

Göbbels, Himmler
and Göring

Göbbels, Himmler and Göring:

The Unholy Trinity

By

Andrew Sangster

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This book is dedicated to my wife Carol.

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PREFACE

Having once written the biography of Field Marshal Kesselring I recognised the dangers that the intimacy of exploring one person can sometimes dazzle the historian and biographer into even a small degree of sympathy with his subject. Having read some fifteen biographies of these three men, Himmler, Göbbels and Göring there was no such danger. One of the biographies I read was a hagiography, one or two others tried to show these characters in a slightly more human light, but even this proved to be an impossible task. The more recent and better biographies, especially by Longerich and Overy tend to be very lengthy, deep in intricate detail and more intended for the high-flying academic scholar. This book has examined previous scholarship, checked many other biographies from surrounding characters of this period, taken into account the views of general Twentieth Century historians, and has produced each biography between 55,000 to 60,000 words to make it readable by the student, the historian and general reader.

The Introduction to the book explains the nature of the work; explores why such a book is worthwhile; looks at the nature of previous biographies, and sets the scene as to why these three particular men were so significant in this critical period of Twentieth Century history. This section also examines the opinions of an objective Australian academic who met these men face to face as he toured Germany in 1935 and wrote his findings in 1937, which Chamberlain read and did not want to believe. The introduction has a brief glance at the German humour relating to the three men under this study.

In Part One the influential propaganda expert Göbbels is examined; the secretive Himmler with his empire of fear, terror and repression is in Part Two. In Part Three the powerful and eccentric character of Göring is explored, concluding with his trial at Nuremberg; thus the title of the book, *The Unholy Trinity*. However, unlike the Christian version of the Trinity, the Unholy Trinity is divided, comprehensible, unequal, potentially repetitive but certainly not eternal.

The final Part Four draws on these new biographies and demonstrates that Göbbels' support in the rise of the Nazi regime was critical, that Himmler's control through his terror apparatus helped maintain the regime, and Göring made one or two substantial contributions, the main

one was “paving the way” for Hitler. Although Göring was the most powerful personality he was the weakest of the three. Even in the war years the Soviet NKVD (KGB) turned down Göring’s possible assassination because he was considered more valuable alive than dead.

They were in one way or another mentally unstable, and built up their own vertical empires inside the Third Reich, running parallel to one another, and always in total support of Hitler the man whom they all adored and more to the point feared. This was about the only thing they had in common, and their group dynamics and relationships with one another are also explored throughout the book and concluded in Part Four. Also raised in the fourth part is the question of their psychological or mental stability which is examined, and concludes with the results of their diabolical machinations. It is further argued that they were either psychopaths or at the very least had most of the qualifications for that mental state of mind.

It might be said enough has been written about these people, but the danger is that they were not one-off isolated aberrations. Even in the part of the Twentieth Century with which this book relates Hitler had his equivalent in Stalin, and in China and Japan there were people of the same inclination. Stalin once noted that his head of Police, Beria, was his Himmler. These types of behavioural traits exist in every generation and country.

It is not so much that history is cyclic, but it is often all too true that historically parallel situations arise. Such men as the unholy trinity exist today, and since 1945 across the world there have been phases of horrific genocide (a word devised to describe Nazi policy) and massacres. These situations arise because of megalomaniacs seeking power, living off so-called nationalism, often driven by racism and the inbuilt self-belief that they are not only superior, but other races or creeds are somehow degenerate. Even in the various democratic countries such figures can come to the fore, putting their countries first and demanding obedience. It is not so much as “my country right or wrong” which is highly dubious on moral grounds, but even in a democratic State it is possible to invest too much power in a person who may well be as psychopathic as some small-time dictator in a totalitarian state. The democratic Weimar Republic was progressing well until the Nazis came to power with the aid of such men as the unholy trinity, and with the most appalling consequences.

TIME LINE 1918-1945

This is a brief timeline with a broad outline of this period of study.

1918 Nov 9th - Kaiser Wilhelm abdicated and Weimar Republic declared.

1919 Jan 5th - German Workers' Party formed by Drexler and cohorts.

March 13th - Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch fails.

June 28th - Versailles Treaty signed.

Sept - Hitler sent to spy on German Workers' Party (DAP) and then he joined the Party.

1920 Feb - DAP changed its name to NSDAP.

1921 July 29th - Hitler became leader of NSDAP.

Nov - the SA, Stormtroopers (Brownshirts) formed.

1923 Nov 8th - Munich Beer Hall Putsch failed.

1924 Feb 26th - Start of Hitler's trial; sentenced to five years in Landsberg and served 10 months.

1925 April - SS formed.

1926 Feb – Bamberg Nazi Conference.

1927 August - First Annual Conference held at Nuremberg.

1929 - Start of the Great Depression.

