence in the periphery for the rest of the novel, but the mask Goebbels provides him is transparent. Ivan's political views represent the fear of Bolshevism entering Germany, as is corroborated by Michael's continual victories over Ivan when they argue. Interestingly, Michael respects the rebellious side of Ivan, and does not dismiss his ideas from the outset, such as he would when considering an idea he considered to be Jewish. Instead, the arguments they have are well thought out, with Michael finally returning to the German way of thinking. This relationship with Ivan not only shows how the author thought Germany was being affected from within, but also with how foreign influences need to be handled domestically.

Following this period of wandering and relationship-building, Michael again exposes his inner turmoil regarding religion. After a trip to an art museum, Michael reflects on a painting he saw: "Now I have the term: We modern Germans are something like Christ Socialists."<sup>79</sup> A long passage then compares Christ and Karl Marx, with lines such as "Distribute your property to the poor: Christ. Property is theft - so long as it does not belong to me."<sup>80</sup> This passage combines the concern about foreign influences in Germany with the construction of a new religious idea to unite the people of Germany. In an attempt to clear up this idea, Michael defines a Christ Socialist as someone who will "voluntarily and willingly [do] what the run-of-the-mill socialists do out of pity or for reasons of state. Moral necessity versus political insight."<sup>81</sup> In these lines, Michael envisions a merging between political and religious groups, culminating in the government being a religious entity. As is argued below, Goebbels also desired to see a

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

government that embraced one religion, which partially explains why he railed against both the inclusion of Catholics in the Reichstag and the influence of Jews in Germany. Michael ends by writing in his diary that “The struggle we are now waging today until victory or the bitter end is, in its deepest sense, a struggle between Christ and Marx.”<sup>82</sup> This passage almost does not need further explanation. Its true goal is twofold, to avoid foreign political influences getting into Germany and to have the people of Germany focused on one messiah.

As quickly as Michael enters this passage, he leaves it just as quickly. He turns back to conversation between himself and Hertha Holk, and for fifteen pages focuses on minor squabbles and annoyances.<sup>83</sup> Eventually his focus changes, and he discusses a rally he attended in which a First World War veteran spoke to the people. Michael describes the scene as such: “the man on the podium is...rolling stone upon stone in a cathedral for the future. Amid the ruins, someone is standing and raising the flag high.”<sup>84</sup> Here, in the mixing of political and religious imagery, is a break from the general depiction of Michael as prefiguring the character of a future leader like Hitler, and instead Michael looks up to a different leader. This inconsistency should not distract from the general point, however; it may be a consequence of Goebbels’ poor writing ability. Nevertheless, this reinforces the author’s focus on seeking the proper person to lead Germany.<sup>85</sup>

Michael decides he has seen enough of Munich and moves to Heidelberg, but despite his idea of beginning “his path to self sacrifice,” it is not entirely clear why.<sup>86</sup> Several pages then describe his new surroundings. Michael desires to work as a laborer instead of taking his

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 86-101

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>85</sup> Outside the novel, and in reality at the time of writing, Hitler had not yet risen fully, and in that sense even Hitler was in search of the ideal leader, a role he aimed for and subsequently claimed for himself. In contrast, Michael dies in the novel without achieving any leadership role for himself. In other words, although Michael prefigures Hitler in many ways, not everything about him is parallel to Hitler. Thus, there are many similarities and some differences between Michael and Hitler—exactly as a careful reader would expect in retrospect.

<sup>86</sup> Goebbels, *Michael*, 104.

university examinations because he feels that the best way to change the nation is through the work of his hands. However, this feeling does not deter him from continuing his intellectual journey and his attempts to describe the perfect government. He writes, “I suffer for a poor, errant, lost nation. But we still have strength left. There is a man who knows the way. I wish to become worthy of him.”<sup>87</sup> As expected, this person remains vague, but it embeds a desire to find the new kind of leader for Germany. Once again, Michael enters a rambling discussion of how to save the German nation: “we can never be saved by academic speculation” and “when I seek the new man, I first seek the German man.”<sup>88</sup> These statements are confusing at first, because, for the majority of the novel, Michael has spent his time arguing with his neighbors over academic topics. This juxtaposition is Goebbels’ attempt to show that Michael is changing into the new man. Instead of worrying about higher order concerns, Michael works as a laborer, focusing solely on his work, which reflects an ideal for the people of Germany as well. As Michael says, “A minority shall always rule. The nation's only choice is to live under an open dictatorship of the bold or to die under a hypocritical democracy of cowards.”<sup>89</sup> Here Goebbels harkens to his personal conviction that through the leadership of a messianic figure like the one Michael has sought throughout the novel, the German people will be made whole, as they were before the First World War. Michael states, “work shall set us free. With the political bourgeoisie, we reel into the abyss; with the political proletariat, we shall be resurrected.”<sup>90</sup> By allowing the people to work and support the government, at least in Michael’s mind, the German nation will flourish.

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 116.

Near the end of the novel, Michael is working in a mine. It is here that Michael seems genuinely happy, but the caveat is Ivan. In his mind, Michael fights with and ultimately kills Ivan, symbolizing the destruction of Bolshevism by Germany. It is important to emphasize that Ivan is not truly dead at this point, but only in Michael's mind. When Ivan is actually killed, Michael says, "You did not deserve to end in this way. Your destiny is the destiny of your nation. Shot and killed. No trace of the perpetrators."<sup>91</sup> Michael's relationship with Ivan and his response to Ivan's death are telling. In regard to Goebbels' thoughts on the Russian state. As a symbol of Russia, Ivan's destiny is the same as his nation's: in life Goebbels detested Marxism and Bolshevism and wished to see both eradicated.<sup>92</sup>

Michael finds some clarity in thinking about religion and the people, as he works in the mine: "We have lost our true cohesion with God." He follows that thought with "But we shall allow the broad masses to worship their idols until we can give them a new God."<sup>93</sup> This is Michael's last important point in regard to religion and leadership. He is killed in a collapse inside the mine, and the novel ends with Hertha reading about his death in a letter.

In retrospect, Michael is effectively a prefiguring of Hitler. Both served in the First World War and were disillusioned with the state of Germany following the Treaty of Versailles. Michael not only prefigures Hitler but also reflects Goebbels' evolving feelings and ideas about religion and politics. In his later work for the Nazis, Goebbels wanted the leader of the German state to be regarded as highly as people regard their god, thereby solidifying popular support for the regime. If the people are tied to the state by their nationalism and their religion, Goebbels hoped that the necessary political support would no longer be a concern. The worry about

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>92</sup> Reuth, *Goebbels*. For information on Goebbels feelings on Marxism see 53, 63, 66, 68. For Bolshevism see 58, 66, 205-206. In most cases, Goebbels relates Marxism/Bolshevism and Jewishness and is thereby disgusted by it.

