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## The Power of Leadership Storytelling: Case of Adolf Hitler

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### Keywords

*Leadership*  
*Nazis*  
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*Story-telling*

### Abstract

We consider the construction of leadership influence involving manipulation and from narrative standpoint. We use the career of Adolf Hitler as an empirical example - as a case - illustrating the huge, and potentially destructive, power of story-telling. Hitler is used as an illustrative case for how storytelling is involved in constructing great leadership influence – and with a view to making sense of such a leader’s story. We have applied both conceptual and narrative analysis in our empirical case. In terms of the narrative analysis, we follow Polkinghorne’s definition on narrative inquiry. Despite the significant attention given to storytelling in the contemporary management literature, less research has been devoted to understanding its connection to destructive leadership. As a result of the case we have constructed a rich description of evolving process of destructive leadership. Leaders all over the world can get practical guidance and support for their aims to be better leader and to resist bad leadership.

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### Introduction

During the last two decades storytelling has gained a strong position in leadership theory and practice (e.g. Boje 2006; Boje & Rhodes, 2006; Flory & Iglesias, 2010; Auvinen et al., 2013). Stories can be seen as a particular doctrine and even a philosophy of leadership. Some authors treat stories as an intentional leadership instrument (e.g. Parkin, 2004; Denning, 2005), whereas some emphasize the subconscious, or even innocent, nature of organizational and leadership storytelling (e.g. Gabriel, 1995; Auvinen, Aaltio & Blomqvist, 2013). In terms of leadership theory – diverging from traditional leader-centred approaches – storytelling is interested in discursive resources that construct and convey leadership power. In terms of power, storytelling is not attached to sovereign power but social interaction in organizational processes, where leadership-influenced power is constructed and conveyed, or contested (Weick & Browning, 1986; Collin et al., 2012). Organizations are replete with a wide range of different forms of stories: myths, sagas, legends about heroes or the defeated, strategic projects and humorous anecdotes (Gabriel, 2000). Some stories are coherent, well-established and publicly expressed narratives with a clear plot, while others are fragmented, spontaneous or even hidden from public

discourse (Czarniawska, 1998; Boje, 2001). Regardless, stories are information-rich entities full of organizational values and beliefs containing moral positions dealing with issues concerning what is good and bad (Gabriel & Griffiths, 2004; Ciulla, 2005), and therefore, an appropriate vehicle for studying leadership and ethics.

Stories may inform us about leadership styles. Contrary to hierarchical and authoritarian approaches (such as managerialism), storytelling is often seen as an ethical approach to leadership – promoting democracy and empowerment (see e.g. Weick & Browning, 1986; Auvinen et al., 2013). Instead of straightforward commands and coercion, a story is rather persuasive and latent. Therefore, it is the subjective and collective interpretation of the stories among organizational members that brings about leadership influence (ibid.).

Plato stated that the one who tells the story governs (Fisher, 1985). In other words, the owner of the story – the narrator – resorts to discursive exercise of power (see Foucault, 2000). Unlike during the exercise of force and coercion, the source of such power lies in discursive reality and the mental realm (Polkinghorne, 1988): The storyteller aspires to influence the social reality with a view to shaping it in a desirable direction. This, in fact, addresses the ethical dimension in leadership stories: Storytelling may involve attempts to seduce or even manipulate with evil purposes. Indeed, the narrator may conceal her/his intentions with indoctrination and manipulation, whereupon listeners are not aware of the attempts to wield power over them. Consequently, exercising leadership power in this manner is typically seen as rather bad and unethical. According to Bass (1998), manipulative leadership is condemned as unethical and hence called pseudo-leadership.

Our paper will include a case study of Adolf Hitler's leadership within the framework of storytelling. Why study this dictator, who has been referred to as bad and vicious? First, Adolf Hitler's life and career was something unusual and worth studying – Drucker (see e.g. TCBR, 2014) even nominated him (along with Mao and Stalin) as one of the most influential leaders of the 20th century and an archetype of dark ethics and charisma. Hitler set up the Nazi regime and caused the death of millions of people. Indeed, the ethics of the Nazis are personified in Hitler to some extent and these entities are tightly interconnected. Secondly, the image of the leader transforms in the course of time through storytelling (e.g. Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012). We are not suggesting that in another 50 or 100 years Hitler will be seen as a good leader with sound ethics, but it may be possible that his charisma and Nazi ethics could still work on many people (e.g. Polley 2000). Hence, dissecting the story of Hitler might provide an understanding of how his charisma and ethics were formed and expressed through a narrative configuration – which may in turn inform us about the strategic logic of totalitarian systems (including storytelling involving such forms of manipulation as propaganda or even brainwashing) and teach us how to resist the mental forces used by dictators.

## Methodology: Research Task, Data and the Logic of the Analysis

In this article, we are interested in the intertwined quality of storytelling, leadership and ethics. Besides the leadership influence constructed in storytelling, we ponder the constitution of charisma and the ethics involved in narration and leadership. Our research task is to make sense of how the most influential and notorious leadership story of the 20th century, Adolf Hitler, was possible, and how his charisma and colossal (unethical) movement pervaded an entire nation. Adolf Hitler is therefore used as an illustrative case for how storytelling is involved in constructing great leadership influence – and with a view to making sense of such a leader's story, we first need to identify the salient episodes that had an influence on the leader himself.

We have applied narrative analysis in our empirical case. In terms of the narrative analysis, we follow Polkinghorne's (1995, 5) definition on narrative inquiry, which refers to a subset of qualitative research designs in which stories are used to describe human action. A human being organizes experiences into temporally meaningful episodes (Polkinghorne, 1988). A narrative, or story (we use the terms interchangeably), is a primary form by which human experience is made meaningful (Polkinghorne, 1988). A narrative is a form of discourse, in which events and happenings are configured in temporal unity. In other words, this is about emplotting: The events are linked to each other in a certain order, which indicates causality between them. However, causality in the sequences in a story involves human interpretation, and hence cannot be understood as an objective fact, but must be meaningful and in this sense plausible and real for human beings (Weick, 2001; Bruner, 1991). According to Polkinghorne (ibid.), narrative inquiry may operate by recognizing elements as members of a category or it may operate by combining elements in an emplotted story:

Paradigmatic-type narrative inquiry gathers stories as its data and uses paradigmatic analytic procedures to produce taxonomies and categories out of the common elements across the

database. Narrative-type narrative inquiry gathers events and happenings as its data and uses narrative analytic procedures to produce explanatory stories.