1930 September - Nazis gained 18.3% of votes in Reichstag.

1932 July - Nazi votes rise to 37.4% becoming a significant Party.

1933 Jan 30th - Hitler became Chancellor.

Feb - Hitler announced Nazi policy including *lebensraum*.

Feb 27th - The Reichstag Fire.

March 5th - A new election; Nazis gained 44% of General Election vote.

March 23rd - Enabling Act; Hitler may make laws without Reichstag.

April 26th - Gestapo formed.

May 10th - Book burning episode.

July 14th - All other political parties banned.

Oct - Germany withdrew from League of Nations.

1934 June 30th - Night of the Long Knives.

August 2nd - Hindenburg died and Hitler became the Führer.

1935 Jan 13th Plebiscite held in Saar and Danzig.

Feb - Hitler ordered Göring to establish Air Force.

March - Hitler announced conscription for the army.

- Sept - Nuremberg Laws.
- 1936** March 7th - Re-occupation of Rhineland.
- August - Berlin Olympics.
- November - Anti-Comintern Pact between Japan and Germany.
- Dec - *Hitler Youth* made compulsory.
- 1938** March - Anschluss with Austria.
- Sept - Munich Agreement, Sudetenland in return for peace.
- Nov 7th - Herschel Grynszpan killed vom Rath in Paris followed by Kristallnacht.
- 1939** March - Germany invaded Czechoslovakia.
- March - Britain guaranteed Poland's independence.
- May 22nd - Pact of Steel between Italy and Germany.
- August 23rd - Nazi-Soviet Pact.
- September 1st - Poland Invaded.
- September 3rd - Britain and France declared war.
- November 8th - Assassination attempt in Munich.
- 1940** April 9th - Denmark and Norway invaded.
- May 10th - Invasion of Western Europe started.
- July - Battle of Britain.
- Oct - Luftwaffe bombed Britain.
- 1941** April 6th - Yugoslavia and Greece invaded.
- June 22nd - Operation *Barbarossa*.
- Dec - Russians halt German advance.
- Dec - Pearl Harbour and Hitler declares war on USA.
- 1942** January 20th - Wannsee Conference.
- November - Germans defeated at Second Battle of El Alamein.
- November - Hitler occupied Vichy France.
- 1943** February 2nd - Defeat at Stalingrad.
- March - Allies bombed German centres.
- 1944** June 6th - D-Day Normandy.
- July 20th - Bomb Plot
- 1945** April 30th - Hitler committed suicide
- Nov 20th - Nuremberg trial started.

INTRODUCTORY THOUGHTS

Why study these people? We need to know “why historical events developed in the way they did, facts about characters and careers of men who have been influential cannot fail to be of value and interest. Nazism was not merely a factor in the immediate past; it was a manifestation of a part of human nature, and it may recur at any time and in any place.”¹

Why the Book?

The unholy trinity of Göbbels, Himmler and Göring were chosen because out of all the various henchmen and paladins surrounding Hitler these three men played a major part in his rise to power, and held that power until his immolation in Berlin in 1945. There were others such as Röhm but he became too much of a personal threat and was eliminated. Bormann was a man of the Bunker, dangerous, Hitler’s parrot and was less important in the overall development of Nazism and Hitler’s rise to power. Ribbentrop was a factor in the initial stages of causing war but he was lightweight, and although Speer was more important than Hitler’s fantasy-architect when he took over from Todt, he was not part of Hitler’s rise to power. The various military commanders circled Hitler with a mixture of obedience, fear, hope and loathing. Göbbels, Himmler and Göring were with Hitler as he rose from the beer cellars to the Chancellery and stayed to the bitter end.

Their political party was “The National Socialist German Workers’ Party (*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*, NSDAP); it was a fascist, totalitarian political party that was born and nurtured in the atmosphere of the ‘fascist epoch’ that characterised Europe, and particularly Germany, after World War 1.”² The unholy trinity all but worshipped, adored and feared Hitler; they were his subservient servants and caught up in “Hitler’s unshakable certainty of his life mission which complemented the rootlessness of many of the atomised, disengaged, and frustrated elements in Weimar Germany.”³

The Nazi’s political success depended on “skilful propaganda and effective organisation.”⁴ The Party also needed the ability to control the German population and influence its thinking through total domination when possible, and with terror when necessary. All three members of the

unholy trinity were power-hungry and built their own empires within the Nazi State, often quarrelling with one another, always suspicious, but each in his own characteristic way was dangerous. Nevertheless they were united in their worship and fear of Hitler. This exploration will examine their individual contributions, their personalities, and demonstrate that without them Hitler may have remained ranting in some Bavarian beer cellar. Hitler may have been the architect of Fascist Germany, but he needed these three men more than all the others.