<sup>93</sup> Goebbels, *Michael*, 142.

political support reflects the time the novel was written since the Nazi Party had only recently burst onto the scene and was starved of passionate citizens to assist them. However, building and maintaining popular support continued to be Goebbels' concern in his role as a Nazi official. As seen in the next chapter, Goebbels' ideals were realized when he met Hitler himself. Initially unimpressed by him, Goebbels came to recognize that Hitler was precisely the person he wanted to see in power, and he used his position in the Party and his influence to mold Hitler into a god.



## Chapter 3

### The Goebbels Diaries

As a young man, Goebbels was generally displeased with his station in life. His novel was not published until after he entered the Nazi Party in 1924, and as such he continued to live an average life. Educated though Goebbels was, he could not find a job that met the standards he set for himself, and he endured feelings of alienation. He found a place to put his energies when he joined the Nazi Party, but he was not yet entirely interested in Hitler himself. In fact, he worked under Gregor Strasser, who led a more radical socialist section of the Party than Hitler.<sup>94</sup> Strasser was devoted to Hitler's political vision, however, and through further exposure to Hitler Goebbels turned his attention toward the rising Nazi leader. This chapter exposes Goebbels' growing belief in Hitler and his ultimate devotion to him, along with his intentional blending of religious and political language to make Hitler into a messianic figure.

In his early diaries, Goebbels spends considerable time covering his own internal religious issues and his struggle to be important to the Party outside of Berlin. In the preface to a translation of the early diaries Alan Bullock provides a general overview of Goebbels' life up to 1925, but also delves into his desire for power, which manifested itself in his glorification of Hitler. According to Bullock, "Hitler too, although he knew how to use his gifts and although Goebbels' loyalty to him was unswerving, was distrustful of his Propaganda Minister's restless intelligence and held him at arm's length." Bullock also identifies that Goebbels' three defining features as "his intelligence, his professionalism and his passion for self-dramatization."<sup>95</sup> The importance of these statements is twofold. First, they indicate the fact that Goebbels and Hitler

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<sup>94</sup> Read, Anthony. *The Devil's Disciples: Hitler's Inner Circle*. (W.W. Norton & Company, New York: 2003) 143.

<sup>95</sup> Goebbels, Joseph. *The Early Goebbels Diaries*. Translated by Oliver Watson, Edited by Helmut Heiber. (Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., New York: 1963) p.10.

were distant from each other during this period, and secondly that Goebbels was concerned with dramatizing his own life and by extension, we may infer, the life of Hitler. Bullock concludes his preface by arguing that, although Goebbels wanted his diary to be read by the masses, his true audience was only himself: "Goebbels was writing to impress, with an eye to an audience; but the audience was himself, he was the reader he needed to impress." This statement recalls the image of Michael, in the novel by the same name, living a life that, at least in Goebbels' eyes, was full of purpose. Goebbels wanted to see himself as important and purposeful as well, and during the early years of his Party affiliation, he did not see himself as such. Therefore, Bullock argues that in these diaries, Goebbels sought to impress himself with his own actions and accomplishments. Although Goebbels may have used exciting language or syntax to stir the reader, the facts within the diary nonetheless reflect the activities and feelings of his life.

The introduction of this translation of the early diaries once again provides a brief overview of Goebbels' life up to 1925. However, the most important part of the introduction concerns how Helmut Heiber, the editor, accessed the original manuscript itself. Heiber writes that sections of the original were damaged by water or fire and therefore provided him considerable difficulty in editing them. This is an important point to remember concerning Goebbels' diaries; during the Russian invasion of Berlin, these manuscripts were not treated as valuable historical evidence, but instead as the ravings of a madman, which led directly or indirectly to the partial or total destruction of pages or entire diaries written by Goebbels. Therefore, there are some obvious gaps between the diaries, but their condition does not detract from the overall picture they present of Goebbels and his desire to glorify Hitler.

Now moving into the substance of the diary: Goebbels begins by arguing that the fall and winter of 1925-26 will begin a new stage of the “final struggle.”<sup>96</sup> He believed that the Reichstag elections of 1930 would be a defining moment for the Party. As the entries continue, Goebbels offers criticism like “Hitler is surrounded with the wrong people” and “Hitler’s book [*Mein Kampf*] is wonderful...what a political instinct.”<sup>97</sup> At this point in his life, Goebbels had apparently come around to Hitler’s way of thinking and he spends considerable time discussing how to develop the party outside of Berlin. His comment that enemies surrounded Hitler is understood as Goebbels’ wanting to be in a position of influence, because he believes that his advice for Hitler is better founded. Upon finishing *Mein Kampf*, Goebbels exclaims, “Who is this man? Half plebeian, half God! Really Christ, or only John?”<sup>98</sup> This exclamation, written on October 14th, 1925, is the first of many instances in which Goebbels invokes religious imagery to describe Hitler. His identification of Hitler as half-plebeian describes Hitler in much the same way that Goebbels described the character Michael in his novel: a man who could save Germany, unhindered by the bourgeoisie. This statement, coupled with Goebbels’ falling out with the Catholic Church, begins his journey towards the religious idolatry of Hitler. Yet, this road was not without its rough patches.

Within days of comparing Hitler to Christ, Goebbels begins to doubt his revolutionary ability. Five days after that entry, Goebbels writes, “We must get closer to Hitler. The programme, the spiritual and economic fundamentals, all of that is vague; in my own mind and the minds of others.”<sup>99</sup> The mention of spiritual fundamentals is interesting here, because Hitler

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<sup>96</sup> *Early Goebbels Diaries*, 29.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 29 and 31.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

himself was not intentionally spouting religious messaging. The Party and the Catholics in the Reichstag did not get along, and this rivalry led Goebbels to move against them, so the spiritual fundamentals he speaks of were of his own creation. Next he states that unless the Party clears up this issue with the Catholics, its revolution is sure to fail. Intentionally or not, Goebbels has revealed that he is losing his initial faith in Hitler. By February 1926, Goebbels confesses, “I can no longer believe in Hitler absolutely.”<sup>100</sup> His reasoning is based on Hitler’s failure to control supposed Russian influencers in German political circles. However, by March 21st, Hitler has once again “removed any doubt from [Goebbels’] mind.”<sup>101</sup> On display is Goebbels’ flair for the dramatic. Although Hitler allowed an outside voice, Hermann Esser, to influence him, Goebbels was simply upset because he was not in Esser’s position. In reality, Goebbels never lost faith in Hitler, but rather was jealous of his leader’s affection for another. His faith in Hitler was too strong to be swayed so easily.

