Hitler's Destructive Legacy: Lessons in Leadership

[1]Yongyut Khamkhong and [2]Natamon Nanposri

[1]Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Phranakhon Rajabhat University, Thailand

[2]Rajapark Institute, Thailand

E-mail: [1]yongyut.k@pnru.ac.th, [2]mintfang@windowslive.com

Abstract

Adolf Hitler was the prime culprit for causing the death of around 85 million people during World War II. Many questions were still left for nowadays debates of his peculiar leadership and how he climbed up to the highest position in Germany through the general elections where democracy was very strong. This report analyzed Hitler's leadership styles that made him win millions of votes and how some major factors helped Hitler take the opportunity for his Nazi regime's rise to power. The destruction trails Hitler left behind were reported. While the world is currently experiencing sporadic wars in some countries around the globe, it is probably wiser to look back in history where Hitler was unfortunately created so we can make the right choice for our leaders today.

Keywords: Adolf Hitler; Leadership; World War II

Introduction

With respect to those fallen victims of Adolf Hitler, this report was written to understand the rise and fall of the horrifying dictator who wreaked havoc in human history so that we can learn the hard-earned lessons and avoid repeating the mistakes by creating another Hitler.

For the meaning of a leader, the ancient teaching by the Buddha has explained it all: *"When the cow leader leads the herd across a river and he swims in the wrong direction, all cows will follow him wrongly. Similarly, in human beings, if the appointed leader behaves wrongly, the people will follow him wrongly. If the state leader does not stay in righteousness, the whole state will live in suffering. However, if the cow leader leads the herd across a river and he swims in the*
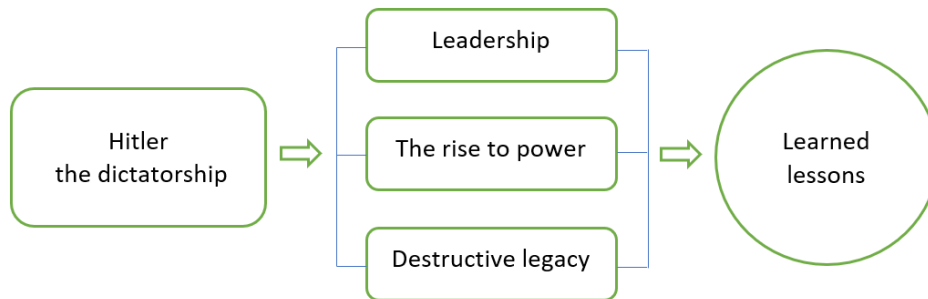
right direction, all cows will follow him rightly. Similarly, in human beings, if the appointed leader behaves rightly, the people will follow him rightly. If the state leader stays in righteousness, the whole state will live in happiness" (Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya, 1996).

From the ancient world until now, we will not deny the fact that any types of leadership that bring about peace, prosperity, and happiness to their nation should be recognized as a real leader. What are some attributes of real leadership? Here are some answers: According to Jan-Benedict Steenkamp (2020), the author of *Time to Lead: Lessons for Today's Leaders from Bold Decisions that Changed History*, there are some great qualities about the real leader: 1) They have strong values about the right thing to do 2) They show consistent integrity across all spheres of life 3) They exercise self-discipline 4) They are willing to pay the price, and 5) They establish meaningful relationships with followers. Some great leaders may possess some qualities and lack others. But if they do not have integrity, they will lose faith among their followers quickly. Some may argue that Hitler established strong relationships with his military followers up until the point many were willing to die for him, but that is still not enough to call him a real leader for the world. Moreover, Hitler was good at creating propaganda to make belief among his people that what he did was the right thing to do and that he sacrificed all he has for the nation. It is the only one-sided information Hitler wants to convey to the Germans because he successfully suppressed all free speech and expression by the public. He did not listen to the grievances of the people under him. If he did, he wouldn't become Hitler as we knew him.

Other qualities frequently suggested by leadership experts are, for example: helping others, valuing relationships, accountability, active listening, honesty, humility and many more. These are the positive qualities we ideally want our leader to possess. However, getting a positive leader might depend on many factors. It is certain that Hitler must have possessed some interesting qualities that made the Germans vote for him and his Nazi party. This report would bring you to look at his life from different angles and give some analytical inputs that made us understand the situation at that time clearer.

Analytical framework

This article has put the framework for analysis as follows:

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│     Hitler       │  ⇒   ┌──────────────────┐   ⇒   │ Learned  │
│  the dictatorship│      │ The rise to power│       │ lessons  │
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The rise of the dictator

Adolf Hitler, born on April 20, 1889, in Braunau am Inn, Austria–Hungary (now Austria), rose to become one of the most infamous figures in history. His early life was marked by struggles, including the death of his father when he was a young boy. Hitler showed an early interest in art but was rejected twice by the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, which pushed him towards politics (Kershaw, 1999). He joined the army for 6 years (1914–1920) and went to war which he received several medals of bravery. In the later years of his service, he joined the unit of the army's propaganda where he was trained to write articles and probably speak to the public as well. His political and nationalism idea was said to form during this time.

In the aftermath of World War I, Hitler joined the National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nazi Party) and quickly rose through its ranks. In 1923, he attempted a failed coup, known as the Beer Hall Putsch, in Munich. He was arrested and sentenced to prison, during which he wrote his autobiography and manifesto, Mein Kampf (Shirer, 1960). His time in prison allowed him to refine his political beliefs and strategies. After his release, Hitler reinvigorated the Nazi Party and used propaganda, charismatic speeches, and political maneuvering to gain power. He became Chancellor of Germany in 1933 and later consolidated his power as Führer, or leader. Under his leadership, Nazi Germany pursued aggressive expansionism, leading to World War II (Kershaw, 1999).

Hitler's reign was marked by widespread atrocities, including the Holocaust, in which millions of Jews and other minority groups were systematically murdered (Shirer, 1960). As the war turned against Nazi Germany, Hitler's health deteriorated, and he went into hiding in his bunker in Berlin. On April 30, 1945, as Soviet forces closed in on the city, Hitler and his longtime

companion Eva Braun committed suicide. His death marked the end of World War II in Europe, and he left a legacy of devastation and infamy that continues to be studied and remembered as one of the darkest periods in human history (Shirer, 1960).

Hitler the opportunist

It is believed that Hitler was well received by German voters because of several factors. One of them was the widespread poverty in Germany due to the Versailles Treaty that Germany was forced to sign with the Allied Powers after it lost the war in WW I. The Germans blamed the unfairness of the treaty that it has to pay for reparations, disarm and make territorial concessions. The reparation payment made 6 million Germans lost their job and hunger was felt all over the country. Also, the Great Depression that destroyed economies all over the world added on top of Germany's woes (Simms, 2020).

Hitler and the Nazis, who championed nationalism and promised to restore pride to the country, emerged as the promising choice. The Nazis secured 32 seats in the 1924 elections, a number that surged to 107 in 1930 and ultimately reached 288 in 1933, constituting 43.9% of the entire votes (Holocaust Encyclopedia, 2023). The latest elections propelled the Nazis to become the largest party in Germany, paving the way for Hitler's appointment as the country's chancellor. Hitler adeptly exploited the resentment against the superpowers, leveraging the perceived injustice of the Versailles Treaty.

In the initial four years of his leadership, Hitler was purported to have fulfilled his promises, successfully improving the lives of Germans, albeit through the use of propaganda and manipulation techniques. However, this progress came at a cost, as he systematically suppressed all political opponents and enacted laws to eliminate all other political parties in the country, consolidating Nazi power in Berlin.

Hitler promoted two controversial policies. One was the notion of 'blood purity' among the German people, driven by his desire to maintain his 'master race' ideology. He believed that, deep down, Germans harbored dislike towards Jews, viewing them as economically superior to the local population. When he implemented the Nuremberg Laws against the Jews, the majority of Germans supported his initiative. However, once they realized that these laws led to violence, most of them condemned it (Moore, 2022). However, Hitler's targets were not limited to Jews; he also opposed the handicapped, homosexuals, and all non-Germans.

