

Summa Confidentia et Nimius Metus:

A Psychological Analysis of Adolf Hitler's Decision Making as Commander in Chief

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Abstract

This study is an attempt to analyze Hitler's decision making during World War II (WW II). Based on detailed historical sources, we specifically analyzed Hitler's decision-making failures and investigated the possible causes for these failures following theories on cognition, motivation, and action regulation. Failures such as underestimation of an opponent and overestimation of one's own capabilities, the displacement of responsibility for failures on scapegoats, the substitution of easily solvable problems for difficult ones, methodism in decision making, and lack of self-reflection are discussed and detailed examples are provided. These failures ultimately functioned to maintain Hitler's self-confidence. The paper integrates the failures into a model that explains the origins of Hitler's decision making. Though Hitler's behavior could certainly be judged as "evil," the analysis goes further and thus can help leaders to learn from these failures.

Keywords: Hitler, World War II, decision making, cognitive failures, PSI-theory

*Summa Confidentialia et Nimius Metus*¹

A Psychological Analysis of Adolf Hitler's Decision Making as Commander in Chief

Though it is sad, Hitler probably can be regarded as the most influential politician in centuries. In a cross-cultural study (Liu et al., 2005) conducted with 12 different cultural samples (6 Asian and 6 Western samples) comprising over 2,000 participants, World War II (WW II) was named as the most important event in world history by each of the 12 cultural samples and Hitler was named as the most influential person in world history in the last 1000 years by 11 of the 12 samples (Hong Kong was the exception).

Most people would agree without hesitation that Hitler could be labeled a criminal (and even this term is an understatement) – a label which refers to the Holocaust (the genocide of more than 6 million European Jews and others such as gays, lesbians, or gypsies by the Nazis during WW II) as well as to the fact that Hitler destroyed the German nation morally and materially to a degree that is probably unprecedented in history. On the other hand, if Hitler had died in 1938, he probably would have been considered one of the most outstanding leaders in German history because he unified nearly all the German speaking territories in Europe into one state (Fest, 2004). Hitler has been praised not only as a politician, but also as a military leader. Particularly the early achievements of WW II were attributed to Hitler's military skills. Between 1939 and 1941, he was able to conquer Poland, to occupy France, and to bring the Soviet-Russian Empire on the brink of the collapse.

In this article, we will analyze Hitler's decision making as commander in chief and investigate the main psychological factors that determined his behavior and decision making and thus his successes and failures. Referring primarily to examples of his military decisions during

¹High confidence and excessive fear: It was with two such seemingly contradictory attributes that Sueton (1914, p. 482) characterized the Roman emperor Gaius Caligula. In reading this article, it will become clear why we chose this title.

WW II, we then integrate the findings into a theoretical model. Unlike previous research on Hitler, which has followed a psychoanalytic and psychopathological perspective (e.g., Bromberg & Small, 1983; Redlich, 1999; Schwaab, 1992), we will focus on cognitive, motivational, and social psychological concepts and action theory (see Dörner, 1999; Dörner & Güss, 2010) to analyze Hitler's behavior. The main sources for our analysis were the Hitler biographies of Joachim Fest (2002, 2004a, 2004b) and Ian Kershaw (2000a, 2000b, 2008).

Of course, a short article on Hitler cannot be exhaustive. This article does not focus on the atrocities of the Holocaust (see Goldhagen, 1996²). It does not focus on the historic-cultural conditions, such as WW I and the reparations, the dissatisfaction with the Weimar Republic, the Great Depression, or the conditions of disorder and insecurity that, to a great extent, made it possible for Hitler to gain power and become the most powerful man of the Third Reich. We also do not discuss Hitler's weltanschauung of anti-Semitism and social Darwinism in detail.

² Goldhagen (1996) analyzed police battalions, the camp system, and the role of "ordinary" Germans in the Holocaust. He argued for an anti-Semitic German political culture with beliefs about distinct races with their respective capacities (p. 460) as "prime mover of both the Nazi leadership and ordinary Germans in the persecution and extermination of the Jews, and therefore was the Holocaust's principal cause" (p. 455).

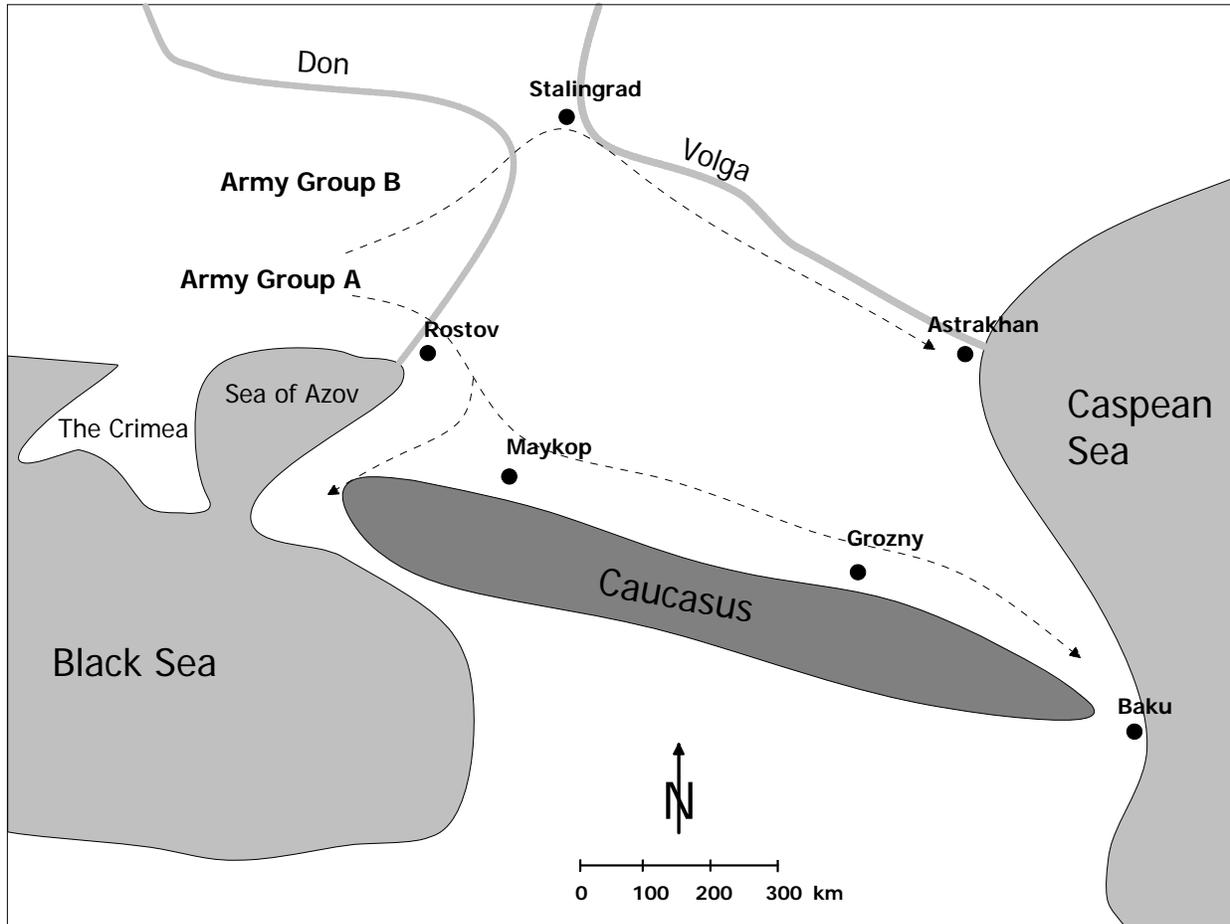


Figure 1. Summer 1942: The grasp for oil.

