Writing on heroes and heroism amidst World War II, American philosopher Sidney Hook drew attention to “the indispensability of leadership in all social life, and in every major form of social organization,” observing that its “pervasive influence … on the daily life of entire populations need no longer be imputed. For good or evil, it is openly proclaimed, centrally organized and continuously growing.”[1] Few people today, contemplating the increasing personalization of contemporary politics, would find much to object to in Hook’s remarks. To many historians, however, reflecting on the role of outstanding individuals in history—as Hook shamelessly did—may appear as an out-moded intellectual exercise. Widespread skepticism largely stems from the overall direction in which history as an academic discipline has moved over time. The more researchers delved into what Sir Isaiah Berlin—quoting T. S. Eliot—memorably called “those vast impersonal forces” that allegedly shape and steer the course of events, the more underscoring the degree of agency enjoyed by political leaders resembles a backward-looking attempt to downplay structural factors.[2] To be sure, even some scholars rejecting the kind of gross determinism Berlin decried in the mid-1950s would be reluctant to concede that placing individual leaders at the center of any serious historical investigation is a worthwhile enterprise. All in all, such an unfashionable endeavor would smack too much of traditional political history, running the risk of reviving “assumptions and methods discredited along the Great White Men whose careers they chronicled.”[3]

As a renowned biographer of Adolf Hitler and a world-leading authority on the functioning of the Nazi regime, Sir Ian Kershaw has no inhibitions about reasserting “the importance of the individual in bringing about epochal historical change” (p. 418). That is the concluding line of Personality and Power: Builders and Destroyers of Modern Europe, which the author presents as “a
series of interpretative essays on the attainment and exercise of power by a number of striking political personalities” (p. xiv). In his book, Kershaw—consistently with his criticism of Hitler-centric accounts of the Third Reich—goes well beyond sketching out the profile of twelve prominent politicians, as if personality alone explained their stunning rise and fall. Instead, he zooms in on each of them to raise thoughtful questions about the circumstances under which leadership can be exerted, the obstacles leaders face, and the most common causes of political failure. In a nutshell, Personality and Power aims to investigate power mechanisms and dynamics within democratic and nondemocratic systems from a comparative perspective. With that goal in mind, Kershaw sets out seven general propositions underlining the conditions of exercise of power that—he claims in the conclusion—his case studies, wholly or in part, corroborate.

One of Kershaw’s key concerns is to jettison the romantic notion of greatness in defining effective leadership. As he puts it, “the issue is not whether or not by some nebulous definition a leader was ‘great.’ The focus instead should be squarely on that leader’s historical impact and legacy. Moral judgement—whether a ‘great’ leader has to be a force for good, or whether ‘negative’ greatness is possible—then falls away (although the historian’s use of language inevitably has moral overtones)” (p. 7). Even so, Kershaw’s accent on impact and legacy—largely understood in cataclysmic, fateful terms—drives him towards the study of an unyielding leadership style that better fits with autocrats or democratic strongmen (or strongwomen) rather than with other, less overbearing policymakers. As Kershaw admits, each of the leaders examined, “if in widely differing degrees, was instinctively authoritarian, ready and determined to command. This was often coupled with intimidating shows of intolerance and anger” (p. 397). Tellingly, out of twelve main characters, seven (Vladimir Lenin, Benito Mussolini, Hitler, Josef Stalin, Francisco Franco, Josip Broz [Tito], and Mikhail Gorbachev) welded power outside of a liberal-democratic framework and were therefore free from the shackles of constitutional checks and balances, whereas four (Winston Churchill, Charles de Gaulle, Konrad Adenauer, and Margaret Thatcher) were subject to more constraints but earned a reputation for resolve, obstinacy, steadfastness, and the ability to govern with an iron fist. Only one (Helmut Kohl) seemingly cut a more conventional, almost drab figure, until the demise of the Eastern bloc allowed him to act boldly in the pursuit of German reunification and show his true colors. It may not be an exaggeration to spot a Machiavellian and sometimes even demonic element in the mindset of nearly all those titans and colossi.[4]

Predictably, Kershaw is at his best in dealing with the leaders more closely related to his main area of expertise. Yet Personality and Power must be praised for making extensive as well as perceptive use of up-to-date scholarship (including secondary sources in German on Tito, Adenauer, and Kohl often overlooked by Anglophone historians) and for being wholly entertaining even when venturing into less well-charted territories. Rather than assessing the strengths and weaknesses of each essay, this reviewer will critically address some fundamental assumptions of the book that may be of special interest to the readers of H-Socialisms.

According to Kershaw, “war was the most important enabler” of the leaders discussed for it created the preconditions under which they could “represent the demand for an extreme solution to the crisis or offer hope of national salvation” (p. 395). Underpinning the argument is the persuasion that wars—and the two world wars in particular—were the most transformative moments in twentieth-century European history: in Kershaw’s words, “the greatest motor of epochal change” (p. 394). Unlike other wide-ranging societal transformations, Kershaw points out, wars maximized the ability of leaders to bring about enduring
change, although victory or defeat depended on factors well beyond their control. In broad terms, Kershaw’s thesis rings true but carries the implicit danger of spotlighting figures whose most notable achievements lay in the field of foreign rather than domestic affairs, or of portraying their record accordingly. For example, Adenauer is commended for his commitment to Westbindung, while de Gaulle takes credit for his role in the Resistance and for putting an end to the excruciating Algerian war, but their accomplishments in the field of European integration and economic modernization, alongside other major policy areas, are somewhat overshadowed. Obviously, the stabilization of Western Europe after 1945 owed much to high-level diplomacy, global alliances, and treaty-making. It can be argued, however, that creating robust, well-funded welfare systems at home, or maintaining full employment, were at least as important in laying the foundation for a durable peace. If so, the towering, charismatic history-makers selected by Kershaw may not be, after all, the most impactful one might think of.[5]

In fact, the most significant drawback of Kershaw’s approach is the omission of Western European democratic socialists from the book. In the introduction, the author acknowledges that he could have picked Willy Brandt or François Mitterrand, who “might have formed part of a different caste of political leaders, mostly social democrats or liberals of one or another persuasion, who made important contributions, mainly in the second half of the twentieth century, to advances in social justice and of human rights,” but his “emphasis on crisis conditions, the type of leader these produce and the role of individuals at crucial junctures of change inevitably—perhaps mistakenly—directs the focus away from such types of leadership” (p. 12). This is an honest and nuanced explanation yet one that may leave the reader with a bittersweet feeling. In a book highlighting different ways of seizing and using power, engaging with a political tradition generally associated with prudence, collegiality, consultation, delegation, and gradualism would have offered a useful counterpoint to revolutionary and totalitarian practices, and helped show how Europe came to embrace a politics of moderation after 1945.[6] Further light could have been shed on the role of democratically organized, broad-based political parties in setting limits to the autonomy of left-wing prime ministers—quite a different counterweight from the small-scale, opaque, and inherently unstable power-cartels Kershaw mentions in many of his chapters. By the same token, examining the role of trade unions and other grassroots social movements in consolidating or undermining the power base of center-left leaders through manifold channels (including mass demonstrations and leadership elections) would have opened fresh avenues of inquiry on decision-making in mass democracies. Regrettably, due to his line-up choices, Kershaw glosses over a variety of phenomena specific to power struggles within social democratic organizations that would have made his analysis more comprehensive. In addition, featuring a few social democrats of the likes of Clement Attlee and Olof Palme would have dispelled the impression that transformational leaders must necessarily have an authoritarian streak—a point forcefully made by Archie Brown (The Myth of the Strong Leader: Political Leadership in Modern Politics, 2014) in a book that Kershaw refers to without discussing its main thesis.

The last, slightly baffling aspect of Personality and Power is the breadth of the survey undertaken. Comparing and contrasting dictatorships is hardly a new idea, and Kershaw himself helped establish, a few decades ago, several valuable criteria to perform the task more rigorously.[7] Extending the comparison to democratic leaders, however, poses a number of challenges. Kershaw underscores that liberal democracy is a daunting environment for any leader willing to achieve absolute control, and his seventh proposition, which he deems “the most straightforward,” runs as follows: “Democratic government imposes the greatest limitation on the individual’s freedom of
action and scope to determine historical change” (p. 411). If that is the case, how much can be learned from lumping Stalin and Kohl or Mussolini and Thatcher together? Thanks to Kershaw’s deep insight and remarkable analytical skills, the wealth of knowledge displayed in the book is encapsulated in the elegantly simple statements laid down in the final chapter. Nevertheless, these tend to be, by their very nature, highly abstract and sweeping in content. For instance, Kershaw argues that “the scope for individual impact is greatest in or immediately following huge political upheaval when existing structures of rule break down or are destroyed” (p. 398), or that “concentration of power enhances the potential impact of the individual—often with negative, sometimes catastrophic, consequences” (pp. 403-404). At first glance, all this makes sense, but distillation has its downsides, once the search for synthesis and the need for a bird’s-eye view take precedence over the detailed scrutiny of unique events. Moreover, generalizations are tricky, for trends, patterns, and regularities may conceal as much as they reveal.

These reservations aside, Personality and Power is an absorbing and gripping read. In many respects, it nicely complements one of Kershaw’s most brilliant works on the unfolding of World War II, Fateful Choices: Ten Decisions that Changed the World, 1940-1941 (2007). It may also encourage the generalist reader to find out more about its twelve main characters, especially those frequently but unfairly dismissed as peripheral in mainstream narratives of twentieth-century Europe, such as Franco and Tito. Finally, it contains some sensible warnings about the present. Political history may be in decline, but political leaders can still turn themselves into the prime movers of the collapse of civilized society. This may be an uncomfortable thought—but is a key take-away point from Kershaw’s tour de force.

Notes


If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-socialisms


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=59522

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.