After his faith in Hitler revived, not surprisingly the next several entries focus on praising Hitler. One such entry, on April 19th, states, “Lunch at a small pub. They [citizens in the pub] recognize him. Rejoicing.”<sup>102</sup> This passage highlights Goebbels’ interest in seeing Hitler revered not only by Party members but also by the public. If the people saw Hitler in the same way Goebbels did, then Goebbels would be that much closer to making Hitler the savior of Germany. In the same entry, but obviously talking about the next day, Goebbels discussed his feelings about Hitler while describing Hitler’s birthday party. He wrote, “Adolf Hitler, I love you, because you are great and simple. A genius.”<sup>103</sup> As noted previously, Goebbels harkens back to

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 79-80.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 80.

his desire for a leader who was a man of the people, much like the character Michael in the novel. These strong feelings were echoed again, when on June 14th Goebbels wrote, “I so look forward to Hitler’s visit. I venerate and love him.”<sup>104</sup> Clearly, Goebbels’ feelings towards Hitler have grown significantly since he entered the Party, and they have grown in direct relation to how Hitler fits Goebbels’ desired mold. It is important to note Goebbels’ use of the term venerate. Although he has used religious imagery previously, this is the first instance of Goebbels outwardly worshipping or venerating Hitler.

Religious language of this sort is seen continually through the rest of this diary. On the 24th of July, Goebbels wrote, “He [Hitler] goes on a long time preaching about the new state...It sounds like a prophecy. Up in the skies a white cloud takes the shape of a swastika. There is a blinking light that cannot be a star. A sign of fate?”<sup>105</sup> Within this particular passage are several important points, the first of which is simply the language itself. Goebbels has moved from someone who had no faith in Hitler in previous months, to someone who believes that this man creates signs in the heavens. This change exposes the level of loyalty, faith, and religiouslike belief Goebbels had in Hitler. Goebbels’ dramatic flair increases in proportion. Although he was not yet the Propaganda Minister, it is becoming clear why he would be chosen for that position. However, the most important part of this passage is the final line, where Goebbels calls attention to a light in the sky. As a former devout Catholic, Goebbels understood the relationship between Jesus and a guiding star. By inventing a similar event, Goebbels provided a divine narrative to emphasize Hitler’s rising power in Germany.

One of the final entries in these early diaries again points to a divine star. Goebbels exclaimed on July 25th that “A star shines leading me from my misery! I am his [Hitler’s] to the

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 100.

end. My last doubts have disappeared. Germany will live! *Heil Hitler!*"<sup>106</sup> This imagery, as stated above, provides the reader, who as Bullock pointed out was Goebbels himself, with a sense that Hitler was beyond human. Even in these early days of his Party affiliation, Goebbels could begin to see and feel that Hitler was the man he had been searching and hoping for. As described in *Michael*, Goebbels desired to be led by a man like the man described in *Michael*, and when he found Hitler he fell in love. Goebbels' deepest desire at this stage of his life was not only to be special himself, but also to find purposeful, meaningful work and to save Germany through it. Hitler fulfilled Goebbels' needs, and therefore became to Goebbels a sort of messiah. From that point on, Goebbels' mission was to convince the rest of Germany that Hitler could be this man for them as well.

Before moving into the diaries from 1939 to 1941, it is important to reiterate the reason behind the gap between the two diaries. Much of Goebbels' writing was destroyed or lost during and after the siege of Berlin, but the diaries from 1939 to the end of the war remain intact. Therefore, missing entries are not a concern after this point. Although it is regrettable to lose more than a dozen years of Goebbels' personal narrative, it is important to note that his feelings towards Hitler only grew stronger before and during the Second World War. It is only in the war's final days, when Goebbels and the rest of Hitler's entourage hid under the Reichstag, that his faith begins to waiver once again.

*The Goebbels Diaries; 1939-1941* are considerably different than the early Goebbels' diaries, and not only because of the drastic changes the world was experiencing. At this point in his life, Goebbels' belief in Hitler reached new levels, as exemplified by the fact that throughout this diary Goebbels does not mention Hitler by name and only refers to him as The Fuehrer.

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 101. Emphasis in Original

Thus, Goebbels makes clear that his veneration for Hitler has reached well beyond its previous extent, and Hitler is now even too holy to mention directly.

John Keegan's introduction of this published diary argues that after the seizure of power in Germany, Goebbels' work shifted from propaganda to *aufklaerung*, or enlightenment. He shows that while both Goebbels and Hitler appreciated the power of radio, Goebbels used it more effectively than Hitler to "sway the national imagination."<sup>107</sup> According to Keegan, in the wartime confusion, Goebbels was able to influence the beliefs and attitudes of the German people. The point he fails to make, however, is that this influence took on a certain religious connotation as well. Although Goebbels never directly attempted to influence the words spoken from the pulpit, he did encourage national belief in the government as a whole and in Hitler specifically. This religiosity was arguably the most important aspect of Goebbels' propaganda, because it motivated the support of the people, and without popular support, Hitler would not have been the man he was.

From the outset, this diary is not overly focused on Hitler, but rather is focused on the war effort and events occurring within Germany. Goebbels talks about his work and his ideal solutions to problems between the high ranking members in the Party. Also included is Goebbels' frustration at the fact that Hitler made all propaganda subject to inquiry by the Foreign Ministry, which Goebbels found particularly annoying. However, by late 1939 to early 1940 Goebbels returns to his almost daily discussion of Hitler and his feelings toward him. Beginning in 1940, Goebbels meets with Hitler regularly at midday to discuss the day's events and to strategize.

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<sup>107</sup> Goebbels, Joseph. *The Goebbels Diaries; 1939 - 1941*. Edited and Translated by Fred Taylor. (G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York: 1983) p. X.

The diary really becomes useful beginning with January 17th, 1940. The only noteworthy mention of religion before this date is Goebbels' comment on November 20th, 1939 that he will "make pastoral letters subject to censorship...this should put a stop to the clerics' abuse."<sup>108</sup> It is on January 17th that Goebbels and Hitler begin to debate the role of the Church in Germany. Goebbels states, "The churches must be left completely to their own devices. A united protestant church is not at all in our interest."<sup>109</sup> It is clear here that Goebbels and Hitler recognized the importance of the Protestant church in Germany and the influence that it carried. If they were to interfere with the church directly and unite all those citizens, it would have been difficult for the Party to regain control of those people. Instead, as Goebbels states, politically it made more sense for the Party to allow the church its own agency and to influence the people indirectly. Following this statement, Goebbels wrote, "The Fuehrer is very skeptical about the possibility of finding a substitute for the churches, and rightly so. That will be a task for some future reformer, which the Fuehrer in no way feels himself to be."<sup>110</sup> Again, this is similar to the character Michael in the novel when he looks outside of himself for a leader. Hitler was not himself interested in being the face of a Nazi religion, and in fact opposed any mention of this possibility. However, he was not opposed to the Party being an all-powerful group in Germany which would overtake the influence of the Church. To overtake its influence was Goebbels' task, and he was clearly aware of Hitler's attitude concerning the elimination of the church. Additionally, this entry mentions Reich Bishop Ludwig Mueller, a German Christian leader. It is important to note here that Bishop Mueller was a Party member. While Hitler wanted the Party to be separate from religion overall, there was little resistance to having Mueller as a Party

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<sup>108</sup> *Goebbels Diaries 1939-1941*, 56.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*



member. The fact that the German Christians influenced a large number of Germans, however, was enough reason for the Party to embrace Mueller in their ranks. Goebbels was not a fan of Mueller, stating that “Mueller has been of little use to us,” and added that it was “a pity that the Wehrmacht leadership [was] still very devout.”<sup>111</sup> These brief comments actually illuminate Goebbels’ broader ideas concerning Nazism and religion. He did not endorse formal religion within the Party, but he was fascinated by the control religion held over the people of Germany. Therefore, Mueller was a necessary headache, and Hitler’s resistance to religion would not keep Goebbels at bay. Goebbels’ comment in 1939 concerning pastoral letters only strengthens this interpretation. If these letters did not pose a perceived threat to Nazi control, Goebbels would not have found it necessary to censor them.