In this study we apply the latter: While using the historical biography of Adolf Hitler, we aspire to identify the meaningful events and happenings in terms of leadership and ethics. Consequently, we have constructed several brief explanatory stories (episodes) that provide insights that illustrate what has been going on in the process and what has happened behind the influential leadership story of Hitler with its ethics.

In terms of data, Ian Kershaw's (2008) historical biography of Adolf Hitler has a central role in our study. In his account, which runs to nearly 1000 pages, Kershaw provides a rich portrait of Hitler as a person, a character in a story, but also reveals insights and pointed remarks on the context (such as historical occasions and social evils). Therefore, this paper will display stories at different levels. First, there are the stories Hitler told his audiences (i.e. the German people, Nazi party members, his friends). Secondly, there is the story written by the famous historian about Hitler<sup>1</sup>. Thirdly, there is another narrative construction carried out by the researchers based on the two first levels. Hence, this paper is a story about storytelling leadership theory and an influential leadership character – an extraction of rich historical accounts.

To sum up, the construction of stories about meaningful and significant episodes using historical accounts in order to provide insights into what influenced the leadership of Hitler took place in three phases of analysis. First, we sketched the idea and acquainted ourselves with the leadership storytelling literature. As we were interested in the Third Reich and the leadership of Adolf Hitler, during the second phase we familiarized ourselves with Kershaw's book using in-depth reading. During the reading we made careful notes and started to sketch our observations on the main events involving leadership storytelling and Hitler's influential charisma formation process. Our aim was to reveal the background and characteristics of the protagonist in this grim leadership story: what kind of actor was Hitler in his story and why?

The third phase of analysis included the formation of the aforementioned events into three more concrete episodes. Based on these episodes, we briefly described Hitler's use of systematic and professional storytelling where many techniques were employed (e.g. the ministry of propaganda using manipulative storytelling). From the perspective of the influence of leadership, in terms of storytelling and ethics, we ponder how Hitler gained such a strong leadership influence in his time. In other words, using storytelling as a framework for leadership and the story about Hitler as an illustrative case, we aim to illustrate and highlight some focal mechanisms for how leadership storytelling works in general. There is a lesson to be learned, if we want to understand and resist dictatorship. Next, we will briefly present the theory and idea of leadership storytelling.

## Leaders are Embedded in Their Web of Stories: About the Nature of “Homo Narrans”

Eventually, it can be said that all storytelling is about exercising power – and the owner of the story or the narrator is inevitably using power (Fisher, 1985; McCloskey, 1988; Weick, 2001). The source of discursive power (Foucault, 2000; Lukes, 2005) lies not in coercive intentions, but in the intention to create a shared social reality and shape this in the desired direction. In fact, it has even been argued that many of the greatest leaders have been the best storytellers, while the worst have been those who have excluded too many people outside their story (Peters, 1991; Ciulla, 2005). While trying to make sense of one of the most influential leadership stories of the 20th-century in Western Europe, we will first introduce the idea of homo narrans and the theory of narrative paradigm, which informs us on how stories influence.

The narrative paradigm is a framework proposed by Fisher (1985; 1986; 1994), which is a philosophy of human reason, value and action. The logic of the narrative paradigm is called narrative rationality, an extension of the logical-scientific approach and traditional rationality theories. Besides organization and leadership studies (see e.g. Weick & Browning, 1986; Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012), it has been revisited in disciplines, such as communication (see Caldiero, 2008) and jurisprudence (see Rideout, 2008). For Fisher (1985), alongside MacIntyre (1981), the conception of the human being is homo narrans. For them, it is not primarily our organic origins or even human culture that separates human beings from other animals, but our ability and tendency to tell stories (see also Polkinghorne, 1988). As Gabriel (2000, 3–4) states, referring to Novak (1975):

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted here, too, that the account of Kershaw is another interpretation of the incidents among many others – and is not mentioned to be understood as inclusive and uncontroversial historical account. Indeed, with a view to take our understanding further, another sources should be used while another approaches besides leadership (e.g. politics) should also be taken into account in the future.

...man emerged as a storytelling animal, an animal whose main preoccupation is not truth or power or love or even pleasure, but meaning [...] sees the present rising out of a past, heading into a future; perceives reality in narrative form.

Human beings are intertwined in a web of stories in all their actions and social belonging.

In terms of organizational and leadership inquiry, storytelling is the preferred sense-making currency of human relationships, and among other organizational members, the manager is embedded and intertwined in a complex network of stories (Boje, 1991; 1995; 2001). Indeed, seeing leadership as influence or power over followers resulting from actions performed by a real-world person would be too far narrow. Boje et al. (2011) propose three orders of virtual leadership. The first level, nearest to traditional (leader centred) leadership approaches is the virtual leader as an imitation of the former flesh-and-blood leader. The second sees the leader as a creative re-presentation of a former leader, while the third is about the leader as a fabricated character with no direct relationship to an actual person (e.g. Ronald McDonald). MacAulay, Yue and Thurlow (2010) are interested in invisible (or at least unseen) actors that have a significant role in organizational behaviour, and who exist in organizational storytelling. Auvinen (2012) argues there is a ghost leader around all formal leaders and also several informal ghost leaders in every organization. The ghost leader applies the Weickian idea of retrospective narration, which influences how the leader even as a real-world person is made sense of in organizations.

The leader's current actions are interpreted by followers through storytelling; for instance, past stories indicating the leader's ethics will be used when the followers make sense of the leader's future definitions of policies. Parry and Hansen (2007) stretch the idea of leadership even further by arguing that it is eventually the story who is leading: No one literally walks at the leader's heel, but everybody influenced by the leader(ship) eventually follow the meanings in the (leader's) story. Understanding the point addressed by these authors is relevant to leadership since the leader may exist as a real-world entity as well as nothing more than a fictional invention existing in the discursive realm (or a combination of these, as Boje et al. 2011 suggested). Therefore, the stories told about leaders and their accomplishments, failures, moral choices and so on are the key to making sense of leadership influence among followers. Instead of getting stuck with questions about what is fictional and what is real, we should ponder what is plausible and meaningful (and why) in human reality.

