

## How Mad Was Hitler?

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Adolf Hitler and his Nazi party perpetrated one of history's most evil deeds by instigating World War II and the Holocaust, which led to tens of millions of lives lost or irreparably damaged. What drove Hitler to act in such a monumentally murderous, horrific (and ultimately self-destructive) way? What with the recent rise of the Nazi-like ISIS movement (see my [prior post](#)), not to mention the much less publicized proliferation of neo-Naziism in Europe and the U.S., it may be beneficial to take a closer look at what influences someone like Hitler to choose the particular destructive path he did.

What do we really know about Hitler's personality? Perhaps the most famous psychological study of Hitler was done by Henry A. Murray, former director of the Harvard Psychological Clinic, at the behest of the American OSS during the war. (See a summary of his original report [here](#).) Dr. Murray points out that though there is very little information available about Hitler's childhood, he is said to have been sickly and frail. His father was described as "tyrannical" and physically abusive. According to psychoanalyst Michael Stone, Hitler's father reportedly beat both Adolf and his older brother with a whip regularly, meting out daily whippings to the more rebellious Adolf, who, by the time he turned 11, "refused to give his father the satisfaction of crying, even after 32 lashes." Here we can begin see how Hitler as a young boy was overpowered by his father and confronted with a situation he could not control, except by controlling his own emotions and actions. Stone further suggests that Hitler's hatred for his father fueled his hatred of Jews, who, after his father died when Adolf was only fourteen, served as scapegoats for his residual fury. And, I would add, as a receptacle for the defensive projection of Hitler's *shadow* (see my [prior post](#)). According to Murray, the adult Hitler was a "counteractive type," by which he meant a person primarily motivated by resentment and revenge in response to prior narcissistic wounding and profound feelings of inferiority. Pathological narcissism develops as a compensatory defense against these painful wounds and inferiority feelings. There is no question that Hitler's personality exuded pathological narcissism or what I have called *psychopathic*

*narcissism* (see my [prior post](#)), and may have met modern diagnostic criteria for narcissistic personality disorder.

Much has already been written regarding power, and Hitler's ravenous hunger for it. In Hitler's case, he chose to pursue power through politics. Of course, Hitler is certainly not alone in this motivation among politicians in general. But what differentiates the run of the mill power hungry politician from someone like Hitler craving world domination? Or from those conscientious politicians who, having attained some modicum of power, primarily use it for good rather than evil? The truth is, we all, whether consciously or unconsciously, implicitly or explicitly, directly or indirectly, seek some measure of power and control in life. To assert our will in the world and to influence what happens to us and others. However, Hitler, like so many victims of physical or sexual abuse during childhood, may have experienced an extraordinary sense of helplessness and powerlessness as a boy, stemming mainly from his poor relationship with his exceedingly domineering and controlling father. It is frequently this terrifying feeling of total helplessness and powerlessness in childhood that drives what Nietzsche called this exceptional "will to power" later in life. As depth psychologist Alfred Adler pointed out, such tragic circumstances engender "inferiority feelings" which, in the form of "increased dependency and the intensified feeling of our own littleness and weakness, lead to inhibition of aggression and thereby to the phenomenon of anxiety." In turn, this becomes what Adler referred to as "masculine protest," consisting of a compensatory striving for superiority (to counteract feelings of inferiority), aggression, ambition, avarice and envy, coupled with constant "defiance, vengeance, and resentment."

Hitler evidently suffered also from severe anxiety. How much of Hitler's destructive behavior, before and after rising to power, was an obsessive-compulsive defense mechanism against his painful anxiety? One pathological attempt to exert absolute control over the environment and one's self can be seen in obsessive-compulsive disorder. OCD is, by definition, an anxiety disorder, and can be understood psychologically as an ultimately losing battle for power and control over the inescapable reality of existential anxiety. Existential anxiety stems from the inevitabilities or givens in life that we are unable to control or overpower, such as insecurity, aloneness, meaninglessness, suffering, sickness and mortality. From being confronted by those terrifying aspects of existence against which we are utterly powerless and cannot control. It is known now that Hitler suffered not only from chronic anxiety, but also insomnia and related somatic symptoms similar to what we today might call irritable bowel syndrome. Once in power, he maintained a very close relationship with his personal physician, who helped manage the Fuehrer's anxiety symptoms with numerous medications, many of which were highly

unorthodox, and are said to have included both sedating barbiturates and stimulating amphetamine on which Hitler came to depend.

No doubt due to his violent treatment at the hands of his father, Hitler seems to have identified more with his mother, with whom he was quite close. In this regard, he may have decided to dis-identify with his father's "masculine" aggression, anger or rage, rejecting these seemingly solely negative, noxious and destructive feelings in himself, choosing to become more "feminine" like his mother. This would have rendered him highly susceptible to being "possessed" by his chronically disowned anger, resentment and rage, a phenomenon noted by psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, who refers to Hitler's barely controlled and intensely intimidating "attacks of anger." Moreover, Murray, who never actually met or examined Hitler in person, states that Hitler manifested other signs of neurosis toward the end of his four years of military service during W.W. I, when he developed a case of "hysterical blindness" and "mutism," possibly in response to "shell shock" or what we now call PTSD. Even earlier, Hitler is said during adolescence to have developed "syphilophobia," a dread of being contaminated by sexual contact with women, leading eventually to sexual impotence according to acquaintances. As Fuehrer, Hitler's neuroses persisted and probably worsened, taking the form at times of intense episodes of "emotional collapse" characterized by violent bouts of furious screaming and crying. Indeed, Dr. Murray accurately identifies Hitler's characterological core of hatred, rage and resentment as the "mainspring" of his career, describing him diagnostically as a borderline paranoid schizophrenic and hysterical "megalomaniac." Indeed, it can be argued that perhaps the major component of Hitler's madness was, well, his *mad*-ness: his immense anger, embitterment and hatred toward his father and, eventually, Jews and the world at large.

There seems no question that Hitler's barely repressed anger, rage and resentment, especially toward his father, fueled much of his symptomatology and destructive behavior. He may have also harbored some resentment toward his beloved mother for having not protected him from her sadistically abusive husband. Such emotions become doubly dangerous when chronically repressed, making one prone to fits of *daimonic possession* in its most negative form. Indeed, as I discuss in my book *Anger, Madness, and the Daimonic* (1996), Hitler could be seen as having been what I call a "dysdaimonic genius. The dysdaimonic genius manifests a confounding combination of exceptional creative powers coalesced with equally strong tendencies toward psychopathology, perversity, destructiveness, and evil; a providentially rare amalgamation of daimonic power witnessed--in its negative extreme--in devious historical figures like Adolf Hitler, or in the fictional film character Darth Vader. Who would deny Hitler's evil genius for destructiveness? Typically--but not always--these diabolical individuals die at an unusually

young age, laid low by their overweening arrogance, hubris, and unholy alliance with evil." Such people, including charismatic religious cult leaders like Jim Jones, David Koresh, Osama bin Laden, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi and others, can further be understood as manifesting a "messiah complex" (see my [prior post](#)). They become inflated by a grandiose identification with the Messiah archetype present within each of us. Because of this grandiose self-image and elevated mood alternating with periods of despair and emotional outbursts of crying or rage, as in Hitler's case, such individuals are commonly perceived to be suffering from some type of bipolar disorder (see my [prior post](#)). Indeed, much of Hitler's documented behavior and demeanor appears to comport with such a retrospective diagnosis, his mania or hypomania masking a chronic underlying state of despair, sadness and rage.

Today, in a troubled world of political and religious leaders like the late Osama bin Laden, messianic ISIS chief Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, and enigmatic North Korean dictator Kim Jong-Un, it is more important than ever to understand the underlying psychology of such dangerous individuals. Often gifted with the ability to influence and motivate the masses through the power of oration and messianic vision, such leaders, as Murray observes, become the "incarnation of the crowd's unspoken needs and cravings." At the same time, much like the mythic figures of the Antichrist in Christianity, Armilus in Judaism, and [Masih ad-Dajjal](#) in Islam, they are not merely false prophets, but, even more perniciously, the very embodiment of evil.

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