The book assumes a basic knowledge of the period when it touches on such subjects as the 1923 Putsch, the Night of the Long Knives, (1934) Crystal Night (*Kristallnacht*) in 1938, but with three biographies each incident may have a slightly different perspective.^a So for example *Kristallnacht* for Göbbels was part of his radical attack upon the perceived enemy of the State, the hapless Jews; for Göring it was a matter of loss of money and valuable property. In the question of the Reichstag Fire in 1933 it is virtually impossible to offer any evidence of the unholy trinity's part because substantive evidence is obscure, and surviving data is unreliable. This has encouraged considerable speculation by many writers, but must be regarded with caveats and scepticism. It did however unite the unholy trinity in "finishing off" their political enemies.

The unravelling of Hitler's rise to power and the conduct of the war he precipitated can best be understood by an understanding of these three key men, the unholy trinity. They were Hitler's servants, but they were also the base for his initial success, and maintaining his position when the war turned against Germany.

When Victor Klemperer the German academic Jew keeping a low profile in Dresden asked himself the question that "despite Versailles, unemployment and deep-seated anti-Semitism, ever more puzzling to me, is how Hitlerism was able to prevail" he might have found the answer in the unholy trinity.⁵

The Biographers

In preparing this exploration it was necessary to read all the biographies of Göring, Göbbels and Himmler and condense their main findings into a reasonable readable length. It was also necessary to explore

^a In twenty-four hours tens of thousands of Jewish properties were destroyed, 91 Jews were killed, 30,000 Jewish males sent to concentration camps, a thousand synagogues destroyed. An excellent book on this subject is: Gilbert Martin, *Kristallnacht* (London: Harper-Collins, 2006)

the general histories to glean what the better historians had to observe. The general impression gained from such histories is that they all contributed to the Nazi State; Göbbels perhaps more widely but less dramatically than Göring and even Himmler, but above all they were all greedy for power and prestige in their world dominated by Hitler whom they worshipped, and yet all three were terrified by him to one degree or another. Himmler once said that standing before Hitler was like standing before the headmaster, Göbbels felt hurt if ignored, and Göring was uncharacteristically cautious whenever in Hitler's presence.^a

During the period of 1933-4 Göring was undoubtedly "the second man in Germany; by 1942, sloth, vanity, and his love of luxury had undermined not only his political authority but his native ability."⁶ Hitler held some affection for him but lost confidence in him as the war progressed. Göbbels who was unpopular with most people because of his caustic tongue and malicious wit, stayed close to Hitler despite a distinct cooling off period during a notorious love affair, but re-emerged as Hitler's friend at the same time as Göring's influence was in decline. Göbbels had enormous influence over Hitler "and in the last weeks of the war enjoyed his unlimited trust."⁷ Himmler's influence dated from about 1934 but he had an "undistinguished personality and limited intelligence" and his racial doctrines were as gross and as bizarre as Hitler's, and he was regarded as a confidant throughout the duration; his terror apparatus helped stopped resistance against the fascist state.⁸

The nature of biographies is difficult to define not least when the biographer, because of the intimacy of the study, starts to evolve a degree of sympathy for the subject. With one slight exception this hardly occurs with the many biographers of Göbbels, Himmler and Göring. The reason for writing a biography is always interesting. In the first ever biography of Göring written in 1938 by Erich Gritzbach, and which was published many times during his lifetime, Göring collected the royalties.⁹ It is of course a hagiography and in the words of the English version preface written by R. H. Bruce Lockhart, it was written in the "spirit of hero-worship."¹⁰ The book is not written in a historical sequence and virtually starts at the time when Hitler was declared Chancellor of the Reich. Gritzbach wrote: "that was decidedly Göring's most glorious moment, wrote Göbbels later on in his book, *Vom Kaiserhof zur Reichskanzlei*. As the result of long years of exhausting work Göring had prepared the

^a "It was no secret that Himmler disliked facing Hitler, and once had told General Wolff that the Führer made him feel like a school boy who hasn't done his homework." See Toland John, *The Last 100 Days* (New York: The Modern Library, 1996) p.132

ground, both diplomatically and politically for the Führer. His prudence, his fearlessness, but above all else, his strength of character and his fidelity to the Führer were genuine, unflinching, and admirable.”¹¹ This sets the tone for the rest of the book, the worship of a great man and hero. Again, more interesting was the English preface written by Bruce Lockhart who was at different times a diplomat, journalist, and spy. He quoted Gritzbach who called Göring “an upright soldier with the heart of a child” and Lockhart noticed the element of some truth in this noting that Göring was “a bundle of contradiction.”¹² Bruce Lockhart also added that many attitudes are based on a delusion because Göring “is a natural child of the Nazi movement...not only by his personal services to the Führer, but also in a very high degree to his perfervid loyalty to the Nazi cause.”¹³ Bruce Lockhart pointed out that, unlike England, in Germany the gods of the public are men of action with a belief in hero-worship which “is the leitmotiv of Herr Gritzbach’s book,” and warns that for the British to understand the new Germany the book must be read with seriousness.¹⁴ Bruce Lockhart concluded that Göring is “a very considerable force for good or evil in the affairs of Europe” and that “Göring might conceivably be a loyal friend...in more untoward circumstances he must be reckoned potentially as a ruthless and efficient enemy.”¹⁵ Bruce Lockhart was right in that Göring would be a ruthless enemy, but he hardly proved efficient; but although the book is not that valuable for historical truth it is interesting from the perspectives seen by Lockhart in 1938.