Denning (2005; 2010; 2011) also applies this idea to the charisma of the leader. He argues that leader(ship) charisma is eventually more or less a narrative construction. First, there is an action or episode (real or imaginary), which has eyewitnesses. As individuals make sense of what has happened (organizing the fragments of an experience into temporal sequences – that is to say emplotting by entwining the protagonist [leader] and minor characters into the emerging story), they pass the consequent construction in narrative form. Sometimes the storytelling may achieve colossal proportions. Denning uses Gandhi as an (positive) example of how a simple action of rebellion by a single leader initiated an enormous, global charismatic leadership institution. Furthermore, Martin Luther King could be seen as another example of a charismatic leader sharing a similar ethos as Gandhi, while Hitler can similarly be analysed as an example of a grim charismatic leader. However, since we cannot observe any of these leaders directly, this is an example of how the followers actually follow the story of the leader – and researchers, too, must resort to (retrospective) storytelling in order to make sense of such leadership and charisma.

The interpretation of a story, however, is related to context and point of view, and interpretations are not fixed but volatile and influenced by temporality (e.g. Boje, 2001; Taylor, Fisher & Dufresne, 2002). Hence, the protagonist can transform from hero into villain, back and forth (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012). Even the self-conception and identity of an organization vacillates, and great winners can become great losers overnight (Clark 1972). For instance, some people still seem to struggle with the question of whether George W. Bush was a great and righteous leader or a great failure, who caused havoc in Iraq and in his own nation (see e.g. Denning, 2005; Marek, 2011). However, such debates may still go on for another fifty years – but is obviously not informed by objective facts. Instead, this is rather another example of how the plausibility is guided by the point of view and temporality – we constantly receive new stories (via news, for instance) about the state of affairs.

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that although the manager (or governor in Plato's terms) typically has a legitimized position as a storyteller in his/her organization, this is not a self-evident state of affairs. In terms of discursive power, the storyteller may exist in narrative silence (see Boje, 2001). This is the case if the audience will not listen, interpret and retell the stories. Consequently, such managerial narration will not bring about meanings among the followers, and hence, lacks leadership influence.

Since here we focus on Hitler, one could ask what do we even know now about whether the idea of Hitler as a leader has been more or less stabilized in the mainstream in Europe. But what we do not know is all the details, elements and episodes that brought about such an influential and vicious leader – and what the state of affairs will be in another 50 or 100 years? That is another reason why the story of such a great (and vicious) leader should be dissected carefully. History is about stories, and those who do not learn from history do repeat it (Santanaya, 1954; see also Grint, 2011).

Indeed, stories of leadership also have, therefore, an ethical dimension. Stories can be used both for good and bad, but apparently Hitler had a different conception of ethics to what most Europeans have today. While typically storytelling resonates as being rather more democratic (such as in the case of empowering leadership), a story may also have a disempowering outcome and leader's story can even narrow a follower's choices in terms of seduction or even manipulation (e.g. Boje, 1999; Boje, 2001). In manipulation, the object (e.g. subordinate) is unaware of the exertion of power and, as is obvious, such an exercise of power is less likely to provoke resistance (Wrong, 2004; Lukes, 2005). On some occasions, the line between encouragement and manipulation vacillates and not all of stories involving concealed influence are told with malicious intent (Auvinen et al., 2013). In terms of leadership power, stories can be seen as a means for empowering leadership, while being a rather latent way to influence followers, the use of hidden power (e.g. manipulation) must be taken into account. Indoctrination and manipulation are seen to be bad and unethical ways of delivering leadership strategies, and creating action through storytelling. While talking about Hitler, the ethical problem does not lie in the milder forms of manipulation such as encouragement or seduction (about the forms of manipulation, see e.g. Bok, 1981; Lauerma, 2006), but in indoctrination and even straightforward brainwashing.

To sum up, leadership storytelling is not always about manipulation – nor do all manipulative intentions pursue evil outcomes (e.g. Fineman, Sims & Gabriel, 2006; Lukes, 2005; Auvinen et al., 2013). However, unlike white lies and playful joking, systematic propaganda and the manipulation of young people seem to be impossible to tolerate in any framework of ethics (see Bok 1981 [1978]). Next, we will move on to the empirical part.

## The Case of Adolf Hitler – A Great Orator and Vicious Leader<sup>2</sup>

In our analysis, we have identified and hence distinguished the following episodes as useful for making sense of the leadership story of Adolf Hitler:

### Episode 1: The character Adolf Hitler and key incidents

- The beginning of the story: The focus on the young Hitler (background and origins); priming the emergence of Hitler's adopted role as a great power holder
- Key incidents: Hitler finds his mission and vision ("to fill his destiny as saviour of the German nation")

### Episode 2: The genesis of the cult of the Führer

- The legend of Adolf Hitler: How it emerged and developed
- The diffusion of the mythical character across the nation
- How his charisma is born and then disintegrates

### Episode 3: To the bitter end – the Fall of the Great Orator

- Counter-storytelling grows and inner circle scatters
- The collapse of the influential charismatic leadership and ultimate fall of the Führer

## Episode 1 - The character Adolf Hitler and key incidents.

### The beginning of the story: The focus on the young Hitler

Adolf Hitler was born into a pre-modern society as a citizen of Austria in 1889. The tender care of his mother, Klara, was the centre of his domestic life. Hitler went to a secondary school, which emphasized practical subjects more than

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<sup>2</sup> Page numbers in the text are references to Kershaw's book (Finnish edition).

a classical high school. While not a bad student, going to school was not to Hitler's taste. In 1907, his mother died and he stopped attending school. Hitler moved to Linz to live with his friend Gustl.

