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A Psychological Analysis of Adolf Hitler's Decision Making as Commander in Chief: *Summa Confidentialia et Nimius Metus*¹

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This study is an attempt to analyze Hitler's decision making during World War 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. We integrate the failures into a model that explains the origins of Hitler's decision making. Although Hitler's behavior could certainly be judged as "evil," the analysis goes further and thus can help leaders learn from these failures.

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

Although 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 cultural samples (six Asian and six Western samples) comprising more than 2,000 participants, World War II was named 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 past 1,000 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 that 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 World War 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, 2004a). Hitler has been praised not only as a politician, but also as a military leader. Particularly, the early achievements of World War II were attributed to Hitler's military skills. Between 1939 and 1941, he was able to conquer Poland, occupy France, and bring the Soviet-Russian Empire to the brink of the collapse.

In this article, we 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 World War II, we then integrate the findings into a theoretical model. Unlike previous research, which has followed a psychoanalytic and psychopathological perspective (e.g., Bromberg & Small, 1983; Redlich, 1998; Schwaab, 1992), we focus on cognitive, motivational, and social psychological concepts and action theory (see Dörner, 1999; Dörner & Güss, 2010) to analyze Hitler's behavior. The main historical 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. It does not focus on the historic-cultural conditions, such as World War I and the reparations, the dissatisfaction with the Weimar Republic, the Great Depression, or the conditions of disorder and insecurity that helped enable Hitler gain power and become the most powerful man in Germany. We also do not discuss Hitler's *Weltanschauung* of anti-Semitism and social Darwinism in detail.

Action-Theoretical Framework: Decision Making, Motivation, and Emotion

We attempt to explain Hitler's decision making referring to parts of a general theory of human action regulation called PSI (described in detail in Dörner, 1999; Dörner & Güss, 2010). The theory postulates that decision making as a cognitive process is influenced by motivational and emotional processes. PSI distinguishes five groups of needs: first, the existential needs such as hunger, thirst, and pain avoidance; second, sexuality; third, the social need for affiliation and belonging; fourth, the need for

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

certainty and predictability of the environment; and fifth, the need for competence. The certainty need, for example, arises when something unexpected happens. *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 uneasiness. *Competence* refers to one's ability to cope successfully with problems and to change aspects of the environment. The competence need arises when an intended action does not have the expected effect.

In other literature, the need for competence has been called the need for power, control, or autonomy (Adler, 1912; Bischof, 1987; Dörner, 1999). 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.

The need for competence is very strong: Success satisfies it, and failure increases its strength; it 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 person feels competent. A strong need, on the other hand, sends a signal to strive for success in order to increase competence, but also 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.² If competence is very low, it is related to resignation, fear, and depression (e.g., Ohannessian, Lerner, Lerner, & von Eye, 1999). Self-confidence is also related to other needs. Affiliation, the need to love and be loved by others, is a very important source of self-worth. It is not enough to be admired, because in this case one can be substituted; one has to love and be loved unreservedly.

Decision making can be described as a process consisting of several recurring phases (e.g., Dörner, 1996; Galotti, 2002; Güss, Tuason, & Gerhard, 2010; regarding phases in naturalistic decision making, see, e.g., Klein, 2008; in economics, see, e.g., Wang, Holloway, Beatty, & Hill, 2007; and in action regulation theory, see, e.g., Hacker, 1994). The first phase is setting goals (see Figure 1). Goals depend on people's motivations, values, and priorities. The second phase is gathering information and integrating it into a mental model, which often includes predicting the situation's development based on the mental model. The third stage refers to planning decision alternatives to reach the goals. The fourth phase involves selecting and implementing a final choice. The fifth phase (often omitted; see, e.g., Dörner & Schaub, 1994; Galotti, 2002) refers to evaluating the decision-making process and the decision outcomes using self-reflection. This phase could change the strategies of information collection and decision making.

Motivational processes are connected to these five decision-making phases. Needs influence the setting of goals, such as to search for situations that allow the satisfaction of existential needs or opportunities to increase competence or reduce uncertainty. The processes of the second and third phase (i.e., gathering information and planning decision alternatives) should normally reduce uncertainty; however, they also could increase uncertainty as it may be impossible to integrate new pieces of information into the existing model of the world or difficult to make the right choice if several decision alternatives have been developed. Experiencing uncertainty lowers the feeling of competence, which in turn can influence the planning of alternatives. The fourth phase, selecting and

implementing a final choice, can increase competence because (a) uncertainty is reduced and therefore the feeling of competence increases, and (b) one might observe the intended effect of the implemented choice, which directly affects competence. If the decision was successful, the successful plan is stored in long-term memory for future use. The last decision phase, evaluating the process and outcome, will often initially increase the uncertainty and lower the feeling of competence because thinking about possible failures confronts the decision maker with his or her own shortcomings. These phases do not run in a fixed sequence with human subjects, but rather occur opportunistically. Phase sequence is dependent on the specific problems the actor meets in the course of preparing for actions.

Autumn 1942

In the following section, we describe one concrete situation before characterizing Hitler's decision making as commander in chief. In autumn 1942, Hitler attempted to break through to the Caspian Sea oil fields near Baku. At the same time, he wanted to reach Stalingrad, located at the lower Volga River, to destroy the industrial center and to destroy "Stalin's town" for symbolic reasons. 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 2). There was an alternative plan that entailed reaching Baku by the northern rim of the Caucasus to quickly conquer the oil territories. In this plan, Stalingrad was initially not a military target. After long hesitation, Hitler decided to follow both plans at the same time.

The Army Group South was divided into two different groups: Army Group B in the north and Army Group A in the south. The weaker Army Group B was to capture Stalingrad, then follow the Volga River and proceed to Astrakhan at the Caspian Sea. Army Group A was to fight near Rostov and then conquer the whole Caucasus region up to Baku, at the Caspian Sea.

Kershaw (2008) called this double strategy "sheer lunacy" (p. 722). Although the two military groups initially had success, neither attack had even a remote chance of 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. Hitler did not allow a retreat proposed by the German generals, and his 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 Army Group South is representative of Hitler's decision making during all of World War 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

² For research on the relation of decision making and confidence, see also Lee and Dry (2006) or Pleskac and Bussemeyer (2010); for neural representations of confidence in decision making, see Kiani and Shadlen (2009).

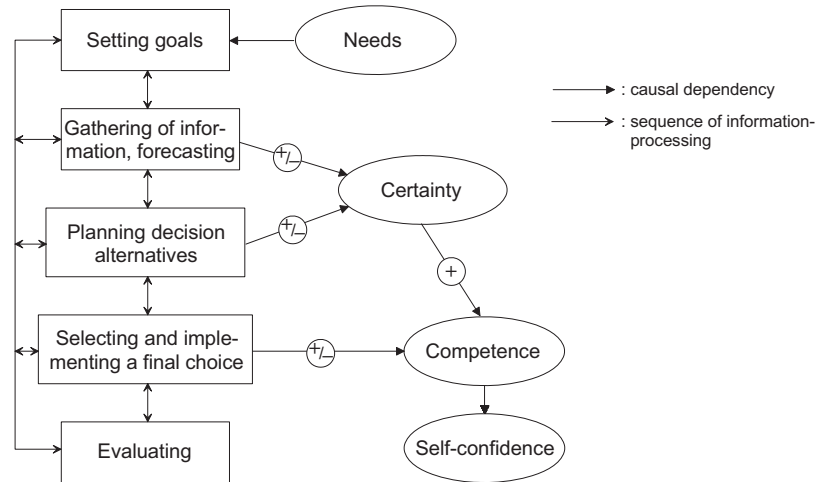


Figure 1. The decision-making process and motivational dynamics.

“Hitler . . . was also known to be indecisive and vacillating, inasmuch as he was prone to take high risks—to gamble—when making decisions”; Schwaab, 1992, p. XIII). 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, then abruptly made a decision without considering its premises critically or comprehensively. Illusionary assumptions substituted critical analysis of possible decision consequences. A conflict with two or more alternatives is a strain, which becomes more so the longer the conflict continues. Analysis of the conflict alternatives inevitably creates more material to consider, therefore increasing uncertainty. Uncertainty can lower competence; thus, a final decision may function as a way to flee tormenting doubts more than as a solution to the conflict. Hitler often displayed this behavior pattern: doubts and hesitation as he vacillated between several alternatives and then finally arriving at some decision—the main function of which had been to end the gnawing doubts.⁴

Hitler justified such arbitrary decisions, which were then enforced with great decisiveness, by massively overestimating the probability of success while simultaneously 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. Hitler stated (*as summarized by Kershaw, 2000b*),

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 Near 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. (Kershaw, 2000b, p. 530)

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.

Another characteristic of Hitler’s decision making, 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 in coming to a decision, as well as justifying it afterward. If the action is so important and, simultaneously, so promising, then, of course, the risk must be taken to do it!

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. In his vision, the British and Americans would be thrown into the ocean, France would be recaptured, and the war would be

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 (1985) mentioned Hitler’s hesitancy: “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” (p. 84).

⁴ 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.

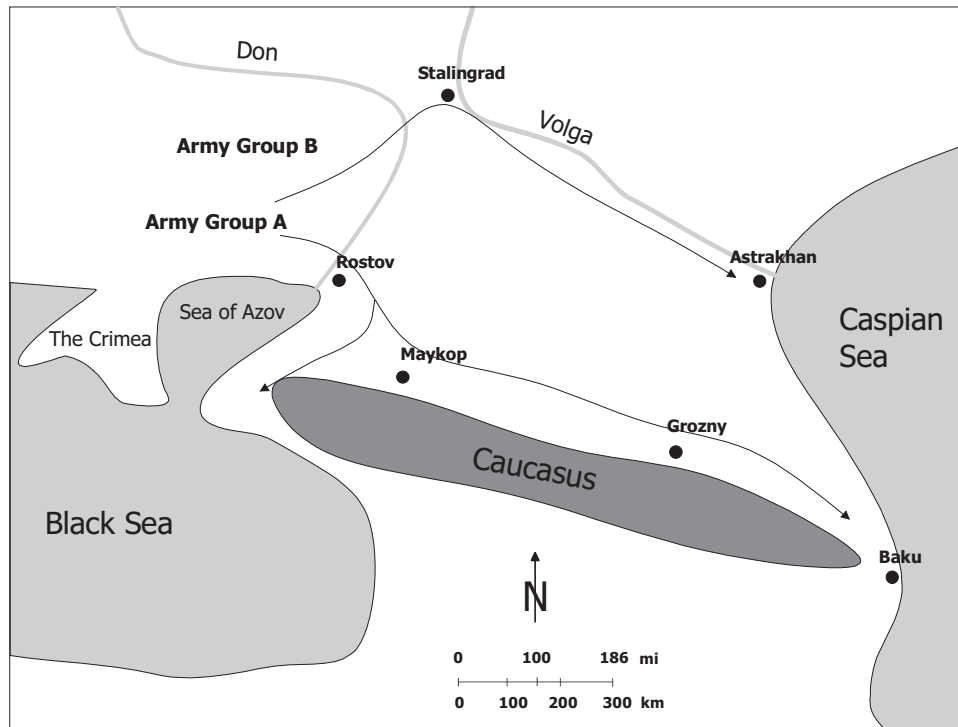


Figure 2. Summer 1942: The grasp for oil.

won! This was in December 1944, when the Russians were already close to the Oder River. Just like 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 1942: At one point it became obvious that 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. This failure put Hitler in a difficult situation. At the end of August, things began deteriorating disastrously on all fronts. The generals argued for withdrawal of the military into safer territories and considered a continuation of the attacks irresponsible. On August 24, 1942, Halder, the German army's chief of general staff, approached Hitler to argue 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 United States]?" (Kershaw, 2008, p. 724)

Halder realized that Hitler's disastrous military decisions "were the product of a violent nature following its momentary impulses"

(Trevor-Roper, 1953, p. xii).⁵ 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 to his headquarters in South Russia to ensure that

⁵ Rage and anger outbursts were quite typical for Hitler. Bromberg and Small (1983) 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" (p. 161). Dorpat (2002) wrote, "Hitler would frequently berate, humiliate, excoriate, rage at and shame the people who worked for him" (p. 223). Fest (2004b, p. 63) described such a scene from the last days of the Third Reich. 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 ever 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."

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—the nobility, and it was especially the Jews and whoever else might be handy.⁶ As Fest (2004b, pp. 54–55) explained, “As always, he had only one word to explain any disillusioning setback: ‘Betrayal!’” 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 and murdered, 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*⁷) 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*, that is, avoiding to deal with a main problem and rather jumping from one problem to another (“*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 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* (Wolf’s Redoubt), in East Prussia. After the Red Army 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 eastern front because so many military units had been deployed to the west. The army’s chief of staff, Guderian, who knew what the situation was in the east, was horrified. Because reducing the numbers of troops at the eastern front to a mere skeleton was so absurd, Haffner (1979) thought the destruction of the eastern front may have been deliberate as Hitler’s 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 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, and 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 notable 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 (*verteidigen*), 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 and as your Supreme Commander: 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 German 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*).

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 (e.g., for wonder weapons) is only another form of 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 occurred in 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, an early form of a cruise missile. The

⁶ 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, pp. 188, 190; cited in Victor, 1998, p. 214).

⁷ German terms are given in italics in parentheses.

result of the attempt on June 12, 1944, was that four of the 10 wing bombs fell right away from their ramps and did not even make it into the air and five 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.

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 a person's 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.⁸

Another activity that served to safeguard Hitler's self-confidence, and to annoy 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 *Kampfzeit* (times of struggle for power) 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 whether 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?

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. I shall act accordingly. (Haffner, 1979, p. 19)

Often, Hitler has been portrayed, even by his opponents, as a person of enormous willpower. He accomplished what he wanted in a determined way. How are willpower and the belief in the Führer-myth compatible with self-doubts? We believe they are a result of the self-doubts. Hitler's willpower, 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. It often took weeks for Hitler to let go of his opinions to accept such an alternative proposal. The behavior of adhering rigidly to one's own decisions is related to the need to justify the respective decisions—as discussed earlier. Also 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 they had not originated from trenchant pro- and contrareasoning. His notorious statements, "It is my unalterable decision" ("*es ist mein unabänderlicher Entschluß!*") or "It is my unshakeable will" ("*es ist mein unerschütterlicher Wille!*") showed his insecurity and reflected his tendency to immunize himself against criticism. "Unalterable decisions" are not advisable in such a vague and uncertain domain as warfare.

Scipio Africanus is credited with saying, "A plan that cannot be changed, is a bad one!" ("*Malum consilium quod mutari non potest!*"), which can also be found in the collection of maxims of Publilius Syrus. Similarly, Napoleon Bonaparte believed that a developed plan has to 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 (e.g., 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

⁸ Another possible explanation for Hitler's lack of self-reflection is his "don't change" attitude. Victor (1998) 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" (p. 99). 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" (p. 99).

the confusing national socialist ideology and give it a profile. As Kershaw (1985) 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. (p. 81)

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 National Socialist 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 those who disputed his claim to power. He wanted to fight, but not actually to solve problems. Enemies aroused his interest.

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

The Need for Competence

How, then, can we explain Hitler's ad hoc behavior and decision making? We would like to do so referring to the general theory of human action regulation briefly outlined at the beginning of this article (see Dörner, 1999; Dörner & Güss, 2010). We believe that Hitler's behavior resulted both from striving for power and from attempting to maintain it. As Kershaw (1985) stated, “What does seem clear is that Hitler was hypersensitive toward any attempt to impose the slightest institutional or legal restriction upon his authority” (p. 82). Underlying this need for power was constant fear. How can someone strive for power and be afraid at the same time? How could it be that Hitler was fearful?⁹

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. As described previously, 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.

Figure 3 shows our hypotheses related to Hitler's action regulation. Hitler's typical decision-making process is shown on the

left side of the figure in five rectangles. A problem leads to solution attempts. The close analysis of a difficult problem usually leads to awareness of many other problems. One realizes that behind the main problem are many other smaller problems. Such an accumulation of problems leads to disorientation, an increase of uncertainty and uneasiness.

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 3. 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 plus (+) and minus (−) 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 *i.e.* (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 3 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, which was characteristic of Hitler, 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. 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 Potsdamer Platz during the last weeks of the war. Hitler was notified about a

⁹ “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).

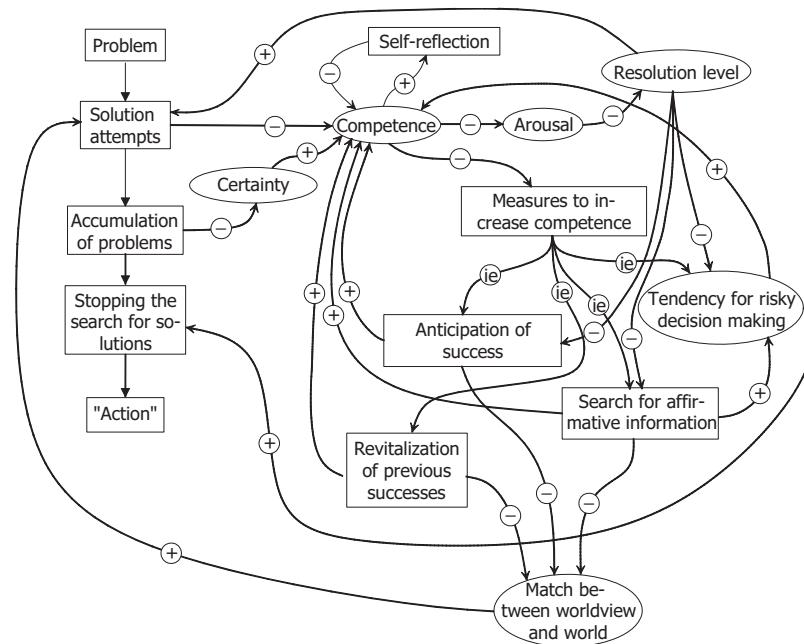


Figure 3. Decision making and motivational dynamics. The straight arrows indicate a temporal sequence. The cambered arrows indicate effects of variables on each other. A minus sign (–) means a variable “influences negatively,” for example, The more problems accumulate, the lower the certainty. A plus sign (+) means a variable “influences positively,” for example, the higher the certainty, the higher the competence.

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, “So, now this matter is settled!” (“So, das ist erledigt!”) He did not consider that (a) the air force pilots most likely would not be keen to risk a “hero death” (“Heldentod”) a few days before the war’s end, and (b) the Soviets had total control of the airspace and probably would have easily 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 this form of decision making (Dörner, 2003, p. 40). Like the 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 one’s errors. In the long run, however, they often increase competence because one can circumvent past failures and mistakes. The closest Hitler came to admitting mistakes was declaring he had been “too good” to his enemies (i.e., to his conservative enemies after 1933, Papen, Schleicher, and Hugenberg; see Kershaw, 2000a, p. 1047).

All these procedures and parameter constellations led to an ever-growing *mismatch between world and worldview* (lower

oval in Figure 3). Hitler lived more and more in a world that had no bearing on reality. In reading biographies, 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, although it would relatively soon after his death.

Hitler also bet on his armies—which were hardly fit for action—ability to counterattack, as well as on counterstrikes by armies that did not exist. For example, the Wenck Army, which did not follow Hitler’s orders to free Berlin from the southwest, instead turned west to protect refugees and ended up being taken into captivity by the Americans. Another example was the Steiner group (a nonexistent army), which was supposed to free Berlin in April 1945 from the north.

Hitler dictated his testament in 1945 to his secretary Traudl Junge. And Traudl Junge expected to find statements showing Hitler to be sorry in any way for all he had done to the world. Instead of apologies however, 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* (*Vebrannte Erde*) commands (*Nero-Befehl*; Haffner, 1978, p. 198), Hitler expressed the living condi-

tions he wished for the German people after the war.¹⁰ None! The “best had anyway died” (“*Die Besten sind sowieso gefallen*”) and the remaining do not deserve any consideration.

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 behavior that we often see in young people because it is related to the low self-confidence of adolescence. We cannot be certain of the cause(s) of Hitler's low self-confidence, but a discussion of our hypothesis follows.

The Role of Affiliation

Hitler definitely had difficulties in interpersonal relationships. He had many admirers, but 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 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 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, “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 yet have the ability to reflect on the causes and background to understand the abusive behavior, then the feeling of being helplessly exposed to the violence of others could become an attitude toward life.¹¹ 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 his unconscious long-term memory.

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) attested that Hitler had a “neurotic fear of showing any kind of weakness” (p. 789). The oscillation between victory and ruin (*Sieg und Untergang*), between hectic actionism

¹⁰ 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).

¹¹ 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) 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” (p. 39).

and apathy (Fest, 2004a, 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 afterward. 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 on 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!¹² 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" ("*letzte Zuckungen der Delinquenten*"; Fest, 2004a, p. 1006). Hitler's delight in watching his enemies suffer showed 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 so by having 6 million Jews and many others killed in the camps.¹³

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. Suetonius (1914) attributed to Caligula "the existence of two exactly opposite faults in the same person, extreme assurance, and, on the other hand, excessive timorousness" ("*attribuerim diversissima in eodem vitia, summam confidentiam et contra nimium metum*"; p. 483). Hitler and Caligula shared the need for approval from the masses, an insatiability for the society of their times, possible paraphilias, intentional defilement of objects and beliefs that people held sacred, and the inability to stop. They both created enemies for the sole purpose of destroying them, and their subordinates were terrified of them. When Caligula, for example, ordered his soldiers to collect seashells at the coast of England and fill their helmets with them, they willingly and calmly obeyed out of fear, no matter how absurd the command.

Caligula also had an abnormal childhood. In addition, he was considered unattractive, most probably had epileptic seizures and—similar to Hitler—had difficulties with relationships. He had no real friends, no real mistress, not even a wife. Hitler did finally marry Eva Braun on April 29, 1945, but only because he knew his time had come, everything was lost, and that he would commit suicide the following day. Given their similarities, perhaps Caligula had a worldview similar to Hitler's all-consuming drive for power coupled with his inability to trust.

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 them.

Did Hitler Make the Decisions Alone?

In our analysis so far, we have focused on Hitler's decision making and hardly referred to his social environment potentially influencing his decision making. Do we provide a realistic picture of Hitler's decision making if we do not refer in detail to the staff, advisors, generals, entourage, and so forth who surrounded him? Some authors (e.g., Goldhagen, 1996; Staub, 1989) go so far to attribute to Hitler only a minor role in all the horrendous cruelties that happened in Germany during that time and to stress general German anti-Semitism or the crucial role of the many willing executors of Hitler's orders (see also Browning, 1992).

We argue, however, that Hitler's position was extremely powerful and cannot be underestimated. Hitler made clear in his speeches that the people formed a pyramid. "At its apex was 'the genius, the great man.' . . . The Leader was the 'central point' or 'preserver' of the 'idea.' This demanded, Hitler repeatedly underlined, blind obedience and loyalty from the followers" (Kershaw, 2008, p. 181). Hitler kept a distance from his entourage to maintain his unique authority as "The Führer." Genuine informality and relaxation were difficult when he was present. Wherever he was, he dominated.¹⁴ People knew that they could easily be replaced. "Hitler's staff, like most other human beings, were of interest to him only as they were useful. However lengthy and loyal their service, if their usefulness was at an end they would be dispensed with" (Kershaw, 2008, p. 374).

At least two times a day or more, during the war, Hitler had discussions with his staff about the current state of affairs (*Lagebesprechungen*) or specific military and political questions and problems. From late summer 1942 onward, these discussions were transcribed by a team of professional stenographers from the Reichstag, as ordered by Hitler, because of his aforementioned belief that some military commanders distorted his orders. Up to the end of the war, about 110,000 pages of protocols of the

¹² Schwaab described another example of Hitler's cruelty (1992): "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" (p. 65).

¹³ 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) said, "These characteristic failings bring Hitler across the border into the antisocial 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" (p. 44).

¹⁴ The dominance of Hitler in conversations has often been mentioned. "Magda Goebbels told Ciano of her boredom: 'It is always Hitler who talks!' he recalled her saying. 'He can be Führer as much as he likes, but he always repeats himself and bores his guests'" (Kershaw, 2008, p. 491). Or, "Talking was like a drug to him [Hitler]. He told one of his doctors two years later that he had to talk . . . he had to sustain a façade of invincibility. No crack could be allowed to show. Hitler remained true to his creed of will and strength" (Kershaw, 2008, p. 742).

Lagebesprechungen existed. As far as we know, this invaluable material was never revised or copied. It was burned shortly before the end of the war, and only about 1,000 pages survived to provide an unbiased glimpse of the thinking of Hitler and his staff. This material has never been analyzed psychologically.

As part of our search for support for our theory about the peculiarities of Hitler's decision making, we analyzed one session from July 31, 1944, shortly after the Allied invasion of Normandy (D-Day). Hitler discussed current developments, along with possible responses to them, with the army chief of the staff, General Jodl, and some adjutants (Heibel, 1963). The rough analysis of the discussions yielded the following results:

1. The discussion contained 9,735 words in total: 9,090 words (93.38%) were Hitler's, 407 words (4.18%) were General Jodl's, and 237 words (2.43%) were spoken by the adjutants.
2. Hitler produced 536 sentences. The German language is known for its long sentences with lots of subordinate clauses, but Hitler's sentences were extremely long, with up to 140 words in one sentence! Only 21 of the sentences were questions.
3. In this briefing, Hitler never asked for advice. His questions concerned the special features of a respective topic, for instance, the number of tanks a unit had or the specific composition of an SS division.

Hence, the "discussion" was more or less a monologue by Hitler. Hitler transferred his ideas and judgments to the audience and gave advice, but he did not seek advice. As far as we could tell from brief examination, the results of an analysis of any of the other conferences in Heiber's collection would be similar.

In addition, it is remarkable that in the above-mentioned conference (July 31, 1944), Hitler generally stressed the dangers of the current situation, but did not judge the crises in France and in Russia to be mortal. In June and July 1944, the Red Army had nearly destroyed the German central Army Group (*Heeresgruppe Mitte*). The result was a gap of about 500 km in the eastern front. But Hitler was quite optimistic with regard to the stabilization of the eastern front.

Also noteworthy is the relatively large extent of abusive language in Hitler's statements (shithead: *Scheißkerl*; swine without character: *charakterloses Schwein*; morons: *Deppen*; criminals: *Verbrecher*; nasty creature: *gemeine Kreatur*), which, as far as we know, were not in line with the usual style of German army staff conferences.

The enormous influence of Hitler's decisions, which affected all levels of German society, could be observed when he took over the Wehrmacht leadership, for example. Hitler was head of state and, from 1941 on, also commander in chief of the army. "Twelve generals (apart from Blomberg and Fritsch) were removed, 6 from the Luftwaffe; 51 other posts (a third in the Luftwaffe) were also refilled" (Kershaw, 2008, p. 398). Although the generals often disagreed with him about commands they deemed militarily suicidal, they were foremost schooled in obedience, swearing the Hitler oath to avoid replacement and other serious repercussions.¹⁵

All these results are in line with our "*summa confidentia et nimius metus*" interpretation of Hitler's decision making. His monological style in the briefings, his unwillingness to accept criticism, his demand of absolute obedience, and the fact that he did not ask for advice were intended to show everyone that he was master of the situation. But the demonstrative character of his statements in the briefings indicates that he did not feel in control. His unwillingness to acknowledge the severity of the crises shows his fear and inability to accept the threatening downfall of the Third Reich, while his abusive language illustrates the tendency to decry the moral and cognitive integrity of his (internal and external) adversaries: Contemptuous enemies are not dangerous.

Was Hitler Sick? Distinguishing the Current Approach From Psychopathological Approaches

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, nor were certain physical symptoms responsible for his decisions.¹⁶ The mechanisms we have discussed can be found in the decision-making processes of many humans and demonstrated in experiments conducted in psychological laboratories (e.g., Dörner, 2003). We can find similar behaviors when politicians or managers are confronted with crises. These behaviors have been observed in the past, in the present, and even across cultures (Güss et al., 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 "normal" 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.¹⁷ 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

¹⁵ Hitler oath of the Wehrmacht: "I swear by God this sacred oath that to the Leader of the German state and people, Adolf Hitler, supreme commander of the armed forces, I shall render unconditional obedience and that as a brave soldier I shall at all times be prepared to give my life for this oath."

¹⁶ "By 1944, Hitler was a sick man. . . . Cardiograms . . . had revealed a worsening heart condition. And beyond the chronic stomach and intestinal problems that had increasingly come to plague him, Hitler had since 1942 developed symptoms, becoming more pronounced in 1944, which point with some medical certainty to the onset of Parkinson's Syndrome. . . . But although the strains of the last phase of the war took their toll on him, there is no convincing evidence that Hitler's mental capacity was impaired" (Kershaw, 2008, p. 782).

¹⁷ Also, Schwaab (1992) 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" (p. 34).

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 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.

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 hr of 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 postmortem as having hypochondria and/or posttraumatic 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), 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” (p. 339). Yes, Hitler was one of the most horrendous mass murderers in history (Haffner, 1979), but his behaviors—as we have shown—can be explained by referring to general normal psychological phenomena and processes.¹⁸ As Bullock said (cited in Rosenbaum, 1995), “That Hitler wasn’t a madman” (p. 66).

What are the advantages of demonizing Hitler instead of viewing him as a reincarnation of Satan? Well, we, the authors, are German citizens. Our 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.

Hitler Within Us

To see Hitler as a human being means, at the same time, to recognize the Hitler in oneself. As Rosenbaum (1995) 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” (p. 70). 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 that 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. 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.

¹⁸ Victor (1998) 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 thousands killed; still later, the ‘euthanasia’ program killed tens of thousands. And during World War II, he had about 13 million noncombatants killed” (p. 71).

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