As the years after World War Two have passed more objective information has come to light both in the archives and in revelations of a more personal nature. Some of the more recent works such as Longerich on Himmler and Göbbels are much more objective, much more analytical, highly detailed and throw new light on the objects of their study. Consequently they are very complex and lengthy in their detail. The earlier works are often put aside because they did not have all the latest information, but it is a mistake to ignore their insights. Manvell and Fraenkel who wrote extensively on this period often had the benefit of meeting and interviewing people intimately involved during the period under study.

In trying to understand Göbbels, Göring and Himmler there appears in very few of the published works any human sympathy for these characters. It appears almost impossible to find a glimmer of any compassion for their conduct even in their early lives. Hermann Göring stands just slightly apart and this is borne out by the 1974 biographer Mosley. His biography of Göring is interesting in its personal insights. He knew Göring as a person (being a journalist) and actually well enough to have placed a bet with him. After the war he interviewed Göring’s second wife Emmy and his

stepson Thomas. As such Mosley's work has some interesting insights at a personal level, but how far such observations can be trusted is difficult to estimate. Göring could be highly affable and charming which gave him a better depiction in the late 1930s in diplomatic circles, but it also made him a major centre of attention at the Nuremberg Trials. This writer could not help wondering if some of Göring's charm had not rubbed off on Mosley himself. In the question of the rancid anti-Semitism the biography by Mosely often refers to times when Göring and his wife Emmy appeared to be more sympathetic to eminent Jewish people, even saving some from death. This insight does not try and conceal the fact that Göring was anti-Semitic. It is Mosely who explains (possibly with some justification) the nature of Göring's drug addiction and puts it in a better light. When it comes to the war-mongering aspect of Göring, Mosley, despite the Nuremberg trial interrogation of Dahlerus, writes several times that Göring wanted peace and not war.¹⁶ This approach is not entirely complimentary as Mosley condemns him as a moral coward, and time and time again Mosley focuses on Göring's total inability to stand up to Hitler, even when he knows Hitler is wrong. Göring remained Hitler's lapdog, obeyed all his commands and even after Hitler's death he remained loyal. When Göring was once challenged about being a "yes-man" he pointed out that the "no-men" were six feet under. Nevertheless, it is easy to gain the impression that Mosely desperately tried to look to the better side of the man's nature, frequently pointing out that Göring actually paid for some of the works of art purloined during the war years. This may be viewed as a degree of bias by Mosley, but it is an attempt to depict a human figure around one of the three daemonic characters.

The more recent and modern historian Overy's biography of Göring ensures that Göring is placed in a more realistic context. Whereas Mosley mentions the Luftwaffe he barely mentions Göring's prolific role in forging the Nazi war policy in the sphere of economics. Overy does, and paints a picture of inefficiency, poor judgment and sometimes downright blunders, but nevertheless emphasises that Göring was at the centre of Nazi aggression in trying to prepare Germany for war economically. More to the point Overy pointed out that Göring adopted an anti-Semitic attitude of deep proportions not only from the point of view of financial advantage, but the political expediency of always following the racially deranged Hitler and his other cohorts.^a As Mosley wrote in his concluding pages

^a Von Hassell on the question of the Jewish pogrom wrote that "certainly Göring had some sentiments, but that Göring would not take action because the order had come from Hitler himself." Hassell von, *The Ulrich von Hassell Diaries* (London: Frontline books, 2011) p.145

Göring was angry about injured animals and occasional personal issues for select individuals, but his lack of moral courage made sure he turned the other way when millions of people were being exterminated. The overall impression is that Mosley is realistic enough about Göring but looks to the human side, whereas Overy takes a powerfully objective stance which allows, understandably, little sympathy. Overy's approach is highly professional and puts Göring into a more realistic light, but Mosley tries to put the human element into this man. There is no question that recent historians such as Overy and Longerich have taken the longer-term view, equipped with better evaluated and researched information, but the earlier historians and biographers are worth reading because quite often their sources were more of a personal nature, and indicate the varying historical nuances developed since 1945.

This book has looked at all the major biographies and used the essential material to paint a brief but realistic and readable picture of the three key men behind the unpleasant phenomenon of a fascist dictatorship.