Autumn 1942

To start with an example, in autumn 1942, Hitler attempted to break through to the Caspian Sea oil fields near Baku. With the Army Group South he would pass the Caucasus. At the same time, he wanted to reach Stalingrad, located at the lower Volga River, to destroy the industrial center. To reach this goal, it was first planned to conquer Stalingrad using all the military forces, then to turn south to reach the Caspian Sea at the eastern end of the Caucasus (see Figure 1). There was however, an alternative plan. The plan entailed reaching Baku by proceeding at the northern rim of the Caucasus in order to conquer the oil territories relatively

quickly. In this plan, Stalingrad was initially not a military target. After long hesitation, Hitler decided to do both, to follow both plans at the same time.

The Army Group South was divided into two military groups: Army Group B in the north, and Army Group A in the south. The weaker Army Group B was assigned to attack Stalingrad. After the capture of Stalingrad, it was to follow the Volga River and proceed to Astrakhan at the Caspian Sea. Army Group A was to fight the enemy in the area of Rostov and then conquer the whole Caucasus region. Thus, the goal was to conquer the eastern coast of the Black Sea, the oil fields around Maykop, to control the hardly accessible Caucasus Mountains, and to push southeast to the oil region around Grozny. Finally, Army Group A should carry the enemy's positions in Baku, further south at the Caspian Sea.

Kershaw (2008, p. 722) called this double strategy "sheer lunacy." The two military groups were not nearly ready to accomplish their tasks and it was unrealistic that even one of the two would succeed considering the manpower of the enemy defense, which, by the way, the German scout units did not miss at all. But the two military groups initially had success. Army Group A seized Maykop. The oil refineries, however, were all but smoldering ashes and Army Group A was left with a long, prominent, exposed flank and suffered under considerable supply problems. In the densely wooded foothills of the northern Caucasus Mountains, the group could hardly advance.

Army Group B also had initial victories. In the beginning of August, it encircled two Russian armies southwest of Kalatsch at the Don River, west of Stalingrad, and defeated them. Under torturing heat and with a severe lack of gasoline, the Sixth Army (part of Army Group B) finally reached the Volga north of Stalingrad. Because of strong defensive forces, the advance came to an abrupt standstill. Only in November, Stalingrad had been nearly conquered.

Overall, both attacks did not have, even remotely, the success Hitler expected due to his own fatuous conceptions about what it was possible to accomplish. The catastrophe of Stalingrad in spring 1943 followed almost inevitably; Hitler did not allow a retreat proposed by the German generals and the German military had almost nothing to subtend the Soviet counterstrike.

Hitler as Commander in Chief

The decision making that led to the complete collapse of the summer offensive of the Army Group South is exemplary of Hitler's decision making during all of WW II, which is why we described it in detail. How can this decision making be characterized? Often, Hitler has been described as being determined to attack. Hitler was, however, hesitant when making difficult decisions, at least at the beginning of the decision-making process (Schwaab, 1992, p. XIII, "Hitler ... was also known to be indecisive and vacillating, inasmuch as he was prone to take high risks – to gamble – when making decisions"). When there were several alternatives present, it was difficult for Hitler to make a decision, as in the case just described. Instead of committing himself to one of the alternatives, the Stalingrad or the Caucasus alternative, he chose both.³

Hitler hesitated when making important decisions, but then abruptly ended his hesitation by making a decision without considering the premises of his decision critically and in enough detail. Illusionary assumptions substituted the critical analysis of possible decision consequences: The preconditions for the actions are given, success will occur, and the consequences will be fantastic. Such behavior is well known. It is the coup (*Befreiungsschlag*⁴). A conflict with two or more alternatives is a strain, and the longer the conflict takes, the bigger

³ Another example of Hitler's hesitancy is related to the attack on Poland in August 1939: "To understand Hitler's mind and the twists of this final phase of diplomacy it is important to remember that he kept all the ... possibilities open and did not commit himself to a choice between them – not even after the attack on Poland had begun – until the British government finally made up its mind to declare war" (Bullock, 1962, p. 536). Also Kershaw mentioned Hitler's hesitancy (1985, p. 84): "Rather, he was frequently reluctant to decide in domestic affairs and generally unwilling to resolve disputes by coming down on one side or the other...."

⁴ German terms are given in italics in parentheses.

the strain; the analysis of the conflict alternatives inevitably creates more cognitive material to consider and therefore increases uncertainty. Perhaps one finds a solution eventually, but at first, instead of one problem, there are three or four or five to consider. An unsolvable conflict (or one that seems unsolvable) erodes self-confidence, in which case, “action” is, after all, a way out of the dilemma: Action releases from doubt. To contain the loss of self-confidence, people have a tendency to end a conflict by choosing one decision alternative relatively blindly. That way they can flee the tormenting doubts. We can find this behavior pattern often in Hitler: doubts and hesitation⁵ as he vacillated between several alternatives and then finally some decision – the main function of which had been to end the gnawing doubts. And this arbitrary decision was enforced with great decisiveness.

Hitler justified such decisions by massively overestimating the probability of success and at the same time notoriously underestimating the opponent. Such thinking helps when justifying decisions, but, on the other hand, is a main cause of failures. When the failure of the two autumn pushes in 1942 became apparent, Hitler showed little sense of reality. He stated (Kershaw, 2000b, p. 530):

Operations in the Caucasus, he said, are going extremely well. He wanted to take possession of the oil-wells of Maykop, Grozny, and Baku during the summer, securing Germany's oil supplies and destroying those of the Soviet Union. Once the Soviet border had been reached, the breakthrough into the north east would follow, occupying Asia Minor and overrunning Iraq, Iran, and Palestine, to cut off Britain's oil supplies. Within two or three days, he wanted to commence the big assault on Stalingrad. He intended to destroy the city completely, leaving no stone on top of another. It was both psychologically and militarily necessary. The forces deployed were reckoned to be sufficient to capture the city within eight days.

⁵ Also the historian Broszat (1981) characterized Hitler as rather reactive than proactive. Hitler was often more reacting to urgent pressures within the regime than creating policy.

The quote is not a satire of Hitler's decision making. These are his own words! Hitler showed a huge misperception of reality in the just quoted telephone conversation with Goebbels, the propaganda leader of the Nazi Party. The explanation for such misperception lies in Hitler's need to reassure himself, because he ultimately had doubts about the success of his actions. In order to not feed those doubts, he had to disconnect himself from reality and create a dream world so he could then act.

