

Background: In this article, Goebbels works to persuade Germans that a bit of complaining is OK, but that it should not get in the way of the war effort. The *Sicherheitsdienst* morale report of 20 April 1942 found the article was popular. People particularly appreciated Goebbels' famous remark that: "Complaining is the bowel movement of the soul."

The source: "Der Papierkrieg," *Das Reich*, 12 April 1942, pp. 1, 3. I am working from the version printed in *Das eherne Herz* (Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 1943), pp. 272-278.

The Paper War

by Joseph Goebbels

It is clear that a war of such total extent as the present one requires a huge, wide-ranging organization with many branches. It reaches into all areas of public life and much of private life as well. The latter is useful only if the necessary factual conditions exist. We are no longer living in the feudal era, when troops in general took what they needed where they could find it. Today military leadership must plan and prepare. It must make its measures consistent with what is possible, and it must prepare for the long term rather than living from hand to mouth. That requires complicated and precise machinery in government and administration. One gear has to fit into the next one to avoid the danger of the whole mechanism falling apart some day.

Nonetheless, here as everywhere else, the simple is always the best. The more plain and clear an apparatus is, the more smoothly it will work. We Germans enjoy worldwide fame for being masters of organization. Because we understand it so well, we sometimes do too much of a good thing. We cannot imagine a proper life without organization. So to be sure of success we frequently organize not only that which absolutely has to be organized, but also that which can be organized. That is the mistake. Because we are so systematic, we here and there lack the invigorating power of clever improvisation. Everyone will agree that the nature of the war is different in 1942 than it was in 1939. The tasks have grown enormously. The people available to master them have hardly grown at all. They have increased their eagerness to work, but their physical and spiritual strengths have more demands placed on them in the third year of the war than in the first year. The apparatus has become more important.

Unfortunately, it has also become more complicated, not simpler. This is where we must do something.

Many engaged in war production still carry too much ballast from peacetime. Instead of marching with a light pack, thus gaining mobility, they carry a sizable backpack filled with concerns, objections and barriers. Instead of releasing initiative, they depend on paper. A critical matter is not resolved by sending a memo to someone else and putting a carbon copy in the files to provide oneself an alibi should something go wrong. It is much better to pick up the phone and call the person, who is after all a person as well and usually of good will. With a few friendly words, the matter can be resolved. That saves time, trouble, and annoyance, and speeds things up, even if it will not provide future historians with the black and white copy they might like. Half of success is usually courageous initiative and fast action. He who gets to his goal first is the one who starts first.

What will happen if the war effort rests entirely on the crutch of files! The leadership of the Reich is so overwhelmed with work that they lack the time to read many of the documents, letters and memos that reach their desks. And by the way, it is not their duty to do the work of lower levels. Their job is to set overall guidelines and see to it that they are carried out. That is what one means by leadership, which is

much different than administration. And besides that, in many cases lower levels can solve problems better than a central office. They have to function with relatively small staffs. A moron is seldom distinguished by particularly brilliant thinking.

Don't misunderstand us. A certain level of organization must always be there if the state and administration are to function. But there is a limit that one may not exceed without damaging the functioning of the apparatus. If one goes so far as to have people checking punctuation, it becomes a curse. That is why we praise improvisation in times of crisis. It produces not only ideas, but also facts. It gains the cooperation of the people to solve big problems, spurs on each individual, awakens his pride and enthusiasm, and thereby achieves successes that would ordinarily be impossible. The hurdles and barriers that would stop the average bureaucrat are quickly surmounted and one gallops onward.

That is the way we always worked during the period of struggle [1919-1933]. Organizations were created for particular purposes, and when they achieved them, they were tossed aside, not kept as some valuable and important museum exhibit. That is how we won our glorious electoral victories. We were always chasing the enemy. Our methods were flexible and elastic, though stubborn and inflexible when it came to principles. We were always untiringly flexible in the methods we used to reach our goals. We would never have won if we had been bureaucrats. We usually used paper only to print newspapers, leaflets, and posters. We left all that was not absolutely essential for victory to the future. We ignored Sundays and holidays. If we had money we took the express train, otherwise we slept on the wooden benches of third and fourth class. None of us lost anything as a result. We all knew that we had to succeed, and did not really care how. The practitioners were in charge, not the theorists. We assumed that we could repair our mistakes once we were in power. And that is what happened.

We have to act in the same way in the war. What does not aid the cause of victory is unimportant and has to be ignored. Delay aids the enemy. That which is necessary has to be done quickly, or it is usually too late. We have to get rid of old practices if they get in the way. We could do some things in peace because we had the time and money. Things are different in war. We all face hard necessity, and will not succeed if we leave opportunities unused.

Say someone wants to buy a poodle, and wishes to put an ad in a dog-fancier's magazine. First he gets a request fill out an application to join the Poodle Club, part of the National Canine Society. He must answer all sorts of absurd questions. The poodle in question will be just as at home with a non-Christian, a Protestant, or a Catholic, at least for the duration of the war. Whatever the contributions the Poodle Club, part of the National Canine Society, may make to the state during peace, it should send its secretary in wartime to the armaments industry and put its press at the disposal of distant regiments on the Eastern front so that they can print their modest newspapers for the front lines.

Forms and questionnaires should be reduced as much as possible. People have no time to write out their entire biography on some ridiculous form to get something that is important to them. One should be reasonable and require of them only that which is essential. Everyone can see that it is necessary to ration meat, fat, bread, and other foodstuffs, and that it requires an organization with cards, coupons, and ID cards. If there are long lines outside tobacco shops, one has to ration cigars and cigarettes. That is for the benefit of the whole public. But the more one is required to ration the essentials, the more one should be willing to leave the nonessentials to take care of themselves. Here one appeals to the discipline and good sense of the public. When someone tries to get more than his share, one says a friendly word, and if that does not work, a friendly kick in the rear.

There are those who practically faint when they see a small speck on their nicely polished boot. The act as if the state had nothing better to do during the war than worry about their valued selves. They have no idea how to help themselves. After it snows, they wait for the city to sweep it up, and when it rains they almost try to step in the puddles so as to be able to complain about the government. They have no

sense of the greatness of our day. They see everything from their perspective, without any interest or enthusiasm. They are only a tiny percentage of our population, and one would not need to pay them any heed if they did not stink up the air around them. They sit in the tram and complain that there is a war on that causes them so much trouble, that a car did not signal its turn, that newspapers only have four pages, that they have to give up their seats for women and wounded soldiers, that brakes squeal, that a nice young girl stepped on the foot they had stuck way out, and so on. These misanthropes think they are important, since they enjoy the particular attention and concern of English propagandists. They are naive enough to believe that such grumblers are typical Germans. How often have we made clear to the English that they are wrong, and how often they have had to pay for their mistakes!

Our people are made of different stuff. They are intelligent, politically alert, cool thinkers, realistic. They have both feet on the ground. When something displeases them or rubs them the wrong way, they do not grumble, but at most complain a bit. That is not so bad, as it clears the air. Complaining is the bowel movement of the soul. We do not need to make a capital offense of it. We get along with such people. They are just like us. We complain too when something goes wrong or we make a mistake. But that is that, and one gets back to work.

Some advice: Work fast, carefully, reliably, and without much fuss. Do not consider your own lesser or greater problems all that important. No one feels sorry for you, because everyone is in the same boat. Do not fight a war with paper. Toss aside everything that does not help us win. In a few words: Just as you behaved in peace as if it were peace, now behave in war as if it were war!