Religion once again falls to the wayside of the diary for several months. Goebbels finds himself preoccupied with other Party tasks. It does return in the spring of 1941, however, when on April 8th, Goebbels came back to the topic with fervor. He wrote, “[Hitler] hates Christianity, because it has crippled all that is noble in humanity.”<sup>112</sup> He then states, “What a difference between the benevolent, smiling Zeus and the pain-wracked, crucified Christ.”<sup>113</sup> Here Goebbels appealed to the symbol of strength that Zeus embodies, and wanted to ignore the supposed weakness of Jesus Christ, which stems from Goebbels’, and the German Christians’, idea that Jesus was an extension of Jewish thought and therefore was not worthy of their praise. Hitler also shared this general line of thinking, so it is no surprise that Goebbels accepted it. This assertion is supported by a comment that Goebbels made to Hitler several months earlier during a religious discussion. Hitler stated that “Christianity has infused all our erotic attitudes with

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 304-305.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

dishonesty. The so-called ‘morality’ of today is mostly nothing but hypocrisy.”<sup>114</sup> Hitler believed that Christianity had damaged not only German culture but also German morality. This is yet another example of the supposed failings of Christianity, and once again exposes why Goebbels desired to see that religious esteem transferred to Hitler.

Although Hitler did not endorse Christianity, philosophically or otherwise, he demanded that Goebbels remain a member of the church. Goebbels says as much on the 29th of April, 1941: “The Fuehrer...forbids me to leave the church. For tactical reasons. And so for a decade now I have paid my church taxes to support such rubbish. That is what hurts the most.”<sup>115</sup> The tactical reasons that Goebbels mentions were the loss of money and other support from churchgoers if the Party were to sever ties completely with the church. This loss would weaken the Party and therefore require subsequent action by either the Propaganda Ministry or the Ministry of the Interior. Therefore, despite Goebbels’ unhappiness with his continuing religious affiliation, it was crucial that he and other Party members remain part of the congregation.

In addition to these comments, there are snippets of religious conversation in entries spread throughout the diary. In one such case, Goebbels stated, “The Fuehrer passionately rejects any thought of founding a religion. He has no intention of becoming a priest. The best way to deal with the churches is to claim to be a ‘positive Christian.’”<sup>116</sup> The term positive Christian is taken directly from the German Christian ideology, which argued that to be a German and a Christian meant that support for the Party was absolute. These positive Christians also aligned with the thought that Christ was inherently a problem because of his Jewishness, and therefore they ignored the New Testament almost entirely. This underlying contradiction led to a

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 200-201

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 340.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 77.

significant twisting of Christianity, but Goebbels thought that the German Christians were worth keeping around. Allowing them to continue operating in Germany accomplished two of Goebbels' objectives. Firstly, those citizens who were part of the German Christian congregation were getting religious messaging and Party messaging at the same time, and secondly, it gave new citizens a Nazi approved religious option. The churches were spouting the propaganda that Goebbels spread in other areas, without asking specific Party members to join the Church. Following this statement, Goebbels wrote, "The Fuehrer is deeply religious, though completely anti-Christian. He views Christianity as a symptom of decay. Rightly so. It is a branch of the Jewish race."<sup>117</sup> Once again, this statement confirms why Hitler desired to keep Christianity out of the Party.

The final support for this message comes on March 23rd, 1941 when Goebbels stated that he would "ban the entire Church press. Because of the paper shortage."<sup>118</sup> Interestingly, following this statement he wrote that while the secular newspapers had to endure some cuts as well, they would still continue to produce content for the public. Although Goebbels did not state it directly, this idea to silence church publications was a strategic move. Goebbels could now keep the church from publishing anything that was counter to the Party's central messaging. In this way he avoided being overly obvious in his motives and potentially upsetting the church congregations.

In the diary which covered 1942-1943, the progression of the war becomes Goebbels' underlying focus. In his introduction to his translation of this diary Louis P. Lochner states that although this diary is typewritten instead of hand written it remains just as accurate. Lochner's other important observation is that "[Goebbels] prepared the ground well for Hitler's war on

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 278

civilization.”<sup>119</sup> Formal religion being a large part of German civilization, it stands to reason that in his statements Lochner included the Protestant church as a target of this attack on civilization.

The diaries from 1942 - 1943 included little on religion or Goebbels’ religiously influenced views on Hitler. In fact, Goebbels only identifies two instances of religion in any significant way. The first occurred on January 30th, 1942 while Goebbels was discussing the Tartars and their role in the Wehrmacht. He wrote, “It is interesting to observe what importance the clever exploitation of religion can assume. The tartars [sic] at first had a none-too-gratifying attitude toward the German Wehrmacht. But they changed about completely when permitted to sing their religious chants from the top of the minarets.”<sup>120</sup> This passage demonstrates Goebbels’ awareness of religion as a form of persuasion, which underlies his ultimate goal to attract the populace of Germany to the Party through similar means. By allowing people, in this case the Tartars, to express their religious views in a Party-approved manner, Goebbels could assure that they remained content and did not become a threat to the Nazis. Indeed, the Tartars actually helped the Party by serving in the Wehrmacht and defending areas under Nazi control.

The second instance of religious discussion came on May 12th, 1943, over a year after the first mention in this diary. Goebbels was preoccupied with writing about the war effort between these entries, but could not resist mentioning his frustration with the church at that point. He stated, “[The church] won’t tolerate a leader going his own way, especially if he has a private point of view on religious matters.”<sup>121</sup> He then embarks on a lengthy diatribe against Christianity, in which he stated, “A church that does not keep step with modern scientific

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<sup>119</sup> Goebbels, Joseph. *The Goebbels Diaries: 1942-1943*. Edited and translated by Louis Lochner. (Doubleday & Company, Garden City, NY: 1948) 14.

<sup>120</sup> *The Goebbels Diaries: 1942-1943*. 56-57.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 374.

knowledge is doomed.”<sup>122</sup> These two statements, leave much to unpack. Goebbels elaborates somewhat on his, and by extension Hitler’s, resistance to religion entering the Party. Had Goebbels tried to convince Hitler that he should openly become a sort of priest, the church would then be able to influence, to some degree, the messaging of the Party. Additionally, the second quote once again exposed the reason for the Party’s soft approach to the German Christians: the Nazis were against Jesus being seen as a prophet because of his Jewish heritage, which they believed to be proven by science. Therefore, the Party could not allow Christianity to take root within its organization. The German Christians, however, were open to, even accepted, the idea that Jesus was unnecessary to Christianity. This contradiction allowed the Nazis to keep a Christian religion open to their current and future members, without having to worry about complications around Christ’s Jewishness. Goebbels understood this complexity, as he showed in the previous entries.