Hitler was entitled to an orphan pension and an inheritance, which was sufficient to support him for a year or two in Vienna. During his adolescence Hitler decided to become an artist because he had always been good at painting and drawing. He applied to the Vienna Academy of Arts, but was not accepted. Until 1908, he lived with his friend Kubicek in a small apartment in Vienna, all the time dreaming of becoming a famous painter. Hitler painted small landscapes, which he peddled among his friends. He lived frugally, eating porridge and bread, without consuming alcohol or having girlfriends.

Kershaw emphasizes (p.58), that Hitler attempted the entrance exam for the Vienna Academy of Arts and was rejected a second time. At this time, the pathological anti-Semitism had not yet been ignited in his mind. By 1909, the young Hitler had hit rock bottom – with no money and clad in ragged clothes he wandered the streets of Vienna. He painted small paintings at a rate of about one per day, while a business associate Hanizek sold these artistic works. Hitler often read different newspapers and it is said that he was influenced by the entertainment paper *Ostara*. This was a cheap adventure magazine in which beast-men fought blonde Viking-like males. Evidently his fight-and-survive ideology began to emerge at this time.

Hitler changed dwellings and ended up residing in a men's shelter, where he lived around 1910. In this residence he read newspapers and painted pictures, while giving heated political speeches to the other lonely and homeless men. He attracted some supporters and was even a somewhat respected member of the community of homeless and unemployed men<sup>3</sup>, in a sense. Hitler then went missing between 1910–12 and very little is known of his movements at the time. By that time, Hitler already hated leftists, but got along well with Jews, who sold his paintings. Later on, Hitler contested – for image reasons – this co-operation with the Jews. He kept stating, or storytelling, that he had already become an ideological anti-Semite in Vienna. Hitler's later image depended on the self-portrait given in *Mein Kampf* of an unimportant man, who from the beginning fought persistently to overcome adversity and who, having been dismissed by academic circles, studied tirelessly by himself. A man who through his own hard experiences arrived at unique insights into society and politics, based on which he could, at the age of 20, form an overall ideology (p. 71).

In 1913, Hitler left Vienna for Munich in order to evade the draft of the Austrian army. In Munich he continued painting small pictures for sale and spent his time roaming beer houses ranting about his message, and debating in cafes. This to Hitler was political participation. Later in *Mein Kampf* he explained and exaggerated, building these cafe debates into the philosophy of a political prophet (= the destruction of Marxism).

#### Key incidents: Hitler finds his mission and vision

A key experience for Hitler was the time he spent in Pasewalk military hospital in 1918 recuperating from wounds received in a gas attack. The war ended while Hitler convalesced in hospital. Hitler heard the news of the war ending and that there had been a leftist revolution, one that he held to be “the century's greatest villainy on earth.” Later on, the Nazis claimed that the war was lost due to back-stabbing and treachery. Actually, the Nazis built this into a legend, which served as one of the foundations for their propaganda. After the war there were several hated subjects, such as war profiteering, which Hitler used in his propaganda. Bureaucrats and Jews in general were made scapegoats, and therefore, became objects of hate. In the rhetoric of several different parties and groups the Jews were described as conspirators aiming at world revolution. At Pasewalk, Hitler searched for an explanation to the collapse of his world and his experiences were only beginning to coalesce into a whole, although later on he exaggeratedly described this time as a mystical awakening of an authority regarding his own fate (p. 91).

Hitler was released from hospital and remained in the army until the 31 February 1920. His ideology took its final shape in the army, the Reichswehr, in 1919. In the exceptional conditions of the time, the defeated German army made Hitler above all a propagandist, the most talented demagogue of his time. It was not a deliberate choice, but by making the most of his current situation Hitler turned it into politics. Opportunism and mere luck had more to do with it than willpower.

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<sup>3</sup> Hitler lived in a residence for homeless and unemployed poor men. The community had its regular daily tasks and a valuation of status in terms of social structure.

## Episode 2 – The genesis of the cult of the Fuhrer

### The legend of Adolf Hitler: How it emerged and developed

At the beginning of 1919, a leftist revolution occurred in Bavaria. It only lasted for a few weeks, and then failed. This failure worked for the Nazis, as everything that could go wrong with the revolution attempt did so and there were a lot of Jewish people involved in key positions. Hitler worked in the Reichswehr as an informant. He was a skilled speaker and became known as an expert on Jews. Among his themes were race theory, anti-Semitism, nationalism and the opposition of Jewish authority. In 1919, Hitler almost accidentally gave his first speech. He had a natural gift as an orator; he could talk with a way of simplifying and repeating things which become characteristic to his style.

Hitler joined the German Labour Party (the predecessor of the NSDAP), and received member number 555, although later he always claimed to have been member number 7. This was one of the lies used to bolster the Fuhrer legend. It can be said that Hitler did not find politics, but politics found him.

Hitler invented and outlined the plan for German salvation. This plan already included some germinant elements of the Nazi ideology, but was missing the idea of living space from Eastern Europe, and the opposing of Bolshevism and connecting Judaism to that. At the time Hitler was reading the “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion”, a manifesto of anti-Semitism, a historical forgery written at the end of the 19th century for use by anti-Semites.

Hitler did not want to be a party leader nor an organizer – he wanted to be a propagandist and a demagogue. He did not want to be responsible for organizing.

At the beginning of the 1920’s, Hitler was a drummer – “Trommler” – who incited the common people to join the national movement. At that time Hitler did not yet see himself as the future great leader, a political messiah, who would step up when the people recognized him, even though that is what he would later claim in *Mein Kampf*.

Hitler was still based in Bavaria, when Mussolini’s March to Rome occurred on the 28 October 1922. His accomplices came up with the idea that Il Duce could be the example that Hitler could model himself after. The cult of the Duce was born and this was symbolically the moment when Hitler’s supporters invented the *Fuhrer cult*. Declaring “*Germany’s Mussolini is Adolf Hitler*.” Hitler’s inner circle started to consciously profile Hitler.

*The Hitler revolt – Hitler Putsch* – in November 1923 was also a **key event**. The revolt failed and Hitler was arrested. His trial was a farce as Hitler made the courtroom the stage for his own propaganda, sitting there with a suit on and an iron cross pinned to his chest. Hitler was sentenced to 5 years in prison, of which he served only 13 months at Landsberg prison, where he lived the high life in his own suite while writing the first part of *Mein Kampf*. As Hitler later commented, Landsberg prison was like university to him.

