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Eichmann is in All of Us:  
How Dictators Get Their Way  
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## Eichmann is in All of Us

Dictators and tyrants have always plagued our unfortunate world. As we study them, however, beyond noting the obvious fact of their pervasiveness throughout history, we begin to ask some serious questions. What enables dictators to obtain and retain such vast power? Could the cause be the men themselves, nations made vulnerable by weak governments and tumult, or simply the zombie-like behavior and obedience of the people? These questions are important to those who would prefer to learn from history rather than to duplicate its mistakes. Before answering these questions, however, let us look at some stories of dictators which demonstrate their ability to control people and to obtain tyrannical authority.

Julius Caesar came to power in 49 BC, in an age of turmoil. Rome had been subjected to a series of civil wars resulting primarily from competing rulers. Tired of uncertainty and tumult, the "people wanted a strong leader to bring order to the republic and to solve their problems" (Stanton & Hyma, 1976). Caesar, with his popularity and expertise in warfare, was the ideal hero to "save" the commoners of the fast-sinking republic. He successfully waged a civil war against Pompey, the consul ruling Rome at the time, and ushered in his new form of rule for the nation.

Rome was conquered again by a dictator many centuries after Julius' reign. Following World War I, economic and agricultural disasters had ravaged the nation of Italy. "With disorder and violence sweeping the country, an ambitious politician named Benito Mussolini found conditions ripe for building his Fascist Party" (Moes, 1995). Taking advantage of the many aimless firebrand revolutionaries roaming the countryside, Mussolini welded "together a motley group of war veterans, Futurists, anarchists, nationalists, and others to form the *Fasci di combattimento* or 'fighting leagues'" whom he ordered to march on Rome, after failing to obtain the votes needed to gain political power legally (Jensen, 1994). The king was unsure of his chances at successfully repressing the uprising, and, in an effort to avoid bloodshed, appointed Mussolini prime minister. Naturally, this move did

little to prevent the upheaval which occurred as Mussolini took the short step from prime minister to dictator.

Surprisingly, the tyrant who is probably better known for his violence and murders than the rest of his colleagues gained his position not through violence, but by legal means. Adolf Hitler had tried the route of revolution; but, after an unsuccessful uprising called the Beer Hall Putsch, he landed in prison, where the disgruntled Adolf came to the conclusion that the only open door to power was through the people. Upon his release, he began to canvas the countryside for supporters. As the economic troubles of the 1930s came to bear heavily on Germany, the nation became more despairing and more open to anyone who promised relief. "With the onset of widespread unemployment, Hitler's demagogic message of a Nazi Third Reich as a foolproof cure for the nation's ills, previously ignored by the great majority of Germans, now began to sound plausible to increasingly desperate people" who soon elected Hitler to be Prime Minister (Haag, 1994). From there, he acted swiftly, finding an excuse to push aside the German constitution and setting himself up as dictator.

So what is the secret to these oppressors' despotic triumphs? There are several factors which might have played a part. Dictators frequently share common characteristics and abilities which help them to gain supporters for their regimes. Also many of the countries which fell victim to a tyrant's rule had weak governments or a public lacking the knowledge and ability to preserve their own freedoms. On top of all of this is a natural propensity within humans to give their allegiance to authority figures, which perhaps paralyzed those who were subjected to these dictatorships.

The most easily discernible ingredient in the mix of causes stems from the attributes which most dictators possess. The ranks of tyrants have been filled by those with strong convictions, magnetic personalities, and the strength of will and speaking skills of a leader. These have been masters of political manipulation and chief among their many talents has been a skill at circulating propaganda.

As evidenced by the masses drawn to their speeches and rallies, dictators have been charismatic crowd-pleasers in the earlier phases of their political campaigns. As they have begun their journeys toward leadership, they have presented themselves as revolutionaries working for a better world. They each have had a cause or creed which was used as a rallying point for their party. Hitler's was the "Aryan nation," a nationalistic and racist belief in the superiority of the German people. Mussolini's was fascism. These causes collected supporters in numbers which cannot be attributed simply to the ideology's attractions, but must be imputed to the magnetism of the leaders themselves.