The final diary of Goebbels’ life completes the circle of his religious feelings towards Hitler, and ultimately on the question of whether or not Goebbels believed he chose the right man to put his faith in. In his introduction to the translation of this diary, Hugh Trevor-Roper stated, “[Goebbels] needed an object of devotion and could not long reject the idol he had made.”<sup>123</sup> Clearly referring to Hitler, Trevor-Roper ends his introduction this way: “So as the clouds gathered more thickly...[Goebbels] would build up the image of the Fuehrer higher than ever, to tower above them.”<sup>124</sup> Trevor-Roper supports my argument in this thesis, but did not pursue that idea to its natural end; he did not suggest that Goebbels sought to see Hitler at the head of a Nazi religion. His final relevant word on Goebbels specifies that “[Goebbels] lived on

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 375.

<sup>123</sup> Goebbels, Joseph. *The Goebbels Diaries: The Last Days*. Edited by Hugh Trevor-Roper, Translated by Richard Barry. (Seeker & Warburg, London: 1978) xxv.

<sup>124</sup> *The Goebbels Diaries: The Last Days*, xxv.

Hitler, and although he could detach himself from Hitler, and the image of Hitler he created, he could not detach himself for long; his own essential nullity always drove him back.”<sup>125</sup>

Considering that this last diary focused on the very end of the war, and as such on the rapidly approaching end of Goebbels’ life, it does not come as a surprise that he became somewhat more candid in his feelings about Hitler. As previously stated, Goebbels wrote his diaries for himself, but it is reasonable to assume that his emotional state broke down to some degree at this point. He was writing his true and deepest feelings, regardless of who would know them.

By February 1945, when this diary picks up, Germany was in dire straits. The Soviet assault in the East was a major concern, and Goebbels focused on it intently. Another topic at the forefront of his mind was the failure of the Luftwaffe to assist in pushing back the assault. He continually mentions his desire to see Hermann Goering relieved of his position, but Hitler always rebuked these suggestions. Importantly, however, Goebbels never lost faith in the Fuehrer. Even when he mentioned Hitler’s failing health, he followed it by stating that “throughout the length and breadth of the land there is no one who can hold a candle to [Hitler].”<sup>126</sup> Goebbels’ faith in the Fuehrer was not shaken, at least not yet, even in those trying times. Goebbels blamed Hitler’s failures on those around him, just as he did in the early 1930s as Hitler came to power. His *modus operandi* had not changed; he maintained Hitler’s infallibility for as long as possible, even to the point of denying the facts. He continually asserted that Hitler

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 45.

was in good health, and even stated that Hitler could see the future in terms of how the Soviet forces moved toward Berlin.<sup>127</sup>

Goebbels also held to his belief that Hitler's messianic powers remained fully intact. While he discussed the state of Nazi soldiers taken as prisoners of war, he wrote that "Above all people in Eisenhower's headquarters are deeply impressed by the fact that all German prisoners of war still have faith in victory...[they] believe in Hitler with well-nigh mystical fanaticism."<sup>128</sup> To this point, Goebbels refused to see that the Reich was falling around him, and held to his own belief that the Fuehrer would see them through this difficulty. However, as the Soviet forces drew closer to Berlin, Goebbels' faith in Hitler finally waned.

Goebbels' main qualm with Hitler was his continual refusal to remove Goering from the Luftwaffe and therefore hampering the war effort. Initially, Goebbels relied on his typical backup plan: blaming all the people around Hitler instead of Hitler himself. He even began to blame the soldiers at the front, and when Hitler ordered executions of officers Goebbels thought that the "execution of these sentences should be educational."<sup>129</sup> Several entries later, with his attention returning to his frustration with Goering, Goebbels wrote, "The Fuehrer's procrastination over the matter of Goering has brought the greatest misfortune on the nation."<sup>130</sup> In these two passages, Goebbels' attitude toward Hitler was faltering. In the past, Goebbels had not shown faith in Hitler one moment, and damned him the next. Goebbels' ironclad belief in Hitler began to crack at this time and would continue to do so until the end of the war.

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 106. "This too the Fuehrer had prophesied." It is known that Hitler's health was deteriorating. For reference, see Fest, Joachim. *Inside Hitler's Bunker: The Last Days of the Third Reich*. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York; 2002) 21-22, 23, 45, 60, 131.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 184.

Until the end, Goebbels continued his silent struggle against Hitler concerning Goering. On March 21st, 1945 he wrote, "I rage inwardly when I think that, despite all the good reasons and arguments, it is not possible to persuade the Fuehrer to make a change here."<sup>131</sup> Goebbels now became annoyed by Hitler for his refusal to speak on the radio. Goebbels believed that Hitler could calm the citizens via the radio, but Hitler refused. At this point the citizens of the Reich had lost faith in Hitler, which Goebbels makes clear by continually speaking of them as questioning the decisions of the government.<sup>132</sup>

From this point, Goebbels continues his thinly veiled defense of Hitler, but to the reader of his diary it is apparent that he has lost most of his faith in the Fuehrer. In one entry from March 27th Goebbels wrote, "As I have already stated, the Fuehrer perceives everything correctly, but he draws no conclusions."<sup>133</sup> This comment seems tame, but as compared to his previous assessments it is unconscionable for Goebbels to suggest that Hitler was anything less than a divine genius. Interestingly, around this same time Goebbels uses some religious imagery again. While expressing his displeasure with Heinrich Himmler, the leader of the SS, Goebbels states that, compared to Hitler, Himmler "totally lacks the divine spark."<sup>134</sup> Although Goebbels had lost faith in his leader, he still regarded Hitler as divine in some fashion. The remainder of the diary focused on Goebbels' sense that, if only Hitler had better men around him, he would have been able to defend the Reich more effectively. Goebbels refuses to directly blame Hitler for the problems of the Reich, except in the case of the Luftwaffe leadership and Hitler's refusal to address the citizenry, via the radio or otherwise.

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 213, 228.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 281.



The importance of these diaries for this study cannot be overstated. Goebbels' obsession with detailing the minute details of his daily life connects the ideal leader created in his novel to his worship of Hitler later on. Through the diaries it is clear that Goebbels eventually found the man he described in *Michael* and was willing to devote himself totally to that leader and his cause. The birthday speeches Goebbels' presented, which are analyzed in the next chapter, reveal that Goebbels not only wanted to worship Hitler himself, but also that he would twist religious messaging to draw in the citizens as well. Thanks to the religious struggle already occurring in Germany, his task was all the easier.