### *The leader steps up – the creation of the Fuhrer cult*

Hitler was released from prison in December 1924. The NSDAP was banned and the GVG was founded as its successor. Instead of sinking into depression, Hitler’s ego swelled immeasurably in the wake of the failed revolution. It is from this time that his near mystical faith in himself as a man guided by fate with a mission/calling to save Germany stems. Hitler wanted to be, and was, the only leader and the only interpreter for the national socialistic movement.

When re-establishing the Nazi party, which had been banned after the attempted revolution, Hitler made a speech on 25 February 1925, where he emphasized that as a leader his task was to “bring back together those who were moving in different directions.” The skill of the leader was that he could put together “the pieces of the mosaic”. The leader was “the centre and the repository of the cause.” Hitler repeatedly underlined this required blind obedience and faith from his followers (p.202). Consequently, the leader cult was constructed as a common factor for the movement. The Fuhrer myth was both a propaganda tool and a doctrine.

### *Party convention in Munich*

Hitler returned to the political stage in Munich on 27 February 1927. He spoke for two hours. Hitler and the cause he symbolized were the only thing that could keep the scattered movement together. The convention was rife with arguing and ended in a symbolic handshake, an action with which the party troublemakers were reconciled. The atmosphere was emotional and fervent, such as when the vassals of the Middle Ages swore allegiance to their overlord. Hitler established his position and demanded that his leadership was to be accepted unconditionally.

Hitler began to adopt a manner according to his conception of a great power holder. Before his speeches he did not want to meet anyone, and he distanced himself even from his inner circle. Obtaining an audience with him was extremely difficult. He maintained the self-image of a great heroic man, sustaining a halo, an Olympian distancing himself from the



scheming of everyday life. These were the means with which he created his own status as an important leader (p.195). Hitler was a born actor, whose style was characterized by a calculated and sharply honed showmanship. Yet he was not perceived as a cynical manipulator, but a man who believed in his cause. This is what caused people to believe in him.

Hitler was forbidden to speak in public until the revocation in 1927 in the large German states. He was once again able to wield his words and to enforce the Fuhrer cult. Its creation was a crucial factor in the development of the Nazi movement. The tenet of the movement was that obedience to Hitler was the primary duty of each member.

#### *From chancellor to dictator 1933*

Attitudes to Hitler among the general public varied according to political stance and personal outlook. The Nazis did not in fact seize power as they claimed in their mythology; instead, it was given to them. The Nazis often had to resort to staging applause. The fake applauses made Hitler and his supporters reach a stage of rapture. Consequently, the weak and small parties could not hold power in a democratic way.

In 1934, the re-armament program was forcefully started. Slowly, Hitler gained credibility among the business community. Nazi propaganda became even more fervent and focused on social Darwinism and the conspiracy of the Jews and the Bolsheviks.

On the 27 February 1933, Marius von Lubbe burned the Reichstag building and an election was held on 5 March 1933. On the 23 March, Hitler gave a tactically ingenious speech. The power was now in the hands of the national socialists and this was the beginning of the end for the other parties, which were eventually banned on the 4 July (p. 303). Hitler's personality cult already began to grow in the spring of 1933 and had strange manifestations. People wrote poems and ingratiating verses, and all over Germany people planted "Hitler oaks and lime trees", which with their pagan symbolism had a special meaning to the supporters of the völkisch movement and to those interested in the cults of old German mythology. Hitler was 44 years old, and becoming a symbol for national unity. The salute "Heil Hitler" quickly became more frequent and it was mandatory for civil servants. This was a sign and symbol that Germany had become a Fuhrer state.

It was impossible for Hitler to be immune to smarmy flattery, with the inner circle screening information coming from the outside world, and thus Hitler became even more alienated from the world.

#### *Towards the Fuhrer's will – Anointed by providence*

These trends – the collapse of collective government, the clarification of ideological goals, and the Fuhrer's absolutism – were intimately connected to each other. These three principles hastened the endless radicalization of the Nazi ideology and strengthened the competition between administrative branches of the Third Reich. In this Darwinist competition, actors could be successful only by anticipating: "Let us anticipate the Fuhrer's will" and then to act with our own initiative without a separate command. This was an unspoken principle when different people tried to guess what would be a favourable course of action. The power personified in Hitler providing the trigger for such initiatives from the lower ranks, and at the same time offering support for such initiatives, if they were in line with Hitlers's own broad goals (p. 329). The disorderly government of the Nazis caused corruption, and bribes were rife. Hitler knew that corruption guaranteed loyalty, but bribery was a double-edged sword. However, it also eroded trust, and led to administrative chaos.

Hitler's behaviour changed over the years in relation to how he conducted his politics. Hitler's increasing withdrawal from domestic politics after March 1934 also illustrated how domestic policy became in practice indoctrination and propaganda (p. 330). One of the key factors in the power struggle around Hitler was who could get an audience with him. However, the inner circle narrowed and he alienated himself from the German people. After the mid-1930s, Hitler did not care for structures, nor state, nor party. He was only interested in the consequences and effects of action. The SS and the police were merged in 1936; therefore, a new structure emerged, the main function of which was to implement the Fuhrer's ideology.

Hitler had reckless habits and administration routines. Occasionally acquainting himself with papers, having short conversations, watching an evening film every night; lunch conversations, where Hitler would not stand for counterarguments; the fellow diners were often afraid that someone would bring up; for example, the navy or World War I, ensuing an endless monologue until the early hours. Hitler prepared his speeches meticulously and always wrote them himself. He dictated all his speeches to a secretary, of which he had three, and then he wrote the final draft himself. Hitler's flickering temper, non-bureaucratic manner, Darwinist tendency of setting himself on the side of the stronger, and withdrawing behind the role of the Fuhrer; all this merged together. The result was a modern state, with no coordinating central organ – in which the Prime Minister (Kanzler) was to a large extent separated from the ruling system (p. 331).