Not only were the leaders mesmerizing, but they also possessed the skill to circumnavigate political obstacles. They spent great resources to gain allies. Throughout his long political career, Julius Caesar dedicated much time and money to gathering support. ". . . Caesar did not shrink from bribing officials and the voters of Rome," often rescuing fellow politicians from debt (Viscusi, 1994). He also formed alliances through marriages, beginning this practice with his own wedding at a young age and again, after his first wife had died, through his marriage to the granddaughter of Sulla, a previous dictator (Viscusi, 1994). He also forged an alliance with Pompey by giving the consul his daughter in marriage. In comparison, Hitler's manipulative strategies were of a more sinister nature. He used the National Socialist Workers' Party as a stepping stone into power. Then, once he had gained a position in government, he turned on his old adherents in order to gain the support of the German military which would eventually make up a powerful portion of his totalitarian government (Green, 1969).

Hitler and Caesar were masters of political manipulation, but Mussolini takes the prize for the best use of propaganda. He was especially adroit at this, having edited a political paper prior to making his dash for power, and thus possessing all the knowledge needed to herd blinded fascist sheep into his fold. Other dictators have followed suit, controlling the press, printing only information that advocated their own causes, and suppressing any criticism of their own persons. As Winston

Churchill said, "No socialist government conducting the entire life and industry of the country could afford to allow free, sharp, or violently worded expressions of public discontent" (Brooke, 1995).

Despots have also targeted younger generations, saturating the education system with their own ideas and standards in order to ingrain their beliefs and particular brand of political fervor in the minds of children. They have bolstered their own image as much as possible. Julius Caesar, for one, "enhanced his position to such a degree that he began to flirt with assuming godlike attributes" (Viscusi, 1994).

In addition, tyrants have claimed to be working for the good of the country and, once this lie began to fail, have forced the people to at least pretend they still believed it.

Obviously, there is a pattern to the rule of dictators. They boast similar qualities which make them eligible for the job, and their paths to dominance follow similar turns. Hugh Trevor-Roper summed up this cycle in his book *The Last Days of Hitler*: "Most historical dictators have passed through similar stages of development. Starting with revolutionary power, based on a revolutionary idea which happens to symbolize the mood of a people, they convert it into military power based on success; when the revolutionary premise is betrayed, and the success runs dry, they resort to naked power, based on political expedients and secret police. . ." (Trevor-Roper, 2002).

Now that we have looked at the effects that the personal talents of charisma, political manipulation, and propaganda have on a dictator's ascension to supremacy, let us proceed to a second possible factor resulting in their conquests: the weakened state of the nation due to turbulent conditions raging throughout the country and heightened by an unstable and inefficient government.

Troubled times have much to do with a tyrant's popularity. The appeal of these despots is doubled by their sparkling contrast with the chaotic setting in which they normally appear. An aspiring dictator will often present himself upon the advent of difficulty as a beacon of hope and salvation. Caesar's Rome was torn by civil war. Mussolini's Italy was crushed by violence and agricultural and industrial hardships. Hitler's Germany was similarly laden by financial disaster. The

oppressors struck when the people "were seeking a political savior in a chaotic and economically depressed time," effectively taking advantage of their nations' dilemmas in order to build their totalitarian governments (Sowell, 2005).

It is no accident that these strong absolutist governments displaced the rule of weak and inefficient bureaucracies. In Italy, before both Caesar and Mussolini's regimes, the government had been riddled with division and conflict, making it easy for the rising despots to push aside the old rulers and install themselves in their place. In addition, in many of these nations the commoners had become accustomed to following whichever ruler happened to step into power. "The relative political apathy of Germans and their historic law-abiding habits enabled Hitler to seize far more power than he was elected to, with perhaps less resistance than such an action might have provoked in some other societies" (Sowell, 2005).