Indeed, the conversation with Goebbels took place while the German armies were still successful. However, these attacks happened not at all according to plan and the successes were not at all those that were planned. Though the failure of the whole course of action had been implied, Hitler either did not realize it, or did not want to realize it. According to Kershaw (2003) there were several indications that the self-confidence Hitler had demonstrated in the telephone conversation was only a façade.⁶ If it really was a façade, then the façade was not only for Goebbels, but especially for himself in order to hold off the haunting feeling that everything had gone wrong and that, after all, the war was already lost.

Another characteristic of Hitler's decision making that is visible in the operations of late summer 1942 was to classify the respective action as essential: If it works, all is won! Once we have Baku, we will have Iran, and if we have Iran, then we have Syria and Iraq. If we have Syria and Iraq, the whole British oil supply will collapse and the war is won! This declaration of the importance of a decision, declaring it as extremely important, helps one to come to a decision as well as to justify it afterwards. If something is so important and at the same time so promising, then the risk must be taken to do it!

⁶ Several other researchers also refer to Hitler's low self-esteem: "Despite his propensity for boastful claims of superiority in everything, and confidence in the omnipotence of his word, his record contains expressions of ... inferiority, insecurity, and shame from youth on" (Bromberg & Small, 1983, p. 182).

Hitler was faithful to this tendency for extrapolation of successes in Never Never Land. And of course, at the beginning of the war in 1939, he was quite successful. When Hitler planned an offensive on the western front through the Ardennes Mountains in 1944, he already saw the push of the German military via Luxemburg and Belgium ending in the important city and port of Antwerp. The British and Americans would have been thrown into the ocean, France would have been recaptured and the war would have been won! This was in December 1944, at a time where the Russians were already close to the Oder River. Just like in 1942 in South Russia, with the initial successes of the German military, the Ardennes Offensive was, in fact, the reason why the anticipated successes were considered possible.

Returning to autumn of 1942: At one point it became obvious that the Army Groups A and B had not reached their goals. Not even Grozny was seized, let alone Baku – and certainly not the city of Stalingrad. It still took months and the occupation, as is well known, never happened. The push of Army Group B in Russia was the direct cause of its break down in spring 1943 because it had burned itself out. This failure put Hitler in a difficult situation. He had not reached his goals. Beginning at the end of August the situation deteriorated disastrously on all fronts. The generals argued for withdrawal of the military into safer territories and considered a continuation of the attacks irresponsible. At this time, Halder, the chief of general staff for the German army, talked to Hitler. On August 24, 1942, Halder argued for a retreat.

Hitler rounded on Halder. “You always come here with the same proposal, that of withdrawal,” he raged. “I demand from the leadership the same toughness as from the front-soldiers.”

Halder, deeply insulted, shouted back: “I have the toughness, my Führer. But out there brave musketeers and lieutenants are falling in thousands and thousands as useless sacrifice in a hopeless situation simply because their commanders are not allowed to make the only reasonable decision and have their hands tied behind their backs.”

Hitler stared at Halder. “What can you, who sat in the same chair in the First World War, too, tell me about the troops, Herr Halder, you, who don’t even wear the black insignia of the wounded [comparable to the Purple Heart in the US]?” (Kershaw, 2008, p. 724)

Halder realized that Hitler’s disastrous military decisions “were the product of a violent nature following its momentary impulses”⁷ (Trevor-Roper, 1953, p. xii). Such arguments ad personam are the means of bad lawyers when they are at a loss. Obviously, Hitler had nothing else to throw at Halder other than the ridiculous remark about the wound badge, which obviously had nothing to do with the situation in North Caucasus. Hitler, who had ordered the two attacks, the goals, the split into Army Groups A and B, was not responsible for anything. The generals had ruined everything! His commands had not been followed appropriately and that was the reason for the disaster – at least in his view.

After the failure of the summer attacks in 1942, Hitler had stenographers fly into his headquarters in South Russia to ensure that in the future his orders were understood correctly. The stenographers were to write down everything Hitler said during the briefings to serve as possible proof that his commands had been executed contrary to his directions. (It is unclear whether these notes were ever actually used for this purpose.)

The search for scapegoats was typical for Hitler. It was not only the generals or soldiers who were made responsible for his failures, but also – with regard to the whole war situation –

⁷ Rage and anger outbursts were quite typical for Hitler. Bromberg and Small (1983, p. 161) wrote: “The burden of these explosions was anxious rage, directed at an audience of one or of many. In these incidents he screamed at the top of his voice and pounded a table or wall, all the while spewing out a stream of vulgar abuse.” Dorpat (2002, p. 223) wrote: “Hitler would frequently berate, humiliate, excoriate, rage at and shame the people who worked for him.” Fest (2004b, p. 63) wrote: “Krebs admitted that the Steiner attack that supposedly would have turned the tables had never happened. Hitler became furious. “In an outburst unlike anything those present had every experienced, Hitler suddenly jumped up from his chair and furiously threw the colored pencils he always carried with him during situation discussions across the table. Then he began to scream. ... Struggling for words, he denounced the world and the cowardice, baseness, and disloyalty around him. He reviled the generals, condemned their constant resistance against which he had had to fight; for years he had been surrounded by traitors and failures. ... Several times he tried to regain his composure, only to erupt again immediately.”

the nobility, and it was especially the Jews, and whoever else might be handy.⁸ As Fest (2004b, pp. 54-55) explained, “As always, he had only one word to explain any disillusioning setback: ‘Betrayal!’” (*Verrat*). And quoting Hitler, “With treachery all around me, only misfortune has remained faithful to me – misfortune and my Shepard dog Blondi.”

In one regard, the assassination attempt on July 20, 1944 almost made Hitler happy. He finally had proof that for years a group of commanding officers had been methodically sabotaging his decisions. And now that they had been caught, of course, there would be a turnaround in the war situation (Kershaw, 2000a). When Himmler, the SS commander, tried to contact the West Allies in 1945 to offer to serve as liquidator of the Third Reich, the same thing happened: Hitler now knew why SS-General Steiner had not freed Berlin from the Russian troops and why the SS-division personal bodyguard regiment (*Leibstandarte*) had collapsed in Hungary. Even the SS, with its belt buckle inscription “Our honor is loyalty” (“*Unsere Ehre heißt Treue*”) had betrayed him. Betrayal everywhere!

Besides searching for scapegoats, Hitler avoided recognition of failure. To be more specific, he avoided the realization of his own responsibility for failures by dropping an unsolved problem like a hot potato in order to deal with other problems. In action regulation theories, this failure is also called thematic straying (“*Thematisches Vagabundieren*,” Dörner, 2003, p. 43). It is as if the unsolved problem no longer exists. An almost spooky example of this behavior occurred in October of 1944 when, for the first time, the Soviets successfully invaded the German territories and conquered some locations in eastern Prussia. They came within 60 km of Hitler's headquarters, called *Wolfsschanze* (Wolfs Redoubt), in East Prussia. After the Red Army

⁸ Hitler believed in betrayal until his end. During his last days, Hitler said, “All the failures in the east are due to treachery,” and announced he was going to commit suicide: “The time has come. My Generals have betrayed me; my soldiers don't want to go on...” and “on my tombstone they ought to put the words: ‘He was the victim of his Generals!’” (Baur, 1958, p. 188, 190; as cited in Victor, 1998, p. 214).

was narrowly expelled from East Prussia, Hitler turned to planning for the Ardennes Offensive in the west without any further consideration of the immediate threat right before him – which was much bigger than the one in the west: A prime example of eliminating the problem by simply ignoring it.