Professor Stephen Roberts 1937

It would be interesting to talk to someone who had met these men before the war, someone objective, and with no political axe to grind. Such a man was Stephen Roberts he was an Australian academic from Sydney University who took a sabbatical leave to see what was happening in Germany in the mid-1930s. The result of his sabbatical tour was the book *The House that Hitler Built* published in 1937. It went through several reprints in various languages and was read by Neville Chamberlain who said "If I accepted the author's conclusion, I should despair, but I don't and won't."¹⁷ Robert forewarned of the danger of war and what was happening to the Jews. Given that Roberts was an intelligent man who was writing on first impressions as he wandered through Nazi Germany before the outbreak of war, it is a remarkably interesting and incisive book. It allows the reader to observe an intelligent man's judgement uncluttered by the war years, the Holocaust and the aftermath. When looking at the 1930s in Germany from this distance, it is impossible to unclutter the mind of the consequences of World War; Roberts did not have this inhibition because he wrote before the war. Consequently it is of interest in this exploration to see how the unholy trinity of Göring, Göbbels and Himmler emerge as people to this particular man.

Roberts wrote "the outstanding feature about Göbbels is his searing contempt for humanity. One feels that he despises the human race and looks on people as so many ants to be managed or stamped on. His attitude

may easily be explained by a mixture of tortured nerves and acute resentment-psychosis, due to his physical defects.”¹⁸ This was an interesting observation, and as the biography of Göbbels unravels Göbbels presents as a highly intelligent man who looked down on everyone except Hitler. Göbbels was to divide humanity into three types, Germans, Jews and the third category the rest of mankind. To obey his master he attempted to crush everyone who he perceived as an enemy of Hitler, and that included many Germans.

As a man Göbbels was frustrated by his lack of Great War experience and the problem of his dysfunctional foot; it made him less than the perfect man in his own sight. Roberts noted “nobody is permitted to mention his extremely non-Aryan weakness of body,” a charitable society for aiding cripples did exactly this by pointing out that the mind is better than the body and used Göbbels as a classical example; it was meant as an honour, but Roberts noted that “Berlin still talks of the fate of the unfortunate sponsors of that book.”¹⁹

Roberts saw Göbbels quite clearly for what he was in the mid-1930s, and wrote that “he should call Göbbels the most dangerous man in Europe, precisely because he is so diabolically clever and so frankly Machiavellian in his views of mankind and the methods he would employ.”²⁰ Roberts perceived Göbbels’ function as a clever manipulator and propaganda genius backing his idol Hitler, writing that “what made the demagogue might ruin the Chancellor were it not for Göbbels’ astute control of the press. Even Hitler had found himself censored on many occasions, when his tongue ran away with him, and Göbbels’ blue pencil came into play.”²¹ Time and time again Roberts was able to perceive how dangerous Göbbels was noting that he is admittedly the brain behind Hitler. Göbbels once said “the only instrument with which one can conduct foreign policy is the sword, the sword alone and exclusively.”²² Roberts in 1935-6 realised how important Göbbels was in the ascendancy of Hitler and helping him maintain his position.

Roberts was equally as astute with Göring writing that “Göring, the man of decorations and uniform is usually dismissed too abruptly...Göring is the second most powerful man in Germany, the second most popular (although his Berlin house has wire entanglements around its walls!); and no man could have achieved his position without capacity.”²³ Roberts was observing Göring at the peak of his clever political machinations. Many people thought Göring something of a clown on the German stage, but he transpired to be a dangerous man who brought about his own political descent, and whose natural abilities re-emerged at his international trial. Roberts described him as “eighteen stone of geniality or brutality,” and he

was right.²⁴ Despite Göring's affability Roberts saw his dangerous side writing that "Göring is the embodiment of direct force, and if need be insensate brutality. He has never concealed his belief in the efficacy of direct action and prefers to solve his difficulties by smashing through them."²⁵ Roberts also saw what endeared him to many in the public because as "elementary as his humour is he at least makes the people laugh, and he is shrewd enough to realise the value of such tactics."²⁶ It was his shrewd humour at his trial that caused his American prosecutor Jackson so much tension. Roberts quoted one of Göring's public statements: "I am not concerned with both sides. I see only those who are for National Socialism and those who are against it, and I know how to deal with the latter."²⁷ Later Göring noted that "the law and the will of Hitler are one," which once again summarised Göring's main failure.²⁸ His powerful personality was entirely subjugated to the will of Hitler, which gave Roberts major concern.