The people of these nations did not understand what to do with freedom or how to retain it. They did not "...enjoy the kind of political responsibility in government that prepared them adequately for what happened after the war [World War I]. . . . If the . . . states that gave rise to dictatorship had anything in common, it was an ambivalent attitude to the western model of development" (Overy, 2004).

This passive zombie-like attitude is not exclusive to nations acclimated to absolute rulers. Conformity and obedience seem, instead, to be basic human qualities—which introduces our third possible cause underlying the authority of dictators.

What led fairly ordinary people to be swept along without resistance in the tide of tyranny? This question was asked by a psychologist named Stanley Milgram, and eventually drove him to seek the answer through an experimental study. His research on obedience led to some surprising and dismaying results.

The study which Milgram performed constructed a scenario involving three people: an

"experimenter," a "teacher," and a "learner." Only the experimenter and learner were informed participants in the experiment. The teacher falsely believed that he was there to assist the learner in memorizing a set of words and that the purpose of the experiment was to test the effect that pain has on learning (Milgram, 1974).

The experimenter was presented as an authoritative-looking figure who explained to the teacher that if the learner did not comprehend the words correctly, the teacher was to shock him with increasing levels of electricity coming from a generator. What the teacher did not know was that the learner never would actually be shocked, but was a paid actor who pretended to be experiencing pain when the teacher pulled the shock-initiating lever.

As the experiment got underway, the learner purposely answered incorrectly, forcing the teacher to "shock" him. As the "shocks" became greater in intensity, the learner's affected protests and cries of pain increased until he was screaming and begging to be released. At this point, many of the teachers became distressed and requested to stop the experiment, but the experimenter ordered them to proceed. The number that did continue was alarming.

"Before the experiments," Milgram says in his article (appropriately titled "The Perils of Obedience"), "I sought predictions about the outcome from various kinds of people . . . . With remarkable similarity, they predicted that virtually all the subjects would refuse to obey the experimenter . . . . These predictions were unequivocally wrong. Of the forty subjects in the first experiment, twenty-five obeyed the orders of the experimenter to the end, punishing the victim until they reached the most potent shock available on the generator" (Milgram, 1974).

After seeing these results, Milgram attempted to provide explanations for this behavior. His best justification for the obedience was that, when ordered to carry out an action, the teachers no longer viewed themselves as liable for the outcome. They were just "doing as they were told." On top of this was a sense of obligation to the experimenter and a hesitancy to go against his will as it might

"appear arrogant, untoward, and rude." Milgram points out that average people, simply going about their work, can, without any intention of aggressiveness or hostility, become part of a "terrible destructive process" (Milgram, 1974). This was demonstrated in Hitler's regime which Milgram describes in the conclusion of his article. "Even Eichmann [to whom Hitler delegated the misdeed of mass murdering the Jews]," he says, "was sickened when he toured the concentration camps, but he had only to sit at a desk and shuffle papers. At the same time the man in the camp who actually dropped Cyclon-b into the gas chambers was able to justify his behavior on the ground that he was only following orders from above. Thus there is a fragmentation of the total human act; no one is confronted with the consequences of his decision to carry out the evil act" (Milgram, 1974).

At Eichmann's trial, Yehiel Dinur, a Jew having survived the horrors of Auschwitz and called upon to testify against the mass murderer, entered the courtroom expecting to see a man exuding evil. Instead, the man sitting before him was an ordinary person, and, struck with this realization, Dinur fell to the floor and burst into tears. Later, when questioned about it, Dinur admitted, "I was afraid about myself. I saw that I am capable to do this . . . exactly like he. Eichmann is in all of us" (Thomas, 2009).

In a sense, the people of Rome, of Italy, and of Germany were zombies. They mindlessly followed the commands of others, despite the resulting horrors; and, while we might condemn them for this, we must share Dinur's realization. There is in all of us a capacity for thoughtless compliance, even to the point of blinding us to wrongdoing. It is the responsibility of each of us to examine these stories, recognize the propensity of people to conform, even to evil, and to choose not to be like Eichmann—refuse to be a zombie.



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