## Ch. 4

### Birthday Speeches

Up to this point, Goebbels' personal feelings toward Hitler have been analyzed with the help of his writings. Through *Michael*, it became evident that even as a young man he imagined that someone akin to Hitler was needed to lead the German nation back to prosperity. He imagined a leader who would be a man of the people, but also would be separated from them because of his abilities. Within the novel, Goebbels began to establish the idea of a religious movement, if only in his own head. Through the diaries, he developed and refined his worship of Hitler, and began to place divine influence at the forefront of Hitler's rise to power. Through those personal accounts, Goebbels developed his own religious ideology around Hitler, and believed in him until Berlin was in ruin. As we will see, through the birthday speeches, which he gave every year the day before Hitler's birthday, Goebbels now exposes how he incorporated his own beliefs into public statements, and how he used these speeches to bring the public around to his way of thinking. Systematically, Goebbels used the power of peer pressure and continuous religious verbiage to influence the public's opinion of Hitler. Thus, for a long time Goebbels maintained the support necessary for Hitler to become the messiah he believed him to be.

Goebbels began giving these birthday speeches in 1933, and with the exception of 1934, did so every year until his death in 1945; in 1934 he gave a speech, instead, on the European press. The speeches are not the only way Goebbels influenced the citizens of Germany, but in them he used the most obtuse religious messaging. Because he presented these speeches once a year, he created a roadmap to follow how his messaging changed gradually over the course of Hitler's reign. In addition, the speeches always ended in the same way, by asking that Hitler

“remain for us what he has always been: Our Hitler!”<sup>135</sup> Goebbels used this routine ending almost like the Amen at the end of prayer. As a result, even the formatting of the speeches takes on a religious feeling. These speeches are a major resource for Goebbels’ attempts to deify Hitler in the public’s mind.

1933 was an important year to the Nazi Party because it was the year in which Hitler became the Reich Chancellor. Goebbels’ birthday speech that year was upbeat, and did not include as much deification as is found in speeches from later years. The reason behind the lack of religious messaging is obvious: Goebbels did not need to employ it since Hitler was already enjoying popularity because of his election. This is not to say that he did not include some religious messaging. Following his introduction, Goebbels states that “The mysterious magic that [Hitler] exerts on all who come in contact with him cannot alone explain his historic personality.”<sup>136</sup> Twice in this sentence, Goebbels attributes otherworldly power to Hitler. First, Hitler produces mysterious magic to convince others of his ability, but the second attribution is more nuanced. The idea of Hitler’s historical personality was something that Goebbels returned to throughout the birthday speeches, and it suggests that Hitler is larger than life and above the common person. According to Goebbels, even with these great abilities, Hitler “always remained the same: a person among people, a friend to his comrades, an eager supporter of every ability and talent.”<sup>137</sup> Just as the character Michael in the novel was the everyman, so too Goebbels projected that although Hitler was otherworldly, he did not behave as if he was better than ordinary individuals. Goebbels also mentions Hitler’s plain clothing and simple ideas. Goebbels

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<sup>135</sup> Joseph Goebbels, “Our Hitler,” (birthday speeches) Calvin College German Propaganda Archive. . <http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/goebmain.htm>. Let it be stated here that all the speeches, save 1937, are available from Calvin College German Propaganda Archive. As such, the URL will only be listed here, and the speeches will be differentiated by the year in which they were given.

<sup>136</sup> Joseph Goebbels, “Our Hitler” (speech, 1933). Calvin College German Propaganda Archive.

<sup>137</sup> Goebbels, “Our Hitler,” 1933.

argued to the crowd that through his simple mannerisms Hitler had made the Reich accessible to everyone, and thereby saved Germany. The final point to make concerning the 1933 speech is Goebbels' repeated mention of the idea that all the people of Germany love Hitler and have faith in him. If anyone in the crowd did not believe in the myth of Hitler, this technique would keep that person quiet by peer pressure. Goebbels actively worked to convince those citizens that their peers believed in Hitler, and therefore that they should too.

As already noted, Goebbels did not address Hitler in the birthday speech of 1934, but the themes from the 1933 speech continued into 1935. He began this speech by stating that he did not intend to give a typical description of Hitler, but intended instead to allow the public to see the Fuehrer from a different perspective. The religious connotations did not retreat, however. Before the end of his first paragraph, Goebbels dictated, "Adolf Hitler is the man of fate, who has the calling to save the nation from terrible internal conflict, and shameful foreign disgrace, to lead it to longed-for freedom."<sup>138</sup> Just as in 1933, Goebbels leads with some vague allusive religious messaging, thus setting the stage for his future assessment of Hitler. He followed up by saying that the people of Germany love Hitler because their love was "the result of the magic of his personality and the deep mystery of his pure and honest humanity."<sup>139</sup> Once again, Goebbels mentioned the magic of Hitler, but in this case he also mentions his mysteriousness. This way, Goebbels invokes the image of god by marking that Hitler is difficult for the ordinary person to understand, but that the citizens love him nonetheless. After this assessment, Goebbels again mentions Hitler's love of simple dress and behavior. He then discusses Hitler's unmatched knowledge and his ability to solve problems that lesser men could not. Goebbels then returns to specifically religious language because Hitler possessed "almost prophetic foresight" and was

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<sup>138</sup> Goebbels, "Our Hitler: 1935."

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

“The flesh of [Germany’s] flesh and the spirit of [Germany’s] spirit.”<sup>140</sup> These claims assert to those listening that Hitler is greater than any other man in Germany and that without him Germany would fail. According to Goebbels, Hitler was the embodiment of all that was German, and therefore should be placed above all other citizens. Before ending with the traditional salute to Hitler mentioned above, Goebbels made one final point: “The entire nation loves him, because it feels safe in his arms as a child in the arms of its mother.”<sup>141</sup> Goebbels again appeals to the power of collective belief. He exalts Hitler and argues that the rest of Germany does as well, thereby aiming to keep dissidents quiet for fear of being exiled or punished.

Goebbels’ speech in 1936 reads much the same as in previous years. Specifically, Goebbels reiterates the same themes with continued religious messaging throughout but does add new nuances. Specifically, Hitler was “like a rock in the ocean, he stands firm against all the troubles and difficulties of everyday life.”<sup>142</sup> One particularly interesting passage comes when Goebbels claims, “[Hitler] takes on the burdens of Atlas upon himself and earns not only the confidence and love of his own people, but becomes a factor in the morale of the entire world!”<sup>143</sup> Goebbels ramped up his religious messaging here by arguing that Hitler is no longer important only to German revitalization, but instead to the entire world. By comparing Hitler to Atlas, Goebbels again presents Hitler as superhuman, with ability beyond that of the normal citizen. Goebbels then once again appeals to the hivemind he created since Hitler enjoyed the “confidence and blind allegiance of the broad masses of our people.”<sup>144</sup> By continuing to push

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Goebbels, “Our Fuehrer, 1936”

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

this idea of Hitler and his overwhelming support, Goebbels attempted to bring into the fold those people who were not convinced by Hitler.