The Ardennes Offensive was also connected to the problem on the east front because so many military units had been deployed to the west. The chief of staff of the army, Guderian (*Chef des Generalstabs des Heeres*), who knew what the situation was in the east, was horrified. Because reducing the numbers of troops at the east front to a mere skeleton was so absurd, Haffner (1979) thought the destruction of the east front may have been Hitler's deliberate plan as punishment of the German people for their "failures." This is one possible explanation as Hitler mentioned several times during the last months of the war that the German people (*deutsches Volk*) had not proven worthy of him:

If the war is to be lost, the [German] nation will also perish. This fate is inevitable. There is no need to consider the basis even of the most primitive existence any longer. On the contrary, it is better to destroy even that, and to destroy it ourselves. The nation has proved itself weak. ... Besides, those who remain after the battle are of little value; for the good have fallen (Haffner, 1979, pp. 159-160).

We will come back to this point later. Another plausible explanation, however, could be that Hitler was searching for success in the Ardennes Offensive in the west. At this time, it was clear that he could no longer achieve this success in the east.

The underestimation of the opponent and the overestimation of his own capabilities, the displacement of responsibility for failures on scapegoats, the suppression of failures and difficult problems or the substitution of difficult problems for easily solvable ones were not the only means to maintain Hitler's self-confidence. Another was methodism (we do not refer here to the religious term, but to a cognitive phenomenon). Methodism – the term comes from the military

strategic theorist von Clausewitz (1780-1831) – is the belief in a patent remedy. Hitler's decision making, especially in the second part of the war, was highly characterized by methodism. His decision making recipe was easy: Defend, cling to it (*festkrallen*), endure (*halten*), fight to the last man (*bis zum letzten Mann kämpfen*). As Hitler said (Waite, 1977, p. 212): "I shall not give in," and

One word I never recognized as a National Socialist in my battle for power: capitulation. That word I do not know and I will never know as Führer of the German people...: that word again is capitulation. ... Never! Never! (Waite, 1977, p. 444)

This rigid method of holding on to defense lines was the immediate cause of the senseless deaths of hundreds of thousands of Wehrmacht soldiers. Any flexibility of defense was prevented by Hitler and would have to be carried out covertly by the commanding officers, who had a different opinion about what had to be done. Officers who violated Hitler's commands to endure lost their position and rank and sometimes their lives because of cowardliness or defeatism (*Feigheit* or *Defätismus*).

Hitler's belief in enduring or holding (*Halten*) originated during winter of 1940, when he was quite successfully operating on the edge of Moscow. It is likely that Hitler's rigid holding of the front line before Moscow in 1940 had prevented a disaster for the German army (Kershaw, 2003). In any case, Hitler viewed it that way and from that time on, holding was *the* method: "Hold the line or perish!" (Fest, 2004b, p. 9). Hitler repeated this sentence in many orders or directives. Generals like von Manstein or Guderian, who suggested more versatile warfare in the east, were successfully able to implement their plans only in exceptional cases. In the end, the repeated command to hold resulted in the senseless sacrifice of troops as most of the emplacements finally had to be given up – and such examples of inflexibility show again how

completely Hitler's decision making was detached from the conditions of reality. The longer the war lasted, the more Hitler ignored its actual conditions.

Apparently in contrast to methodism (which is conservative because it is based on past success) stood Hitler's passion for new methods, new weapons, new techniques, and new forms of organization. In principle this enthusiasm, for example for wonder weapons, is only another form of the belief in *the* patent recipe, another form of methodism, because those actions also were considered without realistically assessing the conditions and evaluating what was actually possible.

One example for this passion for novelty is related to June 1944. At this time, Hitler finally had to accept that the invasion of the Allies in northern France was a success. He dismissed the successful invasion with a comment about wonder weapons, which soon would be employed to wipe out the invading forces. In fact, right after the invasion, Hitler attempted an attack against London with the help of the V1 (which was an early form of a cruise missile). The result of the attempt on June 12, 1944 was that 4 of the 10 wing bombs fell right away from their ramps and did not even make it into the air and 5 reached London without causing major damage (Kershaw, 2000a). Needless to say, Hitler's faith in wonder weapons was not at all shaken by such failures, which he most likely did not even note.

Faith in technological advances played an important role for Hitler. This faith in new possibilities for action resulting from the newest technological developments played a crucial role for Hitler's thinking. The propaganda on wonder weapons was addressed, perhaps, in part to his enemies to scare them, but the greatest believer was Hitler himself.

Given this context, it must be mentioned that Hitler never dealt with the fact that he was completely wrong in his prediction of the location and probability of success of the Allied

invasion. Hitler avoided reflecting; it was unusual for him (Kershaw, 2000a, p. 1277). To be more specific, Hitler avoided not the planning, but the critical analysis a posteriori. Hitler avoided self-reflection. Why? Because self-criticism initially makes one insecure. It reveals our own failures and their causes. Hitler's methodical rigidity can be well explained by the lack of self-reflection, because self-reflection is a precondition for flexibility. Hitler, who was certainly not without intelligence, made himself dumb by avoiding self-reflection.⁹

Another activity which served to safeguard Hitler's self-confidence, and which annoyed those who surrounded him, was his habit of giving endless lectures to his entourage every evening. Hitler gave monologues from 8 p.m. to 3 a.m., primarily stories of "time of struggle for power" (*Kampfzeit*) between 1919 and 1933. In these stories, one problem after another was solved gloriously. Every evening Hitler's retinue had to listen to the same stories and many of his longstanding companions (e.g., his secretaries) knew them by heart. Another important topic of his monologues was his philosophy. Over and over again, he talked about his social-Darwinist concepts on races that would fight each other to death in the war over living space (*Lebensraum*). Within those races, there was no mercy, no humanity, only the fight for life and death.

Hitler did not talk about the past, or ask himself if he could have made different decisions under other circumstances. He did not compare his theories on the races with other theories or research results from biological and behavioral sciences. He did not bring forward arguments, but preached instead. Why?

⁹ Another possible explanation for Hitler's lack of self-reflection is his "don't change" attitude. Victor (1998, p. 99) quoted Hitler as saying: "A Führer who is forced to depart from his platform of his general world view ... because he has recognized it to be false ... must, at the very least, forego the public exercise of any further political activities. Because he was once mistaken in his basic beliefs, it is possible that this could happen a second time." Victor continued: "He tried to prove he had never made a mistake. Changing the program, changing Mein Kampf, changing his ideas, admitting error – any of these, he thought, would jeopardize people's faith in him."