It is a curious feature of Robert's book that as astute as he was in terms of Göring and Göbbels and Hitler, and perceptive as he was of what was happening in Germany, he did not have such a clear image of Himmler. He noted that Himmler "lacks any distinction of appearance and is modest in manner. His very indefinite features and his glasses make him look rather insignificant, more of a student...so that his fellow-Nazis made the mistake of underestimating him."²⁹ On first reading this extract it appeared that Roberts was very much on the ball, and because of the secret nature of Himmler's work there were lurking dangers his enemies failed to see. Then Roberts adds Himmler is rightly regarded as "one of the key-men of the new regime. Foreign opinion usually looks upon him as a bloodthirsty ogre, a kind of German Yagoda, the slayer of his friend Gregor Strasser...actually, he sets an example of quiet dignity and simplicity of life that is often lacking in Nazi Germany, and remains entirely unspoilt, living like a clerk in a simple Berlin flat. Personally, I found him much kindlier and much more thoughtful for his guests than any other Nazi leader."³⁰ On reading Robert's book the word "kindlier" seemed out of place. Roberts then went on to write "I am convinced that nobody I met in Germany is more normal...Himmler, 'diploma of agriculture' lord of a million men—is he to be the second Führer? The years and events are with him, and he shows no hesitation in using harsh methods...the superficial see in him only a brutal opponent...while not approving of his methods, I see in him capacities for leadership that may change the future of Europe, provided that he overcomes his failing of considering problems in so far as they affect Germany. His eyes become myopic where the rest of the world is concerned."³¹ Normally Göring was the affable host, Göbbels could be

charming, but with his Australian visitor Himmler was the one of the three who played his cards best. It would be interesting to have been with Roberts postwar (he later became Chancellor of Sydney University) when he realised his pleasant host became internationally known as one of the most evil mass murderers in history.

It is never easy to pass a judgment on events and people at the time, and sometimes many years need to pass for the benefits of hindsight. For most of the book Roberts was highly perceptive and far-seeing; he certainly saw through Göring's bonhomie and bluster, and perceived the dangerous man and not the clown. He noted of Göring that "there is nothing subtle or remote about him, none of the mental storms of a Hitler or the calculating precision of a Göbbels."³² Göring tended to despise what he could not understand "especially the mental qualities of Göbbels" but "their interests are too identical for them to quarrel."³³ In looking to the future Roberts could not see Göring becoming the Führer, and realised that Göbbels was too unpopular, but he foresaw Himmler as head of all the police fulfilling that role as the major leader.

Roberts imagined Göring sitting with Hitler at Berchtesgaden: Göring dressed "in the leather pants and figured braces of the countryside, and they reduce some complicated world problem to a simple discussion, ignoring all its complexities and dealing with it as if they were two peasants talking about the next meeting of the village band."³⁴ Roberts was able to perceive that these three men all dreamed of one day being leader, but he failed to notice the one solid denominator that held them together; perhaps the only thing they actually had in common, a strange unswerving and unquestioning loyalty to their master, Hitler. As Roberts observed in his book, "these are the men who are the real terrorists or disciplinarians of Germany."³⁵ He later wrote that "It is the combination of men like Göring with a dreamer like Hitler that has made Nazidom possible...Hitler without his Party organisation behind him would be inconceivable."³⁶

The part of the book which greatly disturbed Chamberlain was Roberts' perceptive insight into "the whole teaching of Hitlerism which is to justify war as an instrument of policy in certain contingencies, and there is hardly a boy in Germany who does not view the preparation for ultimate war as the most important aspect of his life."³⁷ Later Roberts basic dilemma. If he persists in the policies he has enunciated, he plunges Europe into war; if he abandons them, he can no longer maintain his position within Germany."³⁸

Roberts' work was prophetic and ignored by too many. His insights into Göbbels, Himmler and Göring are fascinating, sometimes sharp, occasionally off beam with Himmler, but he was assured of one major

factor, these three men were to play a major role in the years ahead. They had already contributed to Hitler's rise to power; they had nothing in common apart from their obsessive adoration of the Führer. They built up their own vertical empires within the Nazi kingdom, and supported what many regard as perhaps one of the most evil tyrannies of modern times.

This book using all the better biographies written over the years will demonstrate that Roberts' views were reasonably perceptive (with some qualifications) and that the unholy trinity characters were in their different ways essential pillars of support for Hitler. Other visitors to these men may have found Göring to have been a large affable chap prone to bullying his way, Göbbels a clever and intelligent man if somewhat cynical, and Himmler may have come across as a hard working but somewhat pedantic type teacher. They were in fact, as Roberts started to perceive, three dangerous and evil men, the appropriate candidates for Hitler's team.

Military Contribution and the Unholy Trinity

All three of the unholy trinity had military pretensions. Göring was the only one with a military background, but such was his inept leadership at the top, the Russians as noted later, preferred him alive rather than assassinated. Himmler developed the military SS, but when he was given military command in the closing months of the war he proved Guderian's warning to Hitler to be correct in demonstrating his lack of experience and poor leadership. Göbbels despite his self-acclamation could only criticise what was happening on the front-line from the safety of his desk.

In Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke's diaries there is infinite detail about the war involving restrained and unrestrained political views but the major input, understandably, is the military aspect and conduct of the war. He mentions the belligerents only when it is of consequence, so for example there are references to Hitler, Kesselring, Rommel, von Rundstedt but Göring is never mentioned. Göbbels is mentioned once but that was only when a Russian soldier was showing where they had found his burned corpse. Himmler is mentioned twice, the first time only because his relationship with Wolff put the latter in a questionable light and the second because he heard that Himmler was negotiating with Bernadotte giving hope the end would be at any moment.³⁹ It is a minor observation but as far as Britain's leading military man was concerned these three Nazi leaders were militarily insignificant. Göbbels was never a soldier though later he insinuated several times that war was the reason for his damaged foot. Himmler was a deeply frustrated soldier and pretended he had been a

soldier, but in the last days when he was given military command he was a total failure. When given command in the West General Westphal wrote of the “deluge of absolutely puerile orders” and that “Himmler never visited the front himself but issued his dashing orders from the safety of the rear.”⁴⁰

Only Göring had the right to be called a soldier and he carried many honorary ranks, but by the time he came to power his lack of appropriate strategy, laziness and general incompetence came to light even by mid-1940, and he was not considered a threat to anyone outside the Reich and its subjugated territories.^a Göring was also considered by many German military men as just a boastful politician who made stupid promises such as relieving Stalingrad, and “the best example of his dilettantism was the boast of which he delivered himself in March 1943, namely that he ‘could drive Eisenhower out of Africa in a few days if only Hitler would give him supreme command in the Mediterranean for twenty-four hours!’”⁴¹

As far as men like Alanbrooke were concerned the only thing these three men had in common was that they were despised if not hated; they were a danger to Germany, but to Alanbrooke and his military peers they never amounted to a military threat. As a matter of mere curiosity Eisenhower in his memoirs never mentions Göbbels or Göring, and there is only one reference to Himmler over a similar situation of his conferring with Count Bernadotte which was treated with the greatest contempt.⁴²

Himmler may have held his own military prowess in high esteem but it was not shared by the military who listened out of fear. When General von Senger was back from Italy to receive awards, and be further indoctrinated politically when the war was critical, he was obliged to listen to Keitel’s optimistic speeches and “the artificial joviality of the Reichsführer SS Himmler.”⁴³ He and others were not impressed at having to listen to such propaganda, but they thought it best to conceal their feelings about being lectured by a man like Himmler. Himmler was aware that von Senger was not a Nazi sympathiser and several times attempted to have him dismissed.⁴⁴

One front-line German commander was the well-known Guderian who tried to approach Hitler on the subject of having in his HQs senior commanders who were accustomed to the new approach of this war, and not just Great War veterans and politicians. It failed and so he tried to use Göbbels to make a similar approach. He found in his opinion that Göbbels

^a General Westphal regarded Göring as only a politician and pointed out that Göring attacked the army with political reasons of supporting Hitler, and ensured the Luftwaffe was given priority. Göring once claimed the General Staff were riddled with pacifism. Westphal S, *The German Army in the West* (London: Cassell, 1951) p.23 and p.26

was “undoubtedly one of the cleverest members of Hitler’s intimate circle,” and Göbbels thought it would be difficult to change Hitler’s mind but said he would try.⁴⁵ It took Guderian time to realise that although as a soldier he had challenged Hitler about the mismanagement of some commanders, Hitler’s closet political henchmen would not dare. He later acknowledged that Göbbels was clever but that he was a “dangerous demagogue.”⁴⁶ He thought about approaching the situation through Himmler but “received an impression of such impenetrable obliquity that I gave up any idea of discussing a limitation of Hitler’s power with him.”⁴⁷ Himmler, Guderian decided, “harboured no doubts about his own importance...he believed that he possessed powers of military judgment every bit as Hitler’s and needless to say far better than those of the generals.”⁴⁸ Guderian was one of the few German commanders brave enough to try and face Hitler down in his appointment of Himmler as a military commander. Guderian had observed how Himmler selected SS military leaders not fit for purpose, as well as the lack of organisation at Himmler’s HQs. Again he had the courage to express his opinions to Hitler about Himmler to which Hitler responded “I don’t permit you to tell me that the National Leader [Himmler] is incapable of performing his duties.”⁴⁹ Guderian understood that all Himmler desired was driven by personal ambition and to win the Knight’s Cross. Guderian recognised Himmler was scared of Hitler, and Guderian thought him to be more like a man from another planet. He never approached Göring whom he acknowledged had started the Luftwaffe but then became lost in his own vanity and pursuits. He only wondered how Hitler hung onto him for so long. Guderian was a professional soldier and his ability was acknowledged by friend and foe, but the Nazi leader ignored him and because of that so did Himmler, Göbbels and Göring. The Nazis may have disliked and been suspicious of the army, but the Nazi leadership lacked the expertise of the professional soldier and thought they knew better. There would have been many amongst the Allies who would have liked to have had Hitler and his henchmen assassinated, but while they were in charge of the German military many recognised it was better for them. Men like Keitel and Jodl were just lap dogs doing Hitler’s bidding, but as far as front-line commanders were concerned Hitler was making mistakes and his henchmen were useless.