The highlight of the 1936 speech was Goebbels' declaration that when Hitler visited Cologne and spoke to the people there, it was "religion in the deepest and most mysterious sense. A nation affirmed God through its advocate, and put its fate and life confidently in his hands."<sup>145</sup> These remarks expose Goebbels' deepest intentions. His desire to create a religion around Hitler was succeeding, and he could not help but name it to his audience. His plan was aimed at bringing in those citizens who were disenfranchised by the church.

Goebbels' speech in 1937 emphasized the divine nature of Hitler, because of his successes in remilitarizing the German nation and improving the economy overall. Goebbels wanted to seize upon those successes and maintain, or improve upon, the popularity Hitler enjoyed. As was routine, Goebbels began by announcing the greatness of Hitler, and then moved into some specific examples. One such example, highlights the historic importance of Hitler's leadership: "That is the case with the Fuehrer. He is in fact the bearer of the German national will. His voice is the voice of the people."<sup>146</sup> This is another instance of Goebbels trying to influence the opinion of the public by promoting Hitler as popular throughout Germany. He then tackles Hitler's intelligence, this time suggesting that Hitler had omniscience, and telling those who would listen that "There is no area of public life that is hidden from him, or with which he is unfamiliar. His clear gaze reaches far, and he is involved in everything that happens."<sup>147</sup>

Goebbels went on to assert Hitler's genius and confidence: "Once he made a decision to act, he

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Goebbels, Joseph. "Our Hitler: 1937" in Bytwerk, Randall. *Landmark Speeches of National Socialism*: (Texas A & M University Press, College Station, TX: 2008). 81.

<sup>147</sup> Goebbels in Bytwerk, 82.

acted as a man confident in his guiding star.”<sup>148</sup> Goebbels’ biblical imagery here invokes the story of the wise men following a star. In Goebbels’ mind, Hitler was divinely guided, and in this speech he pushed that thought into the public consciousness.

By 1938, Hitler seemed even greater than he did the year prior. Germany’s success continued, and, as compared to life under the Weimar Republic, it seemed that things were only going up. Goebbels’ speech in this year sang the praises of the Fuehrer and continued to press his divine influence. Following his typical introduction, adding the reintegration of Austria, Goebbels quickly moved to Hitler and his influence. A particular situation had disturbed Hitler, who “strode with long steps across the room, and his face displayed godly anger and holy fervor.”<sup>149</sup> Here, in contrast to previous invocations of Hitler’s power, Goebbels displays that power as not only benevolent, but potentially malevolent when necessary. This development deepens the character Goebbels sought to create for Hitler, and secondarily seeks to intimidate dissenters. Goebbels then changes pace, turning to the conquest of Austria, and claiming that the people there who saw Hitler praised him. “We saw a picture of a man who climbed onto the Fuehrer’s automobile with his hands raised as if in prayer.”<sup>150</sup> Concluding this speech, Goebbels stated that Hitler was “bringing a miracle that was no miracle, only the result of tireless work blessed by the hand of the Almighty.”<sup>151</sup> Goebbels pulled no punches in this passage. Hitler was blessed by god, and Austria was now a part of the Reich only because of this blessing. Ending in the same way as always, Goebbels had presented his last birthday speech before the Second World War became a major concern.

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>149</sup> Goebbels, Joseph. “Our Hitler, 1938”

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

1939 marked Hitler's fiftieth birthday, and Goebbels wanted to give a speech to match the occasion, but this speech mirrored those from previous years with little change. His religious messaging and deceptive references to Hitler's popularity remained, and after telling those listening to celebrate, he returned to his old tricks. The most important passage in this speech arrives when Goebbels discusses Hitler's personality, a term that Goebbels here uses to reference the magical effect of Hitler's personality: "A nation inclines to doctrines only when it is poor in personalities. But when a man of historic greatness stands at its head, one who not only wants to lead but is able to do so, the people will follow him with its whole heart."<sup>152</sup> Goebbels lumps both of his goals into one. He deifies Hitler by presenting him as a savior and arguing that all people love and follow Hitler. Goebbels then returns to praising Hitler's great influence on German prosperity and ends the speech. In this way, Goebbels did not miss the opportunity to push for worship of Hitler.

By 1940, war was declared on Germany, and the Second World War had begun. As a result, Goebbels' speech for that year changed somewhat. Instead of concentrating on Hitler's personality from the standpoint of his approachability, Goebbels instead fixated on the alleged superhuman elements of Hitler. To begin, Goebbels targeted a speech given by Neville Chamberlain, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. According to Goebbels, Chamberlain argued that if Germany would give up the Fuehrer and "Hitlerism", a peaceful resolution could be reached.<sup>153</sup> Goebbels responded that if Germany gave up the Fuehrer, it might as well give up its freedom. It is interesting that Goebbels picked up on and used the term Hitlerism, which gave the religion he created a name. The praise he gave the Fuehrer in this speech was no less than worship.

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<sup>152</sup> Goebbels, Joseph. "Our Hitler, 1939."

<sup>153</sup> Goebbels, Joseph. "Our Hitler, 1940."



Goebbels leads into sweeping praise of Hitler. The connection to Hitler is deeply felt by all people in the Reich because he is the “spiritual foundation,” and “the German people see in the Fuehrer the incarnation of its national strength and a shining example of its national goals.”<sup>154</sup> This glorification of Hitler both supplied the citizens with someone to idolize and galvanized them against the British threat, which also continued his attempts to unite all the people of the Reich behind Hitler and silence those who would speak out against him. During wartime this strategy was especially effective. The last paragraphs of the 1940 speech contain a boost: first, “[Hitler’s] word, even his wish, is for we Germans an order,” and secondly, “the love that binds us to him and the confidence we gave him is even more passionate, even deeper” than previously.<sup>155</sup> Goebbels did not spare his breath in telling the listener that Hitler was renowned and adored, thereby supporting the religious façade he had built and uniting the people for the years to come.

1941 was the final year in which Goebbels did not seem like a man on edge. The war was still moving in the Germans’ favor, which allowed Goebbels to continue the same format for his birthday speech. To begin, Goebbels makes clear to the listener that this age in Germany was unlike any before, and all the better for it. He attributes this greatness to Hitler: “everything we experience today and for which we expend our best energies would not be...were it not for one man.”<sup>156</sup> For the coming war, the Reich was “prepared spiritually, economically and militarily” and they enjoyed “spiritual superiority” over their foes. Goebbels wrote that the German army was successful and “defeated the enemy wherever he met him.”<sup>157</sup> All of this, he argued, was attributable to Hitler. It was through Hitler’s power, magical personality, and ability to win over

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Goebbels, Joseph. “Our Hitler, 1941.”

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

the hearts and minds of the citizens that Germany was successful and would continue to be successful. He once again pressed the religious envelope: “[Hitler] has filled the nation with his spirit,” and “the nation can only bow in thankfulness before him.”<sup>158</sup> At this point, Goebbels graduated from suggesting worship, and outright told the citizens to bow before the Fuehrer.