In the foreign policy of 1935, the Soviet Union was little more than a side issue. In March of 1935, Hitler announced that in the new Wehrmacht there would be 36 divisions and universal conscription was to come into effect (p. 339). Hitler was not yet ready to attack the Soviet Union, but rather aimed his invasion at immediate neighbours to the Reich. The occupation of the Rhineland in 1936 was a resounding success. This event left a permanent mark on Hitler's character. Since that event he believed more than ever that he was omniscient and unfailing. He became increasingly arrogant and a chaos leading hubris entered as the guiding principle in his actions. In 1936, Hitler's popularity and support was resounding, and expansion was called for. He had begun to think of himself as anointed by providence. "I shall walk the path shown to me by providence with the certainty of a sleepwalker", he said to huge crowds in Munich in March 1936. (p.362.)

#### *All in – a heroic tale*

With one miraculous achievement following another, Hitler's belief in himself had swelled to limitless megalomania. He felt he was walking a path marked by destiny (p.478). In July of 1939, Hitler relaxed and went to the opera in the Bayreuth festival. During the trip he met his old friend Kubicek. They talked about the old days in Vienna, and Hitler gave several autographs to Kubicek. In the twilight they decided to reminisce and visit the grave of Wagner. Kubicek reminded Hitler of the old *Rienzi case* (*Rienzi* is an opera), which occurred in Linz long ago. This was an opera that had so excited Hitler in the past that he had dragged Kubicek to a hill on the outskirts of Linz to explain the opera they had seen. Hitler told this story to Winifred Wagner, and then said – with more pathos than truth – "that is when it started." More than likely Hitler believed in his own heroic tale, Kubicek at least believed it. He was emotional and impressionable as always, and now additionally the long-term victim of the Fuhrer cult. He parted from Hitler with tears in his eyes, and soon after heard the people cheering for Hitler, when he left to attend to his own duties (p.484).

#### *The king myth*

In 1942, Hitler was only interested in the war. He continued to alienate himself from the people. Goebbels had to revise his image due to the changes caused by the campaign against the Soviet Union. Goebbels attempted to bolster the king myth and majesty through the film *Der grosse König*, which premiered at the beginning of 1942. The film told the story of Frederick the Great, with whom Hitler associated himself; a lonely king isolates himself and fights heroically against mighty enemies, finally emerging from the crises and catastrophes to triumph. This portrait was more and more in line with Hitler's own idea of himself in the latter years of the war. But the image did not change reality (p.678).

On the 29 May 1942, while commenting to Goebbels and his other lunch guests that he thought the best solution was "to evacuate the Jews" to Central Africa, Hitler upheld the lie that was necessary even in his own court, that the Jews were transported to the east and put to work. This was pure fabrication. Goebbels echoed this fabrication in his diary, even though he knew very well what actually happened to the Jews (p.692).

When Heydrich was murdered, Hitler gave the order to increase security. In the evening Hitler reminisced with Goebbels about the early days of the party. The past felt to him like a lost paradise, Goebbels said later (p.695).

The story of the knife in the back and the fear of its recurrence was heavy on the minds of those who had come (with a heavy heart) to the conclusion that the future of Germany hinged on whether they could oust Hitler – violently or otherwise – appoint a new government, and strive for peace with their enemies. The story of the knife in the back had been born at the end of the First World War, and it had left a heavy burden on the Weimar Republic (p.787).

The same theme of providence having saved Hitler from an assassination attempt was repeated in Hitler's speech, which was broadcast on all radio stations a little after midnight. In three sections of the speech he alluded that his survival was "a confirmation from providence that I must continue my work, and so I shall."

### **Episode 3 To the bitter end – the fall of great orator**

Hitler's optimism was still astounding at the beginning of 1944, even though crises and problems had come to a head (p.752). But this required monumental self-delusion. Hitler lived ever increasingly in the grip of illusions. Miracle weapons will save us, the landing will be repelled, he said. In the evenings, Hitler reminisced about the good old times, his youth and the First World War, and the early history of the Nazi party. He had grown old, and was no longer bursting with vitality; at 55 he was a sick man. Power concentrated in one person had drained his strength. Hitler's rhetoric, which so powerfully appealed to the nation at the start of the war, was no longer effective. The great orator had lost his power and his audience (p.756); the great and influential leadership story was fractured. Therefore, in terms of discursive power (Foucault 2005) and the theory of leadership influence (Boje 2001), the audience was fed up and disappointed with the

Führer: Among the German people, his speeches turned out to be blatant lies and they paved way for the ultimate catastrophe. Consequently, Hitler had regressed from the status of influential leader to the state of narrative silence.

In his official speeches in 1944, Hitler reverted to his prediction of 1939, which stated that a new war would not lead to the destruction of Germany, but that of the Jews – the survival of the German race was of utmost importance, and it would come true. At the end, showered with applause, Hitler talked about the calling that the German people had in Europe (p.773).

From Hitler's point of view, his historical undertaking was to continue the war to complete annihilation, even self-annihilation, in order to avoid another November 1918 and so that the shameful memory of it could be wiped from the mind of the nation (p.819).

"I know that the war is lost. The superior force is too great. I have been betrayed. But we will never surrender, we might collapse, but we will take the world with us."

The *Fuhrer cult*, however, was not dead in the inner circle of the "*charismatic society*" (30 January 1945). Keitel, Jodl and Dönitz in the highest military command were obedient to Hitler. Goebbels, Ley and Bormann were absolutely loyal to Hitler. The "*charismatic society*" was forced by its own inner logic to follow the leader on whom it had always been reliant, even when it was apparent that he would lead them to ruin (p.851).

When the end of the war was looming, Hitler moved to the bunker and drew power from art. He still engaged in long rants about, for example, race problems, the German personality, his dog's antics, the world of antiquity, and so on – frivolous things.

He lived in a fantasy world and planned the re-building of Lintz in miniature (p.865).

In February 1945, Hitler gave his last major speech to his inner circle. His appearance hinted at collapse, his hand twitched and froth was visible at the corner of his mouth. He walked with a stoop and dragged his feet. The contents of the speech were the same as always, but Hitler had lost his ability to motivate his inner circle with rhetoric. The same had happened with the nation, the greatest demagogue in history had lost his effect on the people (p.869).

