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ON THE WEB

From the Revealing Journals of a Propaganda Mastermind

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Arguably the most gifted of Hitler's henchmen, Joseph Goebbels was an enigmatic genius whose successful manipulation of mass political opinion was unprecedented. His rise to power, and that of the Nazi Party itself, will forever stand as one of history's most terrifying examples of the reach of propaganda, a tool with which Goebbels's name is virtually synonymous.

Less is known, however, about the workings of a personality so cultured yet so gripped by barbaric ideas. "The revolution is inside me," he wrote as a young man in 1918, revealing more than just his political hopes for Germany's future; for Goebbels, contentment would always be out of reach.

In their fascinating documentary "The Goebbels Experiment," the director and writer Lutz Hachmeister and the writer Michael Kloft provide a rare and chilling glimpse into a brilliant but toxic mind. Rejecting commentary, Mr. Hachmeister and Mr. Kloft allow Goebbels to speak for himself, in the voice of [Kenneth Branagh](#), via the extensive diaries that he kept from 1924 to 1945. Rare clips from German film and television archives illustrate the readings, which veer wildly from venomous, anti-Semitic rants to eloquent musings on music and nature, often in the same entry.

Waging a lifelong battle with suicidal depression, Goebbels found purpose in the creation of a new Reich and devotion to his Führer. Prescient about the value of a good slogan, he set about bending minds to his corrupt will with fanatical vigor and inventiveness.

Some of the film's most engrossing moments deal with Goebbels's exclusively utilitarian ambitions for German cinema. "We can learn a lot from these Bolsheviks," he reluctantly admits after a viewing of [Sergei Eisenstein's](#) 1927 epic, "[Ten Days That Shook the World.](#)" And his belief in [Leni Riefenstahl's](#) ability doesn't deter him from deeming her a lunatic when she begs for money to finish her film "[Triumph of the Will.](#)"

An intellectual in a party that reviled thinkers, Goebbels suffered from a paranoia that was always on high alert. Offered the position of head of broadcasting in 1933, he sees only an effort by his enemies to sideline him. ("Himmler hates me," he whines.) Careering from soggy sentimentality to maniacal extermination fantasies, the diary entries reveal a supremely theatrical man whose charisma and callousness fuse in a recurring image of elegant hands conducting an audience to frenzy.

At a time when much of our news and entertainment media is controlled by a handful of corporations, "The Goebbels Experiment" is a cautionary reminder that equal access to the machinery of ideas may be society's most critical goal.