Someone once said that statements are often not only assertions to others, but at the same time, assertions to oneself. With his monologues, Hitler was not so much providing information to others as he was a kind of therapy for himself. Because he was insecure and because he basically knew that the war and his whole mission was lost, he had to reassure himself of his ability to solve problems, and to reassure himself about the worldview that was the basis for his decision making and actions. That way he could feel confident and could deflect from the bothersome doubts he had. Hitler had to reassure himself that he was irreplaceable, a wise leader, and an infallible warlord (Führer-myth) saying, for example:

As a final factor, I must say in all modesty, list my own person: irreplaceable. Neither a military nor a civilian personality could take my place. Attempts on my life may be repeated ... the fate of the Reich depends on me alone. (Haffner, 1979, p. 19)

Often, Hitler has been portrayed, even by his opponents, as a person of enormous will power. How are will power and the belief in the Führer-myth compatible with self-doubts? We believe they are a result of the self-doubts. Hitler's will power, perhaps a better term here is stubbornness, was a result of fighting against his doubts. "But his self-esteem was so fragile he hardly tolerated being corrected and rarely admitted a mistake, even when obvious. He was a balloon that needed constant pumping and was vulnerable to every pin" (Victor, 1998, p. 66). His irreversible and risky decisions, ultimately, were nothing but whistling in the forest, sounds that a lonely hiker makes to demonstrate that he is not afraid.

The hypothesis that at times Hitler's self-confidence was weak and unsteady is consistent with the way Hitler dealt with criticism and counterproposals. Manstein (1955) wrote that it was extremely difficult to argue Hitler out of making certain decisions when offering well considered alternative plans. According to Manstein, it often took weeks for Hitler to let go of his opinions to accept such an alternate proposal. The behavior of adhering rigidly to one's own decisions is

related to the need to justify the respective decisions – as was discussed earlier. As we have already discussed before, Hitler's decisions were not based on reflection but were actions to end his doubts and therefore were very impulsive.

If counterproposals or criticisms were voiced, they hit Hitler's weakest point. He could not argue against them because he could not argue for his own decisions, as his decisions had not originated from trenchant pro- and contra-reasoning. His notorious statements, "It is my unalterable decision" ("*es ist mein unabänderlicher Entschluß!*") or "It is my unshakeable will" ("*es ist mein unerschütterlicher Wille!*") show his insecurity and reflect his tendency to immunize himself against criticism. "Unalterable decisions" are not advisable in such a vague and uncertain domain as warfare.

Since at least the younger Scipio, Roman general, who defeated Hannibal, has followed the maxim, "A plan that cannot be changed is a bad one!" (*Malum consilium quod mutari non potest!*) Napoleon Bonaparte believed that a plan must be flexible enough to be altered and adapted to new developments and circumstances ("*On s'engage et puis on voit.*" Freely translated, it means, "One engages and then figures out what to do next.")

If Hitler's decision making is compared with that of other great generals and military leaders, for example Frederic the Great or Napoleon, then not much remains of Hitler as a military genius. His actions seem imprudent, explosive, rigid, inflexible, and without any strategic sophistication. Why? Certainly, not because he was lacking intelligence. He was quite successful until perhaps 1941. In reading Fest's or Kershaw's accounts of Hitler's rise and career from 1919 to 1933, it is clear that Hitler's analysis of situational demands was realistic at least some of the time.

On the other hand, it is noticeable that Hitler almost exclusively behaved in an “ad hoc” way. He consistently dealt with the current problem, but did not plan for the long run. Even as Reich Chancellor, he did not deal with problems that were not urgent. Hitler did not bother to create an enduring political system or to structure the confusing national socialist ideology and give it a profile. As Kershaw (1985, p. 81) stated,

In contrast to conceptions of a “monocratic” dictatorship relentlessly pursuing its fixed goals with remorseless zeal and energy, this interpretation emphasizes the lack of efficiency, fragmentation of decision-making, absence of clear, rational, “middle-range” policies and diminishing sense of reality – all promoting the immanent instability of the political system.

Hitler destroyed the structures of the Weimar Republic and substituted the institutions through party structures, but also only half-heartedly. For example, the state system within Germany remained and was coexistent with the newly created districts (*Gaue*) of the NS party. Kershaw (2000a) regarded this as a principle of Hitler's leadership: the administrative chaos safeguarded Hitler's position as sole ruler. On the other hand, Hitler was simply not interested in restructuring. He was interested in conflicts with his respective opponents who disputed his claim to power. He wanted to fight, but not actually to solve problems. Enemies aroused his interest. Hitler had an ad hoc spirit. One could characterize him as clever or savvy, but not as bright or wise.

Perhaps the fact that many of Hitler's war decisions, such as the one in summer 1942, were unreasonable, actually insane (Kershaw, 2000a) explained some of his military successes. This sounds strange: Wrong decisions as a precondition for success? But consider, Hitler, with his illusory misperception of reality, was responsible for placing the German military in unwinnable situations, which left his troops with no choice but to fight for dear life. Or Hitler attacked locations at particular times that, under reasonable deliberations, would not offer any

chance for success. But because he surprised his enemies with this unreasonable behavior, he often won. If Hitler had anticipated the effect of such a surprise tactic, he certainly would have been very smart. But he could not have done so as he had deliberately chosen to remain unaware of the enemy's intentions, strengths, and weaknesses.

Explaining Hitler's Decision Making

How, then, can we explain Hitler's ad-hoc behavior and decision making? We would like to do so referring to a general theory of human action regulation (described in detail in Dörner, 1999; Dörner & Güss, 2010). We believe Hitler's behavior resulted both from striving for power and from attempting to maintain it. As Kershaw (1985, p. 82) stated: "What does seem clear is that Hitler was hypersensitive towards any attempt to impose the slightest institutional or legal restriction upon his authority." Underlying this need for power was constant fear. You might wonder how someone can strive for power and be afraid at the same time: How can Hitler be fearful?¹⁰

Let's assume that people have a need for power, competence, control, or autonomy (Dörner, 1999, p. 390). Different researchers (Adler, 1912; Bischof, 1987; Dörner, 1999) have used these different terms to describe what is basically the same need. People work to have their lives and reality under control. They strive to solve problems. Ultimately, they strive for competence – the feeling that they will be able to deal with reality and the related problems adequately.

This need for competence is a very strong need. Success satisfies the need, and failure increases the strength of the need. The need for competence is not just a need, but also a status report. If the need is not very strong, it indicates that someone has control over matters; the

¹⁰ "Hitler had a great many fears. He dealt with some by avoiding situations and with others by elaborate precautions and rituals" (Waite, 1977, p. 65).

person feels competent. A strong need, on the one hand, sends a signal to strive for success in order to increase competence, but also sends a message to be careful and alert. A feeling that one has little competence results in a feeling of fear – basic, existential fear, an immediate feeling of great danger. Therefore, competence is highly related to feelings. If it is high, it is connected to pride, high self-confidence, and high self-worth. If it is very low, it is related to resignation, fear, and depression.