Even for military men of lower ranks there was a degree of cynicism about men like Göbbels, Himmler and Göring. During the Ardennes offensive a mid-ranking officer heard Göbbels broadcasting: “we had heard about it marginally and had heard Göbbels’ strident voice on the radio: ‘the Wehrmacht has launched its great offensive. We will destroy the

enemy.’ Our comment on this news had been unanimous: how did Hitler think he could ever succeed in getting through the snowed-in Ardennes?”⁵⁰ When the same soldier heard that Himmler was taking care of the military he was aware of the danger of gallows humour in making remarks about the Nazi echelon which were punishable by death or demotion, so he dismissed a junior soldier with the comment “let us then rely on Himmler and his war experience.”⁵¹ As the war turned there was a bitter cynicism developing about the Nazi leadership amongst military men at all levels, there was a deep contempt and quiet jokes, and Göring was widely known as “fatty Hermann.”

“Not surprisingly, in quantitative terms, the person [German] POWs talked about most often in the protocols was Hitler, followed by Göring, Himmler and Göbbels” mainly because they were seen as the leaders in the German regime.⁵² Yet the ordinary soldier often regarded these key personnel around Hitler as the same ridiculous characters as viewed from today. “Himmler was perceived as a demonic figure, whose SS succeeded in gaining a fatal influence over the system and the war...Göring, mostly referred to as Hermann...had lamentably little clout with Hitler...and Göbbels was alternatively the ‘imaginative politician’ or ‘the cripple’ with an impressive intellect.”⁵³ It was surprising how far down the ranks these opinions flourished.

Despite their views “soldiers tended to see what was happening as not their affair, but the business of their omnipotent Führer and his circle of helpers, whom the soldiers saw alternatively as philistine, corrupt, incompetent, or criminal.”⁵⁴ Yet many POWs were recorded as still believing in the Führer, but who had failed because he should not have “hesitated to get rid of people like Himmler and Göbbels, and if he’s afraid of these people then he’s no Führer.”⁵⁵ It did not seem to occur to this prisoner that these three powerful men were all terrified of Hitler and not *vice versa*.

Gallows Humour

Hastings wrote that “there is a powerful argument that only a warlord as bereft of scruple or compassion as Stalin, presiding over a society in which ruthlessness was even more institutionalised than in Germany, could have destroyed Nazism.”⁵⁶ The Twentieth Century was scarred by Hitler and Stalin, but it was Hitler who posed the immediate threat to peace, and although human life meant little to Stalin it was Hitler who awakened the world to the dangers to mankind by mankind. Hitler wanted an ethnically homogenous Germany and wanted Jews and Slavs out of the

way to make room for German settlers. This was expressed in the slogan *Ein Volk, Ein Riech, Ein Führer*, “one people, one empire, one leader.”

Not all the German people were convinced, but sufficient numbers were influenced to bring him to power with his cohorts. As the war progressed and the tide turned against the Nazi regime Göbbels carefully monitored the mood of public reaction, and Himmler ensured that objectors were dealt with by so-called protective custody or execution through the Peoples’ Courts. Despite the dangers humour still flourished. The cabaret scene in Berlin had once been famous for its political wit but this soon became at first moderate and then silent. Some humour was recorded in a series of popular jokes but with extreme care with whom they were shared. One of the popular ones was “the true Aryan, is as blond as Hitler, as nimble as Göbbels, and as slim as Göring.”⁵⁷ It was extremely dangerous to make jokes about Hitler since this could lead to the guillotine, a common form of execution in Germany. The point of these observations is that most of the humour was aimed at people like Göring, Göbbels and Himmler. Although seen as ideal subjects for humour they were dangerous men to be mocked.

There is no question that humour tells a truth and helped relieve the high degree of tension even in the height of the bombing raids: “whom do we have to thank for the night-fighters? Hermann Göring. For the whole air force? Herman Göring. Upon whose orders did Hermann Göring do all this? On the orders of the Führer! Where would we all be if it were not for Hermann Göring and the Leader? In our beds!”⁵⁸ Some of the humour was risky if the Gestapo or informants were present. One of the most popular humorous stories was heard in a French cabaret, and that was equally as risky as in Berlin: it was the story of “Mussolini asking the Führer what the German eagle signified. Hitler replied, ‘the head of the eagle with its piercing eyes is me, the brains of the Third Reich. The heart is Göbbels, who guides the soul of the great German nation. The two wings represent Reichsmarshall Göring, master of the Luftwaffe. The belly is Dr Funk, in charge of food production.’ At this point the Italian Foreign Minister Ciano clutches the Duce’s sleeve: ‘let’s leave now, before he reaches the arse-hole. That’ll be us!’”⁵⁹

Göring was often called by his first name Hermann and often called fatty and a wind-bag. Göbbels was seen in an even more cynical light as during a bombing raid when Göbbels was purported to have rushed out with two suitcases, rushed back to get two more but first two are stolen, he is upset, he says “in the one was Retaliation and in the other Final Victory.”⁶⁰