1942 marked Goebbels change in his rhetorical style as he became more erratic in his messaging. By 1942, Goebbels began to realize that victory in the war was not assured. Initially the German army pulverized its enemies and conquered new land quickly, but at this point their progress had slowed. As a result, Goebbels changed his speech to some degree. He moved even further away from the personal accounts of Hitler that he gave in the early years, and leaned further toward Hitler being a superhuman leader. His speech began with several paragraphs comparing Hitler to Frederick the Great in an attempt to drum up good memories from German history. His argument was that although Frederick struggled, he was able to overcome his problems and ultimately win out.<sup>159</sup> “How can the fact that Frederick defeated the Austrians be relevant to our day? His value for the present generation is the worth of his personality.”<sup>160</sup> As in previous speeches, he believed that Hitler had a historic personality, which is why he compared him to Frederick: “The power of [Hitler’s] personality is felt nowhere more powerfully than the front.”<sup>161</sup> Goebbels presented Hitler as a bastion of strength and hope for otherwise nervous and afraid soldiers. “If ever the German people has felt united in thought and will, then it is in this: to serve [Hitler] and to obey his commands.”<sup>162</sup> As in his then forgotten Catholicism, Hitler was

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Goebbels, Joseph. “Our Hitler, 1942.”

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

much like the Pope in that he was to be followed and not questioned. The people were to trust him because he was the Fuehrer that god wanted to oversee Germany.

The war took a serious turn for the worse in 1943, as did Goebbels' speech writing. Following the defeat of the German Army at Stalingrad, victory in the war was anything but certain. Goebbels' birthday speech focused on the war effort and how the citizens could support the army. He blamed the entire mess Germany found itself in on the men around Hitler, not Hitler himself. "We need only to recall the Fuehrer's many unfortunately unsuccessful attempts to prevent this was by limiting armaments to a rational level."<sup>163</sup> Goebbels was trying to keep Hitler's previously assumed infallibility intact. He reassured the listeners that Germany would not be defeated. "Despite all their shouting, our enemies have not been able to weaken the magic force for the Fuehrer's personality. It grows in power everyday."<sup>164</sup> Goebbels could ill afford either for Hitler to be blamed for the army's failures in the Soviet Union or to be seen as weak by the people. If he allowed either thing to happen, the curtain would fall, and Hitler would be exposed as an ordinary man. Therefore, he continued to protect him at the expense of other Party members. Goebbels was not ready to see his work crumble. "As a nation of 90 million, we lay before him our faith. We believe in a German victory because we believe in him."<sup>165</sup>

By 1944, Germany's fate was all but certain. In this light, Goebbels spent his speeches in 1944 and 1945 attempting to convince the masses that Hitler's magic could save them from defeat. Religion remained a focus of his. "The man who in the end frees our continent from its spiritual and military difficulties will be at the conclusion of the vast struggle, from the standpoint of history, the man of the war."<sup>166</sup> For Goebbels this man was obviously Hitler, and

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<sup>163</sup> Goebbels, Joseph. "Our Hitler, 1943."

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Goebbels, Joseph. "Our Hitler: 1944."

because Hitler would relieve spiritual difficulties, Goebbels suggests that Hitlerism was the belief system of the future. The commitment of the masses to the Party and to Hitler was of great concern to Goebbels. “It is harder to stay loyal to the cause in the middle of a long struggle for a nation’s very existence.”<sup>167</sup> Goebbels appealed to the people, reminding them that they have never “looked with such faith toward [the] Fuehrer as in the days when [they] knew the full gravity of the situation.” Goebbels knew the faith of the people was waning, but he also knew that without their continued support Germany would fall.

In 1945, Goebbels’ great fear was realized. The end of the Reich was on his doorstep, and his speech in 1945 took on a grim tone, but religious messaging remained. Even as he and the remaining government hid in the *fuehrerbunker* below the Reich Chancellery garden, he still wanted the citizens to believe in Hitler’s magic. Goebbels proclaimed over the radio that “[Hitler] was the only one who remained true to himself, who did not cheaply sell his faith and his ideals.”<sup>168</sup> He then addressed the Allied forces and argued that “The most shining culture the earth has ever seen sinks in ruins and leaves only memories of the greatness of an age destroyed by satanic powers.”<sup>169</sup> Goebbels was so desperate at this point that he used the imagery of god and satan to convince people to fear the Allies. This binary, though not effective in saving the Reich, would have convinced those who could hear it. After all, much of Berlin was destroyed by this time. Goebbels ended his final speech this way: “we look to him full of hope and with a deep, unshakable faith,” and finally “we feel him in us and around us.”<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Goebbels, Joseph. “Our Hitler, 1945.”

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

To the end, Goebbels did his very best to convince the German people of the magical ability of Hitler. In earlier years, his messaging was easy to convey. As long as Germany was winning the war, he was able to send the same message: believe in the Fuehrer because he is divine and because everyone else does. However, as times got harder, Goebbels could no longer fall back on this simple formula. Instead, his focus turned to convincing the people of Hitler's specific abilities and deeds, such as his incredible knowledge and his strength to lead the nation alone. Belief, however, was no match for the Allied weapons, and below the Reich Chancellery Goebbels knew that his dream of Hitlerism spreading over the globe was finished.

## Conclusion

Joseph Goebbels was a complicated person, as his eccentric beliefs reflect. Born into a Catholic family and growing up disabled profoundly affected him, leading him to feel alienated and to seek approval from external sources. As a young man, he imagined the kind of person he would love to follow and created the character Michael in his novel by the same name. Although Michael was special in his own right, Goebbels always presented him as a people person, someone who could mix into the crowd. Goebbels kept this image in his mind as he got older and sought out a man like this whom he could work with to create a better Germany. He found that man soon after completing *Michael*: Adolf Hitler. Goebbels saw within Hitler the abilities that he attributed to Michael and knew that this was the man who could lead the Reich.

There have been other examples of writers and poets using religion to bend public opinion to their aims, but Goebbels was different: he had the man he needed where he needed him. Operating under his own divine right of kings, Goebbels worked to convince the people of

Germany that Hitler was divine, and without him Germany would fall to outside influence. In this way, Goebbels' position graduated from merely using religious imagery to conjure up support from his audience, and instead became a pseudo-religion unto itself with Hitler as the focus.

Throughout Goebbels' diaries, which he kept all through his life, it is clear that he never forgot about the magic he attributed to Michael. In fact, he transferred this magic onto Hitler. Goebbels' fanaticism and belief in Hitler led him to serve without question, as did his desire for others to behave the same. At this point Goebbels began giving the birthday speeches, which he would give each year until the end of the Reich. It was not enough for Goebbels alone to believe in Hitler, he also needed the people to believe. The practical benefit was that Goebbels could use the fractured Protestant Church, which was teeming with a new group known as German Christians, to create a new religion around Hitler. Goebbels knew the citizens needed something to believe in, and through his birthday speeches he encouraged them by peer pressure to make Hitler the focus of their belief. Despite the great lengths that Goebbels went to in order to portray and promulgate this image of Hitler, which he believed in so much, it was ultimately all for naught. The Reich fell, Hitler and Goebbels both committed suicide, and Nazism is now a fringe belief.

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