People strive for a high level of competence in the same way as they strive for food and water, perhaps to an even greater extent. Competence is related to self-confidence and self-worth; trust in one's own abilities to act and make decisions relevant to one's reference group ranks very high on people's values scale. We argue that Hitler's characteristics of decision making and action are a result of the general laws of human competence regulation.

problems. Such an accumulation of problems leads to disorientation, an increase of uncertainty. Certainty is a psychological parameter, namely, the feeling of being able to predict future events and further developments (Berlyne, 1974). If this is not possible, a person experiences uncertainty and eeriness.

Uncertainty lowers the feeling of competence (the less certainty, the less competence), which can lead to abandonment of the solution search and a decision to act. A detailed illustration of how this works is shown in the middle of Figure 2. Parameters are given in the oval fields, either those that are numerical variables (feeling of competence, sensation of certainty, tendency for risky decision making, arousal, resolution level) or those that are complex memory constellations (match between worldview and world). All other rectangles show procedures of information processing (anticipation of success, revitalization of previous successes, measures to increase competence, search for affirmative information, self-reflection). The arrows with the + and – signs indicate how the variables are related to each other.

Let's discuss the regulation in more detail. Competence should be high. If it is not, decisions are made to increase competence. In the same vein, decisions are made when someone is hungry to increase the energy reservoir. Some of the measures that can be taken to increase competence are shown in the fields that are connected to the field *measures to increase competence* with an *ie* (which stands for *id est* and means that is). We have shown four of those measures or parameter changes that increase competence and one that decreases competence, namely, self-reflection.

One parameter is called *tendency for risky decision making*. This tendency increases competence because a person who attempts something risky can only succeed if he or she has the

corresponding competencies. Thus, if a person makes a risky decision, it is an indication to him that he is competent.

Figure 2 shows that a decrease in competence is related to an increase in arousal, which in turn decreases the resolution level. The resolution level is the degree of precision of cognitive operations such as perception, planning, and thinking. If this level decreases because competence has decreased, it becomes easier to make risky decisions. This is so because the entire situation is then perceived only superficially and the analysis of side-effects and preconditions of actions is to a large extent omitted. Thus, the risk is not seen in its entirety.

Another measure to increase competence is the *search for affirmative information*. This measure was characteristic of Hitler and means that only the information that fits into one's worldview is perceived and processed. In this way, a person perceives that he is competent as he has only noted the information that validates his worldview.

A third measure to increase competence is the *anticipation of success*, or more specifically, the unconditioned anticipation of success. Joachim Fest (2002) described an example for anticipation of success and its relation to competence referring to events that occurred in the bunker under the Reich Chancellery at Potsdam Plaza during the last weeks of the war. Hitler was notified about a distant Soviet military unit from the area Fürstenwalde that had fired on the southeastern suburbs of Berlin. In his bunker, Hitler picked up the telephone and ordered the air force to immediately eliminate this Soviet troop. Upon putting down the telephone, he said in a very satisfied tone of voice: "So, now this matter is settled!" ("*So, das ist erledigt!*") He did not consider that a) the airforce pilots most likely would not be keen to risk a "hero death" ("*Heldentod*") a few days before the end of the war, and b) the Soviets had total control of the airspace and probably easily would have shot down ascending German fighter-

bombers. In Hitler's mind, the decision or command was already the success. *Ballistic action* is the scientific term used to describe such a form of decision making (Dörner, 2003, p. 40). Like the ballistic behavior of a cannon ball, which does not change its path once it is fired, Hitler thought his orders led ballistically to success. Hitler did not deem further readjustments of the decision necessary.

Finally, there is the *rehashing of previous successes*. This is also a very common method to increase competence. One can think of family reunions where such old success stories are told over and over again. In his notorious monologues, Hitler lived through the solutions of past, difficult problems and drew strength from them.

Self-reflection and self-criticism, in the short run at least, almost always reduce competence as one realizes what one has done wrong. In the long run, however, it often increases competence because one can circumvent the failures and mistakes of the past. The closest Hitler came to admitting mistakes was when he had been "too good" to his enemies (for example to his conservative enemies after 1933, Papen, Schleicher, and Hugenberg, see Kershaw, 2000a, p. 1047).

All these procedures and parameter constellations lead to an ever-growing *mismatch between world and worldview* (lower oval in Figure 2). Hitler lived more and more in a world that had no bearing on reality. In reading biographies on Hitler, it appears that, until a few weeks before his suicide on April 30, 1945, Hitler was wholeheartedly convinced that the war somehow could be won. He hoped that the Allies coalition with Stalin would soon come to an end, especially after President Roosevelt passed away on April 12, 1945. Of course, the coalition would not break during Hitler's lifetime, though it would relatively soon after his death.

As we have shown, Hitler's behavior and decision making can be explained through competence regulation theory. Hitler did not behave abnormally, nor was he insane. The mechanisms we have discussed can be found in the decision-making processes of many humans, such as in experiments conducted in psychological laboratories (e.g., Dörner, 2003). We can find similar behaviors when politicians or managers are confronted with crisis situations. We can find these behaviors in the past, but also in the present. We can find these phenomena even across cultures (Güss, Tuason, & Gerhard, 2010). Regarding the quality of psychological processes, Hitler's were not very different from those of the average person; everything in his behavior can also be found in the behavior of "regular" people.

Regarding quantity, however, Hitler's reactions to his decreasing competence were extreme and resulted in disastrous consequences (and some might argue that this gives Hitler's psychological processes a different quality). Sometimes we may choose to retreat to our imaginary version of the world as we wish it to be, but most of us know very well that this place is different from reality. Hitler's ideal dream world, on the other hand, became more and more his permanent residence.¹¹ Admittedly, sometimes Hitler was doubtful of the accuracy of his worldview. We find evidence for these doubts in the previously described sensitivity to criticism and the notoriously uncontrolled outbursts of fury. These doubts, however, did not lead to a gradual dismantling of Hitler's illusory worldview: On the contrary, they led to a progressive fanaticism and radicalization. How can this be explained?

One explanation follows the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). If Hitler had given consideration to these doubts and started to think about them, then he would have found an abyss. It simply could not be true that National Socialism, the ideology of races, the

¹¹ Also Schwaab (1992, p. 34) described Hitler's lost sense of reality: "The freely rising images in his mind were linked closely to his denial of the claims of reality. They were like overdetermined fantasies found in the inner world of daydreaming and the creative play characteristically observed in childhood."

theory of the *Slavic Untermensch* (subhuman being), et cetera, were wrong. In that case, the sacrifice of millions of German soldiers, the deaths of millions of Russians, British, French, Americans, et cetera, the slaughter of Jews, the assassination of the Polish intelligence (and on and on) would have been senseless. Precisely because the “investment” was so huge, these losses were not allowed to be senseless. In cognitive psychology, this phenomenon is called the sunk cost effect (Arkes & Blumer, 1985). It is the human tendency to continue a project or endeavor simply because a big investment in energy, money, effort, time, and so forth, has been made, even if the project's expected success is highly questionable.

