

SO, YOU WANT TO BE A DICTATOR...

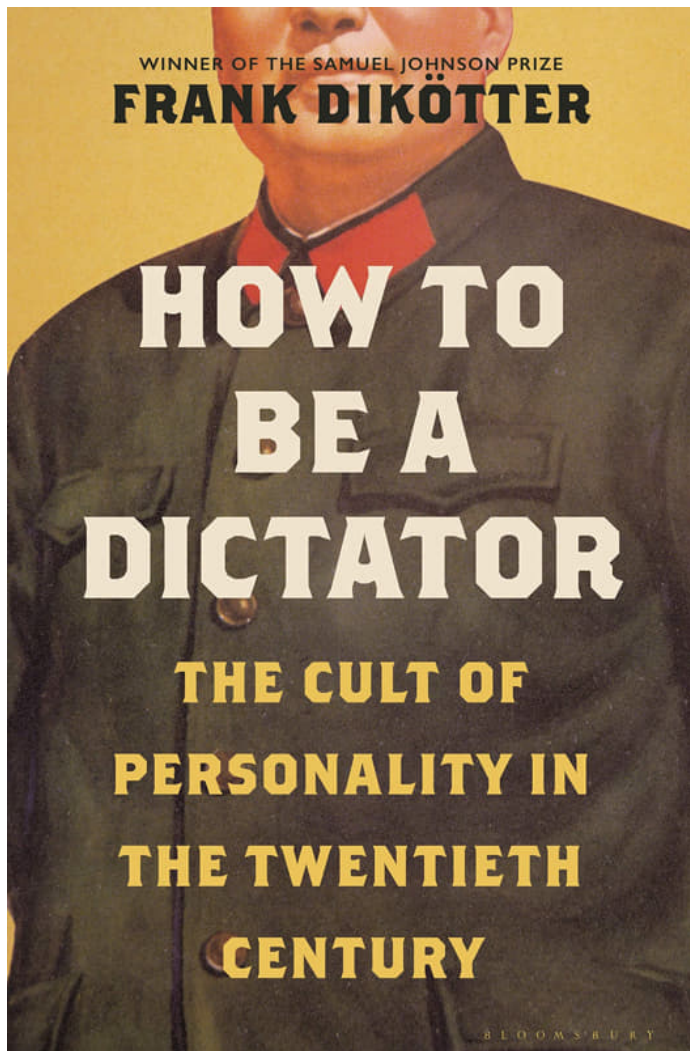
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Would you like to be a dictator? It isn't very hard. You needn't be particularly clever. Ruthlessness helps. Sociopathy is better. But these are optional. All you really have to do is be willing to act as a stand-in for the frustrated ambitions of a group of people. Friends are verboten; intimacy of any kind is out of the question. Simply go along with an unhinged political drama (one already unfolding, or create your own if none exists to work with) and let waves and waves of sycophants fall at your feet in craven, self-abasing adoration.

If the above sounds like something you can manage, then you might just have what it takes to be a dictator.

The above is the greatly foreshortened takeaway from historian Frank Dikötter's remarkable 2019 volume [*How To Be a Dictator: The Cult of Personality in the Twentieth Century*](#). Dikötter, native of Holland, is Chair Professor of the Humanities at the University of Hong Kong, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, and a prolific author of scholarly and popular-press works on modern China. His "People's Trilogy," a richly-researched record of how communism burns holes through the fabric of ordinary lives, includes the 2011 [*Mao's Great Famine*](#), a book on the Communist-made catastrophe of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Dikötter estimates that as many as forty-five million people died early deaths during approximately four years of famine and state violence. Other researchers put the number even higher. At any rate, Mao Zedong was a dictator's dictator, and Dikötter knows the ins and outs of the Mao years like the back of his hand. Suffice it to say that when it comes to writing about dictators, Dikötter knows whereof he speaks.



In a bold departure from his Asia-focused work, in *How To Be a Dictator* Dikötter puts his remarkable archival and analytic skills to use examining the lives of eight figures from the disastrous twentieth century, only two of whom (Mao and Kim Il-sung) are Asian. The rest—Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin, “Papa Doc” Duvalier, Ceaușescu, and Mengistu Haile Mariam—hail from other hellholes which the twentieth-century cult of personality created.

Aha, here we get to the rub. As *How To Be a Dictator*’s subtitle suggests, the cult of personality is Dikötter’s theme. In eight very different case studies, Dikötter tracks how a cult of personality was built up around psychologically damaged political demigods, a hivelike polity formed around a living image

of statism personified. In retrospect, all eight of Dikötter's subjects appear unworthy of not only a personality cult, but a second glance in a crowded train station. All eight are singular only in their mediocrity. All eight were, in short, pitiful losers. The political center was built around mere mortals, and not very impressive mortals at that.

And yet, twentieth-century politics raised each up into the statist pantheon. It is a puzzle with no solution. At the end of *How To Be a Dictator*, I was left wondering, as I believe other readers will be, how in the world anybody could have been cowed into hero-worshipping any of the eight rogues in Dikötter's gallery. As Dikötter qualifies, not all dictators have personality cults. "For two years after [Pol Pot] took power [in Cambodia]," Dikötter explains, "even his exact identity was in dispute" (xvi). But Dikötter also agrees with "historian Henri Locard," who finds that Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge suffered badly for not having apotheosized their mercurial leader. "Failing to induce adulation and submissiveness," Dikötter quotes Locard as writing, "the Angkar [‘Organization,’ shadowy ruling junta of Cambodia] could only generate hatred" (xvi). Cambodia is the exception that proves the rule, then. Dictatorships seem to require personality cults to outlast whatever political frenzy initially ushers a dictator into power. But no dictator, no human being, is equal to the political god-making required to keep dictatorships in business. But still dictatorships perdured.

Perhaps the puzzle needn't trouble us any longer. Dikötter ends his book on a faintly hopeful note, remarking that:

Dictators today, with the exception of Kim Jong-un, are a long way from instilling the fear their predecessors inflicted on their populations at the height of the twentieth century.... Even a modicum of historical perspective indicates that today dictatorship is on the decline when compared to the twentieth century. Most of all, dictators who surround themselves with a cult of personality tend to drift off into a world of their own, confirmed in their delusions by the followers who surround them.... As hubris and paranoia take over, they seek more power to protect the power they already have. But since so much hinges on the judgements they make, even a minor miscalculation can cause the regime to falter, with devastating consequences. In the end, the biggest threat to dictators comes not just from the people, but from themselves (206).

To an extent, yes. But that somehow doesn't feel like the real end of the dictatorship story. Dikötter, to my mind, fails to see how much the state has metastasized since the dictatorial heyday wrapped up in

the 1980s with the shudder and fall of the Soviet Union and its equally evil satellite states in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Dr. Anthony Fauci had a personality cult of his own as recently as a year or so ago, for instance. There was, apparently, a Tony Fauci fan club at the former propaganda clearinghouse known as Twitter. Fauci was not standing on a parapet firing rifles into the air and crying out to the masses to go out and defend the motherland. His press conferences were, nonetheless, political theater, and Fauci has equated himself with "the science" in a way that dictators used to equate themselves with the regime or with the nation as a whole. The old style of dictatorship—think fatigues and Mao suits, towering statues and frenetic military parades—is definitely passe. But has the cult of personality really gone the way of the six-hour May Day speech? I don't think so.

But I digress. Let us return to the wretched twentieth century, and to eight of the worst people who darkened it.

Dikötter's first subject is Benito Mussolini (1883-1945), who "in 1919... launched a movement that would become the Fascist Party" (3). When Fascism failed to catch on, Mussolini grew dejected. But then, in September of 1919,

the poet Gabriele d'Annunzio [sic: should be D'Annunzio] [(1863-1938)] led 186 mutineers in a raid of Fiume, a city to which Italy had made a claim in the wake of the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy a year earlier. Mussolini realised that the power he had failed to obtain through free elections could be seized through brute force. But d'Annunzio also inspired Mussolini in other ways. In Fiume the flamboyant poet pronounced himself Duce, a term derived from the Latin word *dux*, meaning leader (3).

Here we glimpse what I believe to be a trait common to many twentieth-century dictators, namely a flair for the melodramatic. In this Mussolini was unrivaled, making him, to my way of thinking, the twentieth-century dictator *par excellence*. Here's more of Mussolini's antics:

Mussolini... wanted to develop the myth of a March on Rome, one in which he entered the capital on horseback, leading his legions across the Rubicon to impose his will on a feeble parliament (4).

This is of course silly, but it is almost everything one needs to know about Mussolini, and, writ large,

most of what one needs to know about twentieth-century dictating. Mussolini, like the dictators who followed him, was basically an actor in a historical recreation skit. In Mussolini's case his role had him imagining himself a new Caesar and his gaggle of Blackshirt goons a new Roman army. (The press, Dikötter says, "acclaimed" Mussolini as "the Cromwell of Italy, the Italian Napoleon, the new Garibaldi in a black shirt" [6]). To state the thing so baldly is to show Mussolini to be a deluded, pitiable mummer, which indeed he was. He was the saddest clown, a failed actor who used, as a last resort, the heady atmosphere of unhinged post-WWI politics as his stage.

Consider this paragraph:

While Mussolini occasionally professed to dislike the cult around his person, he was actually its main architect. He was a master of the art of projecting his own image, carefully studying certain gestures and poses. He rehearsed in Villa Torlonia, a vast, neoclassical villa on a sprawling estate which became his residence in 1925. In the evenings he would sit in a comfortable chair in a projection room to study every detail of his public performance. Mussolini considered himself to be Italy's greatest actor. Years later, when Greta Garbo visited Rome, his face clouded over: he did not want anyone to overshadow him (9).

What is truly disheartening for us in 2023 is not that Mussolini took himself so seriously, but that nearly everyone else did, too. What does it say about human nature that such a man was lauded as an Olympian deigning to live in the plains below? Dikötter samples some of the effusive words of praise which those who should have known better reserved for *Il Duce*. René Benjamin (1885-1948), for instance, a French literary sensation, was "won over" by Mussolini's "broad grin." Another French man of letters, Maurice Bedel (1883-1954), wrote a whole chapter about Mussolini's smile: "Does he ever stop, even for a few brief moments, being a demi-God carried by a violent destiny?" So, rhetorically, asked Bedel. "The poet Ada Negri thought [Mussolini's eyes] were 'magnetic'," and that his "beautiful hands" were "psychic, like wings when they unfold" (13). This is a lot of stuff, but it gets worse. "Mohandas Gandhi, who visited [Mussolini] twice, pronounced him 'one of the greatest statesmen of the time', while Winston Churchill in 1933 described 'the Roman genius' as 'the greatest law-giver among living men'" (13). Mussolini, apparently, was not the only one daydreaming that the glorious past had snapped back to life again in the person of a former schoolteacher. "Thomas Edison," Dikötter writes, "called [Mussolini] the 'greatest genius of modern times' after a short meeting" (13).

One winces now to read these encomia, but in a sense perhaps Edison was right. Mussolini was, in his

own way, a very modern genius, with a real skill at getting others to clothe him in their unrealized ambitions. That seems to be what at least half of the cult of personality is all about. The past is gone, obliterated by modern times. But we can have the past again, we can touch the old Roman emperors right in the here and now, if only we make believe that Benito Mussolini is Vespasian or Augustus. It was suspension of disbelief that made the whole thing go. ("The [Mussolini] regime's motto," Dikötter recalls for us, was "'Mussolini is Always Right'").

What's more, Mussolini appeared to believe the now ridiculous-sounding comparisons of himself to Napoleon and Garibaldi, and the elevation of his mortician-faced "*Il Duce*" schtick to the level of genius. This is all precisely, Dikötter I think is telling us, how dictators get to be dictators. If there is someone so lost, I would put it, or so divorced from reality, as to believe what flatterers and hangers-on say in even the giddiest flights of political hyperbole, then more and yet more flattery and sycophancy will flow to him. If someone says, with a straight face, that I am a world-conquering genius, and if I, with a straight face, give him to believe that he has not gone nearly far enough in his estimation of me, then we have all the makings of a personality cult. You think I am Charles Martel and Genghis Khan all rolled into one. I tell you that you had better throw in Ramesses II and then put me higher than all three. Now, give me a radio and a Stasi and I will give you a dictatorship like you have never seen. Voila, the cult of personality, where delusion and delusion merge.

In Mussolini's case, Dikötter opines, his personality cult

was also tinged with superstition and magic. In a country steeped in religion, people projected onto Mussolini feelings of devotion and worship characteristic of Christian piety. There were holy sites, holy pictures, pilgrimages, even the hope of a healing touch from the leader. His photograph was sometimes used as a talisman, carried around to bring good luck (27).

Such fanaticism is jet fuel for a would-be dictator's handlers. But popular fanaticism is much fickler than one might imagine, and at any rate no dictator banks on being loved over being feared. "As Emilio Lussu, a committed anti-fascist, noted in 1936," Dikötter continues,

the regime demanded expressions of popular consent, and the blackshirts pursued these, bludgeon in hand. When the Duce gave speeches, people turned up on orders from the police and cheered on command, "like extras in a cast of thousands, so that papers could

publish photographs of public sites full to the brim with exulting people" (27).

A cult of personality will thus acquire a gravity field (more like a sucking black hole) of its own, helped along by raw and thuggish violence as needed, and farce will then follow ruinous farce until it all comes crashing down around everyone. This happened for Mussolini and his fascist Italy in 1945. And it happened for Dikötter's next subject, Adolf Hitler (1889-1945).

There has been so much written about the half-mustachioed Austrian who helmed the third German Reich that I did not expect there to be much new in *How To Be a Dictator* about Hitler. And yet, Dikötter delivers, focusing not only on the platoons of *Sieg-Heil-ers* which eventually bristled around their Führer, but on Hitler's powers of public address. Hitler was a failed artist, that is well known. And it explains much of how Hitler saw politics, namely as an aesthetic testament to the collective will of the German people, a Volk which had also failed, but which nevertheless longed to be recognized for its inherent greatness. But Hitler was, in that sense, not a failed artist at all, but an unmistakably successful one. He curated his own image as such, but couched the self-praise in terms of German destiny and political revenge such that those who heard Hitler and read his words in print agreed with his auto-caricaturing in *Mein Kampf*. Hitler and the Germans were, in other words, in a very unhealthy co-dependent relationship. As Dikötter puts it, readers of *Mein Kampf* found Hitler described as

A genius child, a voracious reader, a born orator, an unrecognised artist driven by destiny to change the fate of a people. A man overcome by a passion like no other, one that allowed him to recognise the words that would 'open the gates to a people's heart like the blows of a hammer'. A man chosen by heaven as a messenger of its will. As a close follower put it, Hitler was an oracle, a *Traumtoller*, one who speaks prophetically in his dreams (37).

And the readers, by and large, ate up every word. That it was all hoo-hah was beside the point. Germans needed to believe something again. Hitler needed them to believe it through him. The result was Stalingrad. The result was also Auschwitz.

The way this all hung together was through performance, the state acted out in the person of the spittle-flecked corporal. