

FROM THE SAMUEL JOHNSON PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR OF  
MAO'S GREAT FAMINE

# HOW TO BE A DICTATOR

THE CULT OF  
PERSONALITY  
IN THE TWENTIETH  
CENTURY

FRANK  
DIKÖTTER

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# HOW TO BE A DICTATOR

The Cult of Personality in the  
Twentieth Century

FRANK DIKÖTTER



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‘So that in the first place I put for a general inclination of all mankind a perpetual and restless desire of power after power that ceases only in death. The cause of this is not always that a man hopes for a more intensive delight than he has already attained or that he cannot be content with moderate power, but because he cannot assure the power and means to live well which he has present without the acquisition of more.’

THOMAS HOBBES,

*The Essential Leviathan: A Modernised Edition*

‘Is it better to be loved rather than feared, or vice versa? The answer is that one would prefer to be both but, since they don’t go together easily, if you have to choose, it’s much safer to be feared than loved... Men are less worried about letting down someone who has made himself loved than someone who makes himself feared. Love binds when someone recognises he should be grateful to you, but, since men are a sad lot, gratitude is forgotten the moment it’s inconvenient. Fear means fear of punishment, and that’s something people never forget.’

NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI,

*The Prince*, a modern translation by Tim Parks



W.M. Thackeray, *The Paris Sketch Book*, London: Collins' Clear-Type Press, 1840.

## Preface

In 1840 the satirical novelist William Makepeace Thackeray, famous for lampooning the high and mighty, published a caricature of Louis XIV. To the left stands a clothes horse, displaying the king's sword, his ermine and fleur-de-lis robe, his wig with tumbling curls of hair, his shoes with their aristocratic heels. In the centre the man himself, a poor Ludovicus in underwear, with spindly legs, a protruding stomach, bald, bare and toothless. But on the left he emerges fully dressed, a proud Ludovicus Rex in full regalia. Thackeray had undressed the King of Kings to show the man, frail and pitiful without the trimmings of power: 'Thus do barbers and cobblers make the gods that we worship.'<sup>1</sup>

'L'État, c'est moi,' the seventeenth-century king allegedly pronounced: 'I am the state.' As Louis saw it, he was answerable to God alone. He was an absolute monarch, who for more than seventy years used his autocratic power to weaken the nobility, centralise the state and expand his country by force of arms. He also projected himself as an infallible Sun King around whom everything revolved. He made sure he was glorified by all, with medals, paintings, busts, statues, obelisks and triumphal arches appearing throughout the realm. Poets, philosophers and official historians celebrated his achievements, acclaiming him as omniscient and omnipotent. He transformed a royal hunting lodge south-west of Paris into the Chateau of Versailles, a monumental, 700-room palace with a

sprawling estate where he held court, obliging his noble courtiers to compete for favours.<sup>2</sup>

Louis XIV was a master of political theatre, but all politicians, to some extent, rely on image. Louis XVI, a descendant of the Sun King, was sent to the guillotine after the 1789 revolution, and the notion of divine right was buried with him. The revolutionaries held that sovereign rights were vested in the people, not in God. In the democracies that gradually emerged over the next two centuries, leaders understood that they had to appeal to voters, who could remove them at the ballot box.

There were, of course, other ways of achieving power, besides elections. One could organise a coup, or rig the system. In 1917 Lenin and the Bolsheviks stormed the Winter Palace, proclaiming a new government. Later they referred to their coup as a 'revolution' inspired by 1789. A few years later, in 1922, Mussolini marched on Rome, forcing parliament to hand over power. Yet as they and other dictators found out, naked power has an expiry date. Power seized through violence must be maintained by violence, although violence can be a blunt instrument. A dictator must rely on military forces, a secret police, a praetorian guard, spies, informants, interrogators, torturers. But it is best to pretend that coercion is actually consent. A dictator must instil fear in his people, but if he can compel them to acclaim him he will probably survive longer. The paradox of the modern dictator, in short, is that he must create the illusion of popular support.

Throughout the twentieth century hundreds of millions of people cheered their own dictators, even as they were herded down the road to serfdom. Across large swathes of the planet, the face of a dictator appeared on hoardings and buildings, with portraits in every school, office and factory. Ordinary people had to bow to his likeness, pass by his statue, recite his work, praise his name, extol his genius. Modern technologies, from radio and television to the industrial production of posters, badges and busts, made dictators ubiquitous to an extent that would have been unimaginable in the time of Louis XIV. Even in relatively small countries like Haiti, thousands were regularly obliged to hail their leader, marching in

front of the presidential palace, dwarfing the festivities organised at Versailles.

In 1956 Nikita Khrushchev denounced Joseph Stalin, detailing his reign of fear and terror. He gave a name to what he viewed as his erstwhile master's 'loathsome adulation' and 'mania for greatness', calling it the 'cult of the individual'. It was translated as 'cult of personality' in English. It may not be a rigorously developed concept proposed by a great social scientist, but most historians find it quite adequate.<sup>3</sup>

When Louis XIV was still a minor, France was rocked by a series of rebellions, as aristocrats attempted to limit the power of the crown. They failed, but left a deep impression on the young king, who developed a lifelong fear of rebellion. He moved the centre of power from Paris to Versailles, and obliged the nobles to spend time at court, where he could observe them as they were made to win royal favour.

Dictators, likewise, were afraid of their own people, but even more fearful of their entourage at court. They were weak. Had they been strong, they would have been elected by majority. Instead, they decided to take a shortcut, often over the bodies of their opponents. But if they could seize power, others could too, raising the prospect of a stab in the back. There were rivals, often just as ruthless. Mussolini was merely one of several established fascist leaders and had faced a rebellion within the ranks before he marched on Rome in 1922. Stalin paled in comparison to Trotsky. Mao was repeatedly stripped of his positions by more powerful rivals in the 1930s. Kim Il-sung was imposed on an unwilling population by the Soviet Union in 1945, and was surrounded by communist leaders with a far more distinguished pedigree of underground work.

There were many strategies for a dictator to claw his way to power and get rid of his rivals. There were bloody purges, there was manipulation, there was divide and rule, to name only a few. But in the long run the cult of personality was the most efficient. The cult debased allies and rivals alike, forcing them to collaborate through common subordination. Most of all, by compelling them to acclaim him before the others, a dictator turned everyone into

a liar. When everyone lied, no one knew who was lying, making it more difficult to find accomplices and organise a coup.

Who built up the cult? There were hagiographers, photographers, playwrights, composers, poets, editors and choreographers. There were powerful ministers of propaganda, and sometimes entire branches of industry. But the ultimate responsibility lay with the dictators themselves. 'Politics in a dictatorship begins in the personality of the dictator,' wrote Mao Zedong's doctor in a classic memoir.<sup>4</sup> The eight dictators in this book had widely differing personalities, but every one made all the key decisions that led to his own glorification. Some intervened more often than others. Mussolini, by one account, spent half of his time projecting himself as the omniscient, omnipotent and indispensable ruler of Italy – on top of running half a dozen ministries. Stalin constantly pruned his own cult, cutting back what he thought was excessive praise only to allow it to reappear a few years later when he judged the time was ripe. Ceauşescu compulsively promoted his own person. Hitler, too, attended to every detail of his image in the early years, although later in his career he delegated more than usual when compared with other dictators. All of them used the full resources of the state to promote themselves. They were the state.

Not all historians would give a dictator centre stage. Ian Kershaw famously described Hitler as a 'non-person', a mediocre man whose personal characteristics could not explain his popular appeal. The spotlight, he believed, had to be turned on 'the German people' and their perception of him.<sup>5</sup> But how would one know what people thought of their leader, since freedom of speech is always the first casualty of a dictatorship? Hitler was not elected by a majority, and within a year of coming to power the Nazis threw some 100,000 ordinary people into concentration camps. The Gestapo, the Brown Shirts and the courts alike did not hesitate to lock up those who failed to acclaim their leader properly.

At times expressions of devotion to a dictator appeared so spontaneous that outside observers – as well as later historians – assumed that they were genuine. The Stalin cult, one historian of the Soviet Union tells us, 'was widely accepted and deeply believed

by millions of Soviet people of all classes, ages and occupations, especially in the cities'.<sup>6</sup> It is a vague and unsubstantiated statement, no more true or false than its opposite, namely that millions of Soviet people of all backgrounds did not believe in the Stalin cult, especially in the countryside. Even keen supporters found it impossible to read the mind of their leader, to say nothing of probing the thoughts of millions of people regimented by their own regime.

Dictators who lasted possessed many skills. Many excelled at hiding their feelings. Mussolini saw himself as Italy's finest actor. In an unguarded moment Hitler, too, called himself Europe's greatest performer. But in a dictatorship many ordinary people also learned how to act. They had to smile on command, parrot the party line, shout the slogans and salute their leader. In short, they were required to create the illusion of consent. Those who failed to play along were fined, imprisoned, occasionally shot.

The point was not so much that few subjects adored their dictators, but that no one knew quite who believed what. The purpose of the cult was not to convince or persuade, but to sow confusion, to destroy common sense, to enforce obedience, to isolate individuals and crush their dignity. People had to self-censor, and in turn they monitored others, denouncing those who failed to appear sufficiently sincere in their professions of devotion to the leader. Underneath the appearance of widespread uniformity, there was a broad spectrum, ranging from those who genuinely idealised their leader – true believers, opportunists, thugs – to those who were indifferent, apathetic or even hostile.

Dictators were popular at home, but also admired by foreigners, including distinguished intellectuals and eminent politicians. Some of the greatest minds of the twentieth century were willing to ignore or even justify tyranny in the name of the greater good, and helped to shore up the credentials of their favourite dictators. They appear only fleetingly in these pages, since they have been the subject of several excellent studies, not least the work of Paul Hollander.<sup>7</sup>

Since a cult had to appear genuinely popular, welling up from the hearts of the people, it was invariably tinged with superstition

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and magic. In some countries the religious overtones were so striking that one might be tempted to see it as a peculiar form of secular worship. But in every case this impression was deliberately cultivated from above. Hitler presented himself as a messiah united with the masses in a mystical, quasi-religious bond. François Duvalier went to great lengths to assume the air of a Voodoo priest, encouraging rumours about his otherworldly powers.

In communist regimes in particular there was an added need for some sort of traditional resonance. The reason for this was simple: few people in predominantly rural countries like Russia, China, Korea or Ethiopia understood Marxism-Leninism. Appeals to the leader as some sort of holy figure were more successful than the abstract political philosophy of dialectical materialism that a largely illiterate population in the countryside found hard to comprehend.

Loyalty to one person mattered most in a dictatorship, more so than loyalty to one creed. Ideology, after all, can be divisive. A body of work can be interpreted in different ways, potentially leading to different factions. The greatest enemies of the Bolsheviks were the Mensheviks, and they both swore by Marx. Mussolini spurned ideology and kept fascism deliberately vague. He was not one to be hemmed in by a rigid set of ideas. He prided himself on being intuitive, following his instinct rather than espousing a consistent worldview. Hitler, like Mussolini, had little to offer except himself, beyond an appeal to nationalism and anti-Semitism.

The issue is more complicated in the case of communist regimes, since they were supposed to be Marxist. Yet here too it would have been imprudent for ordinary people and party members alike to spend too much time dwelling on the writings of Karl Marx. One was a Stalinist under Stalin, a Maoist under Mao, a Kimist under Kim.

In the case of Mengistu, commitment to the tenets of socialism, beyond the obligatory red stars and flags, was shallow. Across Ethiopia there were posters of the holy trinity, namely Marx, Engels and Lenin. But it was Lenin, not Marx, who appealed to Mengistu. Marx had offered a vision of equality, but Lenin came up with a tool

to seize power: the revolutionary vanguard. Instead of waiting for the workers to gain class consciousness and overthrow capitalism, as Marx had suggested, a group of professional revolutionaries, organised along strict military lines, would lead the revolution and establish a dictatorship of the proletariat to engineer the transition from capitalism to communism from above, ruthlessly eliminating all enemies of progress. For Mengistu the collectivisation of the countryside may have been Marxist, but most of all it was a means to extract more grain from the countryside, allowing him to build up his troops.

Communist dictators transformed Marxism beyond recognition. Marx had proposed that the workers of the world should unite in a proletarian revolution, but Stalin instead advanced the notion of 'socialism in one country', holding that the Soviet Union should strengthen itself before exporting revolution abroad. Mao read Marx, but turned him on his head by making peasants rather than workers the spearhead of the revolution. Instead of maintaining that material conditions were the primary force of historical change, Kim Il-sung proposed the exact opposite, claiming that people could achieve true socialism by relying on the spirit of self-reliance. In 1972 the Great Leader's thought was enshrined in the constitution, as Marxism vanished altogether from North Korea. Yet in all these cases the Leninist concept of the revolutionary vanguard remained virtually unchanged.

More often than not ideology was an act of faith, a test of loyalty. This is not to suggest that dictators lacked any worldview, or a set of beliefs. Mussolini believed in economic self-sufficiency and invoked it like an incantation. Mengistu was fixated on Eritrea as a rebel province and was certain that relentless war was the only solution. But ultimately ideology was what the dictator said it was, and what the dictator decreed could change over time. He personalised power, making his word the law.

Dictators lied to their people, but they also lied to themselves. A few became wrapped up in their own world, convinced of their own genius. Others developed a pathological distrust of their own entourage. All were surrounded by sycophants. They teetered

between hubris and paranoia, and as a result took major decisions on their own, with devastating consequences that cost the lives of millions of people. A few became unmoored from reality altogether, as with Hitler in his final years, not to mention Ceaușescu. But many prevailed. Stalin and Mao died of natural causes, having made themselves the objects of adoration for many decades. Duvalier managed to pass on power to his son, prolonging his cult by twelve years. And in the case of the most extravagant cult ever seen, the Kim clan in North Korea has now reached generation three.

The list of leaders commonly regarded as modern dictators reaches well beyond a hundred. Some were in power for a few months, others for decades. Among those who could easily have been included in this book are, in no particular order, Franco, Tito, Hoxha, Sukarno, Castro, Mobutu, Bokassa, Gaddafi, Saddam, Assad (father and son), Khomeini and Mugabe.

Most had a cult of personality in one form or another, creating variations on a common theme. A few did not, for instance Pol Pot. For two years after he took power, even his exact identity was in dispute. In Cambodia people deferred to Angkar, or 'The Organisation'. But as the historian Henri Locard has noted, the decision not to build a cult of personality had disastrous consequences for the Khmer Rouge. Concealment behind an anonymous organisation that nipped in the bud any and all opposition soon backfired. 'Failing to induce adulation and submissiveness, the Angkar could only generate hatred.'<sup>8</sup> Even Big Brother, in George Orwell's *1984*, had a face that stared out at people from every street corner.

Dictators who survived often relied on two instruments of power: the cult and terror. Yet all too often the cult has been treated as a mere aberration, a repellent but marginal phenomenon. This book places the cult of personality where it belongs, at the very heart of tyranny.

## I

# Mussolini

Located on the edge of the historic centre, EUR is one of Rome's most austere districts, criss-crossed by wide, linear avenues and imposing buildings covered in gleaming white travertine marble – the same material used to build the Colosseum. EUR stands for Esposizione Universale Roma, a gigantic world fair designed by Benito Mussolini to mark the twentieth anniversary of the March on Rome in 1942. As its master architect Marcello Piacentini put it, the project would showcase a new, eternal civilisation, a 'Fascist civilisation'. Although the exposition never took place, interrupted by the Second World War, many of the buildings were completed in the 1950s. One of the most iconic structures of the EUR, built on an elevated podium like an ancient Roman temple, surrounded by majestic umbrella pines, contains the state archives.<sup>1</sup>

In a majestic reading room with towering columns one can read through the dusty and yellowing correspondence addressed to the Duce. At the height of his glory he received up to 1,500 letters a day. All of these went through a personal secretariat employing some fifty people, who selected several hundred items for his personal attention. By the time Mussolini fell from power in the summer of 1943, the archive contained half a million files.<sup>2</sup>

On 28 October 1940, celebrated as Day One of the fascist calendar, telegrams came from all corners of the realm. There were odes to 'His Supreme and Glorious Excellence', with Salustri Giobbe exalting 'the supreme genius who has prevailed over all

**Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin, Mao Zedong, Kim Il-sung, Ceaușescu, Mengistu of Ethiopia and Duvalier of Haiti.**

**No dictator can rule through fear and violence alone. Naked power can be grabbed and held temporarily, but it never suffices in the long term. The paradox of the modern dictator is that he must create the illusion of popular support.**

**Frank Dikötter returns to some of the most chillingly effective personality cults of the twentieth century. From carefully choreographed parades to the deliberate cultivation of mystery through iron censorship, these dictators ceaselessly worked on their own image and encouraged the population to glorify them. At a time when democracy is in retreat, are we seeing a return to the same techniques among some of today's world leaders?**

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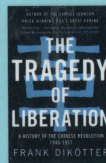
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