Hitler dictated his testament in 1945 to his secretary Traudl Junge. And as we would expect, we do not find statements showing Hitler to be sorry in any way for all he had done to the world. Instead of apologies, the testament contained only allegations and denouncements: The *Wehrmacht* (armed forces) had failed, the officers and generals had failed, and in the end, the whole German nation had failed and the “East nation had proven itself to be stronger” (“*Das Ostvolk hat sich als stärker erwiesen!*”). In this respect, Haffner's speculation that it was a heartfelt matter for Hitler to destroy the German nation was not so fallacious. In the Burned Soil commands (*Nero-Befehl*, Haffner, 1978, p. 198), Hitler expressed the living conditions he wished for the German people after the war.¹² None! The “best had anyway died” (“*Die Besten sind sowieso gefallen*”) and the remaining do not deserve any consideration.¹³

¹² Hitler gave the so called Nero command on March 19, 1945. “Hitler ordered that everything required for the maintenance of life [in Germany] be demolished” (Fest, 2004b, p. VIII). “Hitler once more publicly confirmed his intention to create ‘a desert, void of civilization.’ All military, transportation, communication, industrial, and public utilities, as well as all other resources within the Reich that could be utilized by the enemy now or in the foreseeable future for the continuation of the war are to be destroyed” (Fest, 2004b, p. 124).

¹³ Hitler said: “If the war is to be lost, the nation will also perish. This fate is inevitable. There is no need to consider the basis even of the most primitive existence any longer. On the contrary, it is better to destroy even that, and to destroy it ourselves. The nation has proved itself weak. ... Besides, those who remain after the battle are of little value; for the good have fallen” (Haffner, 1979, pp. 159-160).

From where did Hitler's difficulties with his self-confidence and self-worth originate? Fest (2002, p. 95) thought Hitler needed the rush that stemmed from balancing on a knife's edge like a drug. And, like a drug, he needed it over and over again. Even Hitler himself once confessed, "You know, I am like a wanderer who must cross an abyss on the edge of a knife. But I must, I just must cross" (Waite, 1977, p. 393). The test of courage, the drive to gamble, the need to prove one's self that forms the basis of risky decisions is a behavior that we often see in young people because it is related to the low self-confidence of adolescence. We do not know where Hitler's low self-confidence comes from but we will discuss it in our hypothesis.

The Role of Affiliation

Hitler definitely had difficulties in interpersonal relationships. He had many admirers, but he did not really have friends. As Davidson (1996, p. 451) wrote, "Hitler never had a friend, an unconditionally trusted confidant." "Albert Speer, who shared and served Hitler's building fantasies daily for years, was once praised by Hitler orally and in writing, but said of himself that even he was not Hitler's friend, since Hitler had none" (Bromberg & Small, 1983, p. 177). Hitler also had problems in relationships with women. "In all, known suicide attempts by women connected with Hitler total seven" (Bromberg & Small, 1983, p. 246). Hitler's relationship problems did not just occur when he was in power as Reich Chancellor. His comrades in World War I found Hitler to be a "Peculiar fellow... We all cursed him and found him intolerable. There was this white crow among us that didn't go along with us when we damned the war" (Heiden, 1944, p. 74).

Hitler used people as instruments, but did not really love anybody except his mother. How is this related to self-confidence? Perhaps the most important source of self-confidence and self-worth is affiliation: the need to love and be loved by others. It is not enough to be admired as

a useful instrument, because in this case one can be substituted; one has to love and be loved unreservedly. Hitler did not have this “social glue”. Because he was not able to love, he could not imagine being loved by others and thus he lacked an essential source of self-confidence. He always had to boost his self-confidence through “games”. The idea of unconditional love may sound romantic, but our human need for it is actually quite mechanical: It is the force so often credited with giving people a reason to live by giving meaning to life. Love is the impetus for social integration. It is one reason why men and women often die when their partner of many years passes away; they lose their will to live when their partner dies. Social bonding is a strong buffer for the feeling of self-worth. To a high degree, it substitutes direct experiences of success, which, as efficiency signals, directly affect competence. Social connectedness offers protection by being part of a group. If it is lacking, one is dependent only on efficiency signals.

One could hypothesize that Hitler's drug-like search for public adoration – the “bath in the crowd” – was ultimately a search for affiliation signals. The ecstatic crowd showed him: “You are one of us. We belong to you and you belong to us.” Only, there is a catch, this kind of bonding is anonymous and without obligation, thus it always has to be renewed.

Where do the difficulties with interpersonal relationships and bonding originate? A peek at Hitler's adolescence is, in this regard, illuminating. Hitler was an abused child. He had a hot-tempered father who, according to Hitler's sister Paula, gave Hitler a beating every day (Kershaw, 1998, p. 43 ff.). Hitler's mother was helpless and usually was standing outside the door when these physical abuses happened. Goebbels once said about Hitler's childhood: “Hitler suffered about the same youth as I did. Father a domestic tyrant, mother, a source of kindness and love” (Dorpat, 2002, p. 206).

If, for many years, someone is at another's mercy, completely helpless, without enough power to help him/herself and without anyone else to intervene on the person's behalf, it could lead to a worldview that the only way to transcend the power of others is to become more powerful, along with the belief that others are not to be trusted. Such a situation could create the constant need to assure oneself of one's own power because, deep inside, there is always the fear that "Perhaps, I am not powerful enough." Particularly if the experience of being helpless and at someone's mercy occurs in early childhood when the child does not have yet the ability to reflect on the causes and background in order to understand the abusive behavior, then the feeling of being helplessly exposed to the violence of others could become an attitude towards life.¹⁴ This fear would become a kind of "background radiation" of decision making and action.

Hitler was always striving for power that was not based on social relationships because he knew – based on his childhood experiences – that he could not trust social relationships. In striving for power under such circumstances, it would be difficult to admit that the root of the need for power was the feeling of powerlessness. Thus, the feeling of helplessness would remain unprocessed in some corner of the soul.

Can we find some support for this hypothesis? We have mentioned several pieces of supporting evidence: Hitler's inability to tolerate criticism and opposition, his inability to self-reflect and to critique himself, the tendency to search for affirmative information. Fest (2004a, p. 789) attested that Hitler had a "neurotic fear of showing any kind of weakness" ("*neurotische Angst vor einem Schwächezeichen*"). The oscillation between victory and ruin ("*Sieg und*

¹⁴ Hitler also experienced helplessness and being at other people's mercy later in his life. For example, it had always been his dream to become an artist. Twice he was rejected by the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna; in his first application and in the interview with the director. As Waite (1977, p. 39) wrote: "Rejection by the Academy was the hardest blow Adolf had suffered. He had burned his bridges in order to become an artist, and continued support from his mother was contingent on studying at the Academy. Humiliated by the rejection, at a loss about what to do, he requested an interview with the Academy's director."

Untergang”), between hectic actionism and apathy (Fest, p. 282), which characterized Hitler’s decision making throughout his whole career, likewise indicated the fear lurking in the background that somehow everything would collapse.

The explosive mixture of his need for power and fear of powerlessness is probably manifested most clearly in Hitler’s cruelties. What is cruelty? Not everyone who causes harm to another is cruel. The surgeon is not cruel, even if the surgery wounds hurt afterwards. Also, the soldier in battle is not necessarily cruel when he kills the enemy. He likely believes he has no other option than to protect himself by killing others.