Goebbels lost his faith in victory and in Hitler. Hitler's rhetoric no longer worked when the real world struck at the people every day with bombings. Hunger and shortages plagued the people and faith was at an end. As it were, Hitler's charisma faded away. It did not so much crack at the counter-storytelling of the opposition, as the gap between fantasy and the real world simply became too wide.

The people also replied to the shortages and hunger with humour. Hitler jokes became a permanent and satirical way of opposing the Nazi government. During the war, anyone caught telling a Hitler joke was arrested and immediately sent to a concentration camp. In the last few months of the war, the joke telling became a common sport, because the police could no longer supervise the populace on the same scale as during the victorious days of the war. Telling jokes is one example of "counter-storytelling."

The strongest "counter-storytelling" was probably the assassination attempt against Hitler, but the masses condemned the officers behind the attempt. On the other hand, there was no real opposition and the nation proceeded towards its doom alongside Hitler, even though the people were ready to surrender. But there was no resistance group to be found that could have acted, as the small conspiracies were too slack and the secret police could infiltrate them easily. The German people were loyal to the Nazi government almost to its final moments, although more and more out of necessity.

### The end of the line

Hitler gave his political testament at the end of April 1945 (p.907). Its contents were familiar from *Mein Kampf*, everything was the fault of the Jews. The German people were weak, and deserved to be destroyed. The Führer's friends and subordinates had already fled the bunker, only a small core group remained. After meticulous preparations, Hitler committed suicide on the afternoon of the 30 April 1945.

## Conclusions and Reflection

### Hitler, Power And Charisma: The Narrative Explanation

This story is sad but true, and inevitably raises the question of how Hitler was possible. He was a man with a strong will, but this feature does not anywhere near explain his colossal influence as a leader.

In terms of leadership storytelling and power, Hitler did not remain in a narrative silence (cf. Boje, 2001): It was the First World War that created the conditions for Hitler to appear, and therefore, he had favourable ground to seduce followers. According to the general opinion among Germans, the German people were victims. The winners took all.

Second, the rise to become the leader of the German people demanded both luck and cold-bloodedness. Hitler was a great orator and an opportunist who mercilessly used the weaknesses of his opponents and enemies in an efficient manner. Consequently, the process of becoming a great demagogue and eventually very powerful was initiated by the favourable circumstances.

However, as a man he was passing “hollow”. His private life was concealed and the role of the Fuhrer dominated his selfhood. The power of the Fuhrer was only partially caused by Hitler himself. German society in its entirety in the thirties played a key role by delivering power to Hitler. The figure of the ghost leader started to be shaped – this emerged from the social context underlying the social necessity for such an insurgent leadership character. It is interesting how Hitler managed to secure power for himself and which concept of entitlement he based his supremacy on and wielded power. The power originated only partly from Hitler himself; and in addition, he was not even willing at the beginning to assume proper leadership. It was more the work of his society – a consequence of those social expectations and motives that his followers saw in Hitler. However, this is how Hitler’s story began and his power was exceptional in nature. Instead of justifying his demand for power (except formally) using official status, he propped his power on the historical task: he considered himself to have received the challenge of being the saviour of Germany. In other words, his power was charismatic, not institutional – initiated and boosted through storytelling.

From the viewpoint of Weber’s (1978) charisma theory (see also Pearce et al., 2003), Adolf Hitler was without doubt a charismatic person. His intensive presence and forcefully appealing, often frenzied, style of speaking had a powerful effect on both his inner circle and the masses. Charisma is a mystical phenomenon that is characterized by a powerful effect and, as it were, a sparkling countenance with energy flowing from the charismatic person. However, in the beginning – following Kershaw’s account – the others were perhaps willing to see the characteristics of a hero in Hitler possibly even before he himself believed in them. Even though Hitler’s charisma was produced and repeated instrumentally by his Nazi inner circle, it can be said that Hitler’s innate gift as a speaker and abilities as an actor created the conditions and tools for genuine charismatic power. It must of course be noted that Hitler’s charisma was not immediately full-blown. As a young man he was a rather uncharismatic person, who garnered more pity than respect while he wandered around Vienna poor and ragged before the First World War, having barely enough to live on with his actual profession and so on. Instead, Hitler as a storied character was completely different – being plausible and even inspirational for his followers. This resembles Denning’s (2005; 2010; 2011) descriptions of Gandhi: a person nationally considered a great and charismatic leader may not, in the real world, necessarily measure up to these ideas. This was the case with Hitler, until 1919 (while in the army) he was still discovering his gift as a speaker.

To sum up, in the beginning, Hitler’s story found favourable grounds – which enabled his leadership influence to emerge. In addition, eventually, his narration become more professional and systematic with the expansion of the propaganda machinery, which widely supported the development of his charisma in reaching its peak. However, as is so often the case with great leaders in history, the charisma lasted as long as the Germans were victorious in the war – the winner takes it all. Ultimately, with defeat looming, Hitler isolated himself evermore from both the masses and his own inner circle. At the same time, his charisma started to fade. The bitter end to the war was also the end of his charisma.

### Hitler and His Image: Mass Propaganda and Other Exercises of Power

What kind of leader possesses the most powerful storytelling resources? A charismatic leader, perhaps, is the most influential leadership type. A person with charismatic authority can even build his or her own leader cult. While Adolf Hitler, the German dictator, was represented as the “image of the heroic leader”, his image was largely an artificial product of propaganda – formed through collective and public storytelling, which took advantage of existing national salvation legends and semi-religious expectations. These expectations were produced and maintained largely by the force of stories. The portrait of the young Adolf Hitler in Vienna during the 1920s showed that these stories were in a ripening period, and he was preparing for his own destiny – the coming of the fate of the German people. These stories could also be used to create the reality of what would be the “Fuhrer’s will” in any given case, as seen from the followers’ point of view. We can say that stories, for their part, paved the way for the evil of Nazism and the Holocaust. However, if we compare Germany in the period between 1920 and 1945 to the Germany of today, we can note that public storytelling that embraces Hitler has become contemptuous.

With a view to promoting the power of Hitler as a great ruler, the image of Hitler was boosted using manipulative storytelling that took place through propaganda in particular. Manipulation is most effective when combined with the other forms of power (Wrong, 2004; Lukes, 2006), and often condemned as unethical since it narrows the reality of the

object. In the case of Hitler, the unethical nature of his manipulative influence was harsh since it often involved the most violent forms of manipulation – such as the brainwashing of children (e.g. Hitler Jugend). Goebbels was skilled and unscrupulous as the right-hand man of the Fuhrer and was involved in extensive forms of seductive and manipulative forms of storytelling. The propaganda took place through a range of formats from the newspaper to film. Furthermore, the propaganda was combined with coercion and force and penetrated all levels of society from Hitler's headquarters to the common citizenry. Hitler had ears (e.g. Gestapo) everywhere and any kind of criticism of the Fuhrer was strictly forbidden. By telling stories to each other (even in his inner circle), his followers tried to find out how they could “act towards the Führer's will”. Hitler assumed that his will had to be conducted and obeyed without commanding through direct or explicit orders. Therefore, it can be said that Hitler aimed at an intense and extensive narrative control.

### The Ethics of Hitler: Nazi Worldview and Pathos

Hitler's ethics were the ethics of an egoist and the ethics of ruthlessness. On a personal level, Hitler did not feel pity or compassion; for example, he never once visited a war hospital to greet the wounded or show compassion towards the people who had suffered the destruction, wounds and hunger brought upon them by the bombings. And when the final defeat loomed ahead, he refused to even consider surrendering, as he thought that the people got what they deserved if they could not win the war.

At an early age Hitler developed an ideology in which the strongest is always right. This is probably due to the ruthless living conditions he faced and which caused him to look for an explanation for his tragic experiences. Comfort and inspiration could be found in comics, where Vikings defeated beast-men. The destiny of the weak is to submit and lose the battle for survival – roles and players started to take shape in Hitler's mind. This idea found its culmination when he rose to the leadership of the Nazi party at the end of the 1920s. According to Hitler the only way to acquire more living space in the east was to “take it by the sword.” He found his justification for this in a racist and social Darwinist interpretation of history (p.201). “Politics is merely the people's fight for survival”, he stated. “It is an iron-clad principle: the weaker shall perish so that the stronger may live.” Three values defined a man's fate – the value of blood or race, the value of personality, and the will to fight or the self-preservation instinct. These values manifested in the Aryan race were threatened by the three vices: democracy, pacifism and internationalism, which were the handiwork of “Jewish Marxism.” The theme of character and leadership was the main thread of his speeches and writings at that point. He believed that mankind formed a pyramid, with a “genius, a great man” at the top of it (p.201). This is how the great and influential story that swept a nation with it took shape.

Can the ethics of Hitler's leadership be at all judged on a good-evil continuum? What does good mean exactly? Often there is talk of good leadership where good means efficient – someone who can effectively implement the goals of the organization through people (see e.g. Yukl, 2010). In this case good has a kind of instrumental meaning and the basis for evaluation rests (implicitly) on relativism. For example, an efficient commandant in a concentration camp would be a “good” leader because he can technically fulfil the task given to him. He follows orders and technical norms effectively. But what if the body giving the orders – the system – is “sick”? This would be the issue in the case of the Nazi government. From our perspective, an efficient commandant of a concentration camp must be a bad and detestable person – although numerous stories paint extremely varied descriptions of these characters. Most of the staff followed orders due to the fact that the penalty for disobedience was death, but some were sadistic personas – or they became so – in pursuit of the Nazi ideology. The question should be about the good or evil ultimate intent or aim.

### Final Questions – The “Handiwork” of One of the Greatest Leaders of the 20th Century

How can modern analytical ethics work against evil and badness? We can talk about ethical theories and ethical paradigms. Ethical philosophy can create a good narrative by exploring and opening up the stories in national cultures and organizations. It is important to open up the stories and try to analyse these concepts by means of ethics; for example, to deconstruct the existing stories in an organization or culture. The ethics of concealed influence (e.g. manipulation) in leadership storytelling still need more empirical studies (Auvinen et al. 2013).

According to Mole (2004), great leaders have always been admired and always will be. However, in the background there is a phenomenon that does not deal only with admiration itself: the search for a great messiah is eternal, and once one is found, it is easier to sacrifice him as the leader than the whole nation. And then begins the search for a new messiah. In Hitler's case things were not so simple – if they ever have been. In his case the leader was willing to sacrifice all of his followers for his megalomaniacal ambition. While at one point both Hitler and the nation clearly needed each

other, this mutual leader-follower need was preceded by a complicated course of events – and to ensure that it all went his way the leader acquired skill and storytelling machinery to help him. At some point the effect of the narrative will decline, and in the end both the leader and the follower downright shun each other.

But in the end we must return to the beginning of this story, to the questions of what we should learn from the Hitler case and storytelling and why? First of all, the question “Why” is obvious: is there a period in history when one or more highly unethical leader – according to modern standards – were not in power? As a modern example North Korea and Kim Jong-un is probably the most well-known instance. It is rare for a week to go by without a report about him in the news. Surprisingly, similar mechanisms and storytelling techniques are being used in the building of the influence of leadership in this case even though the time, culture and nation are very different. Both Hitler and the family of Kim Il-sung have exploited the basic elements important for charismatic leadership, such as mysticism, the exceptional abilities/characteristics of a leader, and radical solutions to problems associated with their rule. In terms of storytelling technique, both cases resorted to professional storytelling, for which, for example, a propaganda minister is responsible. Dictatorships build great and influential leaderships – but ones that followers (and nations or organizations) could most likely do very well without. Hence, while storytelling is often seen as more empowering and democratic as a leadership style (e.g. Weick & Browning, 1986; Denning, 2005), there are several risks in leadership storytelling (cf. also Auvinen et al., 2013) and sometimes the leadership story becomes too strong and it may involve bad ethics. However leadership storytelling informs us about leadership ethics and the power of stories should not be underestimated – the most concrete form of power lies in communication and discourse (Foucault, 2000).

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