Another policy was *Lebensraum*, advocating the expansion of German territory into Russia. He envisioned new Germans settling in Russia, aiming for Germany to possess more land and resources to compete with other world powers. If we were to question whether Hitler loved his country, the answer would mostly be yes. His love for Germany bordered on 'nationalist fanaticism,' as he sought to elevate the German race to the status of a 'master race' above all others. His intense focus on the well-being of Germans led him to be indifferent to the suffering and killing of other races.

While German voters may have realized their mistake as Hitler turned the country into a nightmare, it was too late, with German troops invading numerous European countries and Russia. Opposition to Hitler's power meant death. Some argue that even if Hitler had not risen to power, another opportunist might have emerged, luring Germans to vote for them in general elections. The circumstances in Germany at that time allowed for the possibility of a radical opportunist seizing the chance.

Hitler is often characterized as having leadership qualities, but it's essential to clarify that his leadership was marked by highly controversial and destructive actions. As the leader of the Nazi Party and Führer, he wielded significant power within Nazi Germany. Hitler was an effective orator and propagandist, able to rally and inspire a large following. However, the nature of his leadership was deeply problematic, resulting in immense suffering and destruction.

It is essential to recognize that while Hitler may have exhibited qualities associated with leadership, the consequences of his leadership were catastrophic and have led to widespread condemnation of his actions. His leadership serves as a stark reminder of the importance of ethical leadership and the potential for misuse of power.

Hitler exhibited several qualities associated with leadership, such as charisma and the ability to inspire followers. His charismatic authority played a significant role in attracting a large following and maintaining the loyalty of many Germans (Kershaw, 2007).

Hitler's leadership style was also authoritarian and dictatorial. He centralized power within Nazi Germany and made crucial decisions himself, often bypassing established government structures. This authoritarian approach allowed him to implement policies and actions in line with his extremist Nazi ideology (Fest, 1974). Ideologically, Hitler's leadership was closely tied to his extremist beliefs. His vision included notions of Aryan racial superiority, anti-Semitism, and territorial expansion. This ideological component of his leadership influenced the actions of the Nazi regime, including the Holocaust (Bauer, 1989).

In terms of international relations, Hitler's wartime leadership led to aggressive expansionism and the pursuit of territorial conquests, which ultimately resulted in World War II. His actions on the global stage had profound and devastating consequences (Kershaw, 2007). Hitler's leadership is a complex and controversial topic, characterized by charismatic authority, authoritarianism, extremist ideology, and a significant impact on world history. His leadership serves as a stark reminder of the consequences of unchecked power and the importance of ethical and responsible leadership in history (Fest, 1974).

Destructive legacy

Adolf Hitler's legacy is predominantly marked by the immense destruction he caused during his time as the leader of Nazi Germany. Hitler's aggressive expansionist policies and his orchestration of World War II resulted in widespread devastation and suffering. First and foremost, Hitler's most infamous legacy is the Holocaust, in which six million Jews, along with millions of others, were systematically exterminated in concentration camps and through mass killings (Bauer, 1989).

This act of genocide is one of the darkest chapters in human history and stands as a testament to the horrors of unchecked extremism. Secondly, under Hitler's leadership, vast portions of Europe were ravaged by the war, leading to the deaths of millions and widespread infrastructure destruction. Entire cities were reduced to rubble, including the bombings of London, Warsaw, and the decimation of Stalingrad (Beevor, 1998). It was estimated that around 85 million lives were lost during the WWII or about 3% of the world's 2.3 billion. 56 million were killed during the war while 28 million deaths were from starvation and illnesses. Out of 67 million German population, 4.3 million soldiers lost lives while a half million civilians died. German lost 7.4% of its population from the war (National WWII Museum, 2023).

The number of deaths was unbearable to write into number but the estimate was made to remind us the brutality of the war. Russia reported 27 million deaths; China 20 million; Japan 3.1 million; India 3 million; Indonesia 4 million; Burma 1 million; Philippines 1 million. Poland lost 6 million lives or 17% of its population. Lithuania lost 370,000 lives but it is 14% of its entire population. While Ukraine was fighting for its survival in this era with Russia at the present, WWII claimed its 8 million lives (National WWII Museum, 2023).

Furthermore, Hitler's policies of racial purity and aggression towards other nations fueled hatred and conflict on a global scale. The world witnessed the unprecedented scale of destruction

and loss of life during World War II, which remains unparalleled in modern history (Beevor, 1998). Hitler's impact extended beyond wartime destruction. His ideology and actions left a lasting stain on the world, contributing to the development of international organizations like the United Nations to prevent such catastrophic events from occurring in the future (Beevor, 1998).

In conclusion, Adolf Hitler's legacy is primarily one of destruction and devastation, with the Holocaust and World War II standing as indelible symbols of the horrors of his rule. His actions left an enduring impact on world history, leading to global efforts to promote peace and prevent such destruction from happening again.

How he failed

Adolf Hitler's failure can be attributed to a combination of factors that contributed to the downfall of Nazi Germany. These factors include military defeats, strategic errors, economic challenges, and the overall unsustainable nature of Hitler's ambitions.

First and foremost, Hitler's military strategy during World War II was marked by a series of critical errors, such as his decision to invade the Soviet Union in 1941 (Kershaw, 2007). The campaign in the Eastern Front, with harsh winters and the sheer size of the Soviet Union, proved to be unsustainable and led to devastating losses for the German army. Second, Nazi Germany faced economic difficulties and resource constraints. Hitler's policies of total war and resource allocation had stretched Germany's industrial capacity to its limits (Tooze, 2006). The lack of access to essential resources, including oil and other raw materials, hindered the German war effort. Third, Hitler's aggressive expansionist goals and his involvement in multiple simultaneous conflicts strained Germany's military and logistical capabilities. Germany found itself in a two-front war, fighting both the Allies in Western Europe and the Soviet Union in the East, which proved unsustainable in the long run (Kershaw, 2007).

Additionally, Hitler's ideology and brutal actions alienated potential allies and fueled resistance movements in occupied territories. The Holocaust and the mistreatment of conquered populations created international outrage and resistance (Browning, 1992). In conclusion, Adolf Hitler's failure can be attributed to a combination of military defeats, strategic errors, economic challenges, and the unsustainable nature of his expansionist ambitions. These factors, along with the international response to Nazi atrocities, ultimately led to the downfall of Nazi Germany.

Strong lessons for us

While WWII caused suffering for people all over the world, it has also brought about positive changes. The alliance of 26 nations against Hitler, which included the USA, UK, France, Russia, China, Canada, Australia, and others on January 1, 1942, called themselves the 'United Nations' and paved the way for the real UN that exists today, with 193 nations as members. As of my writing this report, the UN has successfully prevented major world wars. However, conflicts that currently attract international interest, such as the situations in Ukraine, Palestine, the Korean peninsula, and Taiwan, might lead to unwanted situations.

Also, WW II witnessed significant technological advancements, including the development of nuclear weapons and the early use of computers. These innovations continue to shape our world, and remembering the war highlights the role of science and technology in history.

It is interesting to note that the Nazis were voted into power by over 17.2 million votes, helping them garner most seats in the Reichstag in 1933. Yes, the Nazis rose to power through democratic elections in Germany, where democracy was thriving. This teaches us that leaders elected by the majority might not always be the right choice for the country. It is crucial to know the background and possible leadership traits of a leader.

In fact, Hitler's actions and policies were not a secret to the public. He expressed his strong intentions and feelings in the 720 pages of his autobiography, Mein Kampf (My Struggle), written during his almost year-long imprisonment in 1923. His extreme ideologies and hatred against the Jews were evident in the book.

In "Mein Kampf," Hitler articulated his anti-Semitic beliefs, nationalism, and his vision of an Aryan master race. The book served as a blueprint for his future policies, including territorial expansion, anti-Semitism, and authoritarianism. It provided a glimpse into the origins of his obsession with racial purity and the propagation of extremist ideas (Hitler, 1925). Hitler's tome was published in 1925 and gained popularity among his supporters, playing a role in shaping Nazi ideology and policies, making it an influential document in the lead-up to World War II and the Holocaust. After Hitler's rise to power, "Mein Kampf" was widely distributed in Nazi Germany, becoming a required gift for newlyweds and military personnel (Kershaw, 1999).

In the years following World War II, the book was banned in many countries and remains highly controversial due to its contents. However, it continues to be studied by historians and scholars as a source for understanding the origins of Nazi ideology and the Holocaust. The Germans who read his book might not have been able to imagine the Holocaust that Hitler wanted

to carry out. Nationalism and economic recession in the country might have blinded the voters, and also the charismatic speeches by Hitler made them vote for him.

One lesson we have learned is the style of charismatic leadership Hitler displayed to the world. Analysts who studied Hitler's style of public speaking were in awe of how he convinced his audience. His whole body shook while delivering the speech, and he even cried when touching on the feeling of patriotism. He was trained in a propaganda unit in the army during his last years of service. He found his public speaking skills in the army and successfully used them to benefit the Nazis.

Charismatic leadership was not used in a positive way in Hitler's case. The aftermath of WWII has taught us that we should choose peace and tolerance above all conflicts. WWII resulted in the Holocaust and other atrocities, highlighting the consequences of intolerance, hatred, and racism. Remembering the war serves as a reminder of the importance of promoting peace, tolerance, and human rights.

What type of leadership suits us?

Leadership styles play a crucial role in influencing the success and well-being of individuals and societies. In the global context, it is essential to advocate for leadership approaches that prioritize ethical considerations, inclusivity, and adaptability. Transformational leadership, as proposed by Bass and Riggio (2006), is a model that emphasizes inspiring and motivating followers to achieve beyond their self-interests, fostering a sense of collective identity and purpose. This style encourages innovation, creativity, and positive organizational outcomes, aligning with the demands of a rapidly changing world. A pertinent question arises: "Is Hitler a transformational leader?" Although he attempted to transform Germany, his legacy is tarnished by negative consequences that persist, hindering open discussions about him.

Moreover, situational leadership, introduced by Hersey and Blanchard (1982), underscores the importance of adapting leadership behaviors based on the specific needs and readiness of followers. In a dynamic and diverse global landscape, leaders should possess the flexibility to adjust their approaches according to the unique challenges and characteristics of different situations. By integrating both transformational and situational leadership, a balanced and effective leadership model emerges, promoting not only individual and organizational growth but also addressing the complex and interconnected issues faced by the global community. As societies navigate the complexities of the modern era, leaders who embody such principles can contribute

to fostering positive change and sustainable development (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Hersey & Blanchard, 1982).

Numerous other leadership styles are discussed in academic circles. For instance, the autocratic or authoritarian leadership style, into which Hitler is mostly categorized, focuses on results and team efficiency, often making decisions alone or with trusted assistants. However, such leaders may experience stress, feeling responsible for everything and lacking flexibility, leading to potential team resentment. Hitler falls into this category, becoming an authoritarian leader to the extent that he did not listen to the grievances of the people.

Next is the bureaucratic leadership style. Similar to autocratic leaders, bureaucratic leaders expect team members to follow rules and procedures precisely as written. This style focuses on fixed duties within a hierarchical system, with each employee having a set list of responsibilities, little need for collaboration, and creativity. It may suit those who are detail-oriented, task-focused, value rules and structure, are strong-willed, self-disciplined, and have a great work ethic. However, it is slow to change and does not thrive in a dynamic environment.

Another style is the coaching leadership style, which seems to be famous in this era. A coaching leader quickly recognizes team members' strengths, weaknesses, and motivations to help each individual improve. This type of leader assists team members in setting goals and provides regular feedback with challenging projects to promote growth. The coaching leadership style is advantageous for both employers and employees but is often underused due to its time-intensive nature. Coaching leaders are supportive, value learning, and are seen as valuable mentors, fostering a confident company culture.

A democratic leadership style is familiar to us. The leader asks team members for input and considers feedback before making decisions. This style, credited with fostering higher levels of employee engagement and workplace satisfaction, values group discussions, provides all information to the team when making decisions, and promotes a work environment where everyone shares ideas. However, organizing group discussions or obtaining feedback from everyone takes time, and some members may not want to share ideas in group settings.

Next is the laissez-faire leadership style. The laissez-faire style, the opposite of autocratic leadership, focuses on delegating tasks to team members with little to no supervision. Laissez-faire leaders often have more time for other projects, adopting this style when team members are highly experienced, well-trained, and require little oversight. However, confusion about leader expectations or the need for consistent motivation and boundaries can lead to a dip in productivity.

This leadership style encourages a relaxed work environment, often resulting in higher employee retention rates.

Lastly, there is the servant leadership style. It prioritizes a people-first mindset, believing that fulfilled team members are more effective and likely to produce great work. Emphasizing employee satisfaction and collaboration, servant leaders tend to achieve higher levels of respect, motivate their teams, and have excellent communication skills. If you encourage collaboration and engagement among team members and commit to growing your team professionally, this leadership style may align with your own. However, it can lead to burnout as servant leaders often prioritize their team's needs above their own (Tenney, 2023).

In reality, a good leader can be a mixture of several styles simultaneously and in different situations. They can be authoritarian in some instances and a servant leadership type in others. As long as a leader cares for their team and organization, they will be respected, and positive outcomes will result from their leadership. No single leadership type suits all situations. A good leader knows how to adapt, garnering support from teammates, understanding that they cannot complete the job alone, relying on teammates to help achieve organizational goals.

However, there are universally agreed-upon common attributes that any good leaders should possess. Some examples are as follows:

Personal qualities	Managerial qualities
• Humility	• Ethical and moral standard
• Self confidence	• Vision for growth
• Balanced life	• Communication skills
• Intelligence	• Opening for new ideas
• Positive outlook	• Decision making
• Global outlook	• Motivation
• Care for others	• Organizing ability

Leaders cannot merely live for the organization without caring for themselves. For instance, the balanced life of the body, brain, and heart should be examined on a daily basis; otherwise, leaders may achieve success financially, politically, and internationally but live their lives with illnesses. They cannot win the hearts of their followers if they do not care for other people's lives and feelings. The case of Hitler serves as a notable example.

Globalization and international media nowadays influence the leadership style of leaders in all types of organizations. It enables leaders to learn from others across the world. Hence, it is crucial for them to possess a global outlook and a lifelong learning habit to continuously advance themselves and their organizations simultaneously. The easy access to information with just a few clicks on the phone can be a powerful tool for leaders. By being open to new ideas and practices from others, leaders will learn to be more flexible and tolerant of the differences in people from various backgrounds, ultimately becoming better and more respected leaders.

Conclusion

Hitler's life and the destructive legacy he left behind teaches us the importance of choosing our leaders carefully. If we find ourselves in a position of leadership within a team, it is crucial to approach the responsibilities with care, compassion, a balanced focus on both work and people, and maintaining a balanced life. While Hitler's autocratic leadership style may have led to quick decisions and apparent progress on certain fronts, the failure to address the grievances of those under him ultimately brought Germany to a doomed state. To be a good leader, one must actively listen to others' ideas and suggestions. Additionally, possessing positive qualities such as compassion, humility, positivity, collaboration, empathy, and diplomacy is essential.

In Hitler's birthplace in Austria, a stone carving with a poignant poem encapsulates the lesson for all of us: ***"For peace, freedom, and democracy; never again fascism; millions of dead are a warning."***

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