Someone is cruel by inflicting harm upon another only to demonstrate power. People are cruel because they elevate themselves by making others suffer and by watching them suffer. In that way, they can increase their feeling of competence by demonstrating to themselves their power over others and the world. In this regard, Hitler was extremely cruel. It was not enough for him to dispose of his enemies once and for all. They had to suffer!¹⁵ The conspirators of July 20, 1944 were not simply killed, they were murdered slowly and excruciatingly (Fest, 2004a, p. 1005). The executions were filmed and, on the very same evening, Hitler watched the movies to the “last convulsions of the delinquents” (“*letzten Zuckungen der Delinquenten*,” Fest 2004a, 1006). Hitler’s delight in watching his enemies suffer shows his insecurity. Their physical elimination was not enough. He had to demonstrate that he had the power to cause harm. To an unimaginable extreme, he did this by having 6 million Jews and many others killed in the

¹⁵ Schwaab described another example of Hitler’s cruelty (1992, p. 65): “The generals who were involved in the conspiracy against Hitler in an attempt to assassinate him on July 20, 1944, were garroted with piano wires. The movie reels taken of their execution were watched by Hitler with sadistic satisfaction at his headquarters.”

“camps (more than 10,000) which the Germans established, maintained, and staffed”

(Goldhagen, 1996, p. 171).¹⁶

The strange and extreme mixture of inflated self-confidence and fear of failure, both strong determiners of Hitler's behavior, was also characteristic of another historic leader: the Roman Emperor Caligula, also usually classified as one of the world's most heinous political criminals. Sueton (1913) attributed to Caligula “the existence of two exactly opposite faults in the same person, extreme assurance, and, on the other hand, excessive timorousness” (translated by Rolfe on p. 483, “*attribuerim diversissima in eodem vitia, summam confidentiam et contra nimium metum*”). Hitler and Caligula shared the need for approval from the masses, an insatiability for the society of their times, the ambition to create enemies for the purpose of destroying them, possible paraphilias, intentional defilement of objects and beliefs that people held sacred, and the inability to stop. Given their similarities, perhaps Caligula had a worldview similar to Hitler's all-consuming drive for power coupled with his inability to trust anyone.

Hitler's decision making and behavior can be explained through certain motivational constellations and the circumstances. It has been surmised that Hitler's addictive need for self-affirmation stemmed from the conditions and experiences in his childhood. Do such explanations excuse his behavior? They do not. People are determined by their motives and the action impulses that result from the motives. However, people are free to recognize their motives, evaluate them, intercept them if necessary, and to redirect and redetermine.

Was Hitler Sick?

¹⁶ Some might argue that Hitler's delight in seeing others suffer to such a horrific extent suggests that Hitler had sociopathic tendencies. As Schwaab (1992, p. 44) said: “These characteristic failings bring Hitler across the border into the anti-social mentality of people called criminals. ... What Hitler had in common with these individuals was abysmal self-centeredness and emotional indifferences toward the needs of others.”

Is it an affront to those who suffered at his hand – does it minimize the consequence of his evil when we show that Hitler's behavior follows certain rules, rules that apply to other people as well? Some people believe so. They argue as Fackenheim did (see McRobert, 1989; Rosenbaum, 1998, p. 286) against a "Hitler within us" point of view. According to this stance, saying that Hitler was just a very, very bad person who differed from us only in degree would diminish the radical evil Hitler represented. They would say that this evil does not have an origin within man and cannot be explained. Some would go even further and assert that trying to explain Hitler and the Holocaust is "obscenely immoral ... for any attempt to understand Hitler inevitably degenerates into an exercise in empathy with him. To understand all is to forgive all, and to Lanzmann [who directed 9.5 hrs documentary about the Holocaust], even the first steps down the slippery slope to understanding are impermissible" (Rosenbaum, 1995, p. 50). We do not believe that explaining equals forgiving or that forgiving necessarily follows explaining. On the contrary, we believe that seeking to explain rather than demonize is necessary to learning.

Why is it forbidden to see Hitler as a human being? What is the advantage of diagnosing Hitler with a certain psychopathology? He was diagnosed post mortem as having hypochondria and/or post traumatic stress disorder and/or antisocial personality disorder and/or borderline personality disorder and/or somatization disorder resulting from his childhood traumas (Dorpat, 2002). Or Hitler was characterized by psychoanalysts as having "a narcissistic personality with paranoid features, functioning on borderline personality level" (Bromberg & Small, 1983, p. 8).

We do not want to excuse his behaviors by applying a pathological label to Hitler. We rather hold with the psychiatrist Redlich (1998, p. 339), who summarized his analysis of Hitler's potential psychopathology as follows: "Hitler's delusional paranoid syndrome could be viewed as a symptom of mental disorder, but most of the personality functioned more than adequately.

He knew what he was doing and he chose to do it with pride and enthusiasm.” Yes, Hitler was one of the most horrendous mass murderers¹⁷ in history (Haffner, 1979), but his behaviors – as we have shown – can be explained referring to general normal psychological phenomena and processes. As Bullock said (cited in Rosenbaum, 1995, p. 66): “That Hitler wasn’t a madman.”

What are the advantages of demonizing Hitler instead and viewing him as a reincarnation of Satan? Well, our (we, the authors, are German citizens) German parents and grandparents, who were to a greater or lesser extent actively involved in National Socialism, can be more easily forgiven in that way. What can one do against the dark power of evil? We Germans were just misled. It was not really us who committed these atrocities: It was an overarching dark power that caused us to become members of the Hitler Youth, to become soldiers, and to completely destroy almost all of Europe. We were bewitched. Such a demonizing of Hitler only deflects responsibility.

To see Hitler as a human being means at the same time to realize and recognize the Hitler in oneself. As Rosenbaum (1995, p. 70) said: “We may despair ever explaining Hitler. But we cannot abandon the attempt, because of those ‘others’ – the other Hitlers who may be among us even now.” Regarding Hitler as a human being means that Hitler is not completely strange and different, someone who cannot be understood. It means that we can find Hitler in ourselves, through such behavior tendencies as we have described in this article: the misattribution of failure, the loss of touch with reality, the affirmative perception, the tendency to feel powerful through decisive actions.

Sure, we might not find them to the extreme extent as was the case for Hitler, but the difference then is no longer a qualitative one, but a quantitative one – it is a difference of degree.

¹⁷ Victor (1998, p. 71) described the progression of Hitler’s killings: “At the beginning of his rule in 1933, Hitler had individuals killed. The next year he had groups of thousand killed; still later, the ‘euthanasia’ program killed tens of thousands. And during World War II, he had about 13 million noncombatants killed.”

This realization is extremely uncomfortable because it means that we must always remain alert – Hitler was not unique, but someone who could reappear again and again. This realization is much more eerie than the idea of Hitler as a phenomenon beyond comprehension and completely unrelated to us. Such a realization is the opposite of minimization or rationalization of Hitler's evil. It is uncomfortable because it requires responsibility. We are charged with the responsibility to think about ourselves, about education, about the form of political affairs, about political action in our societies and cultures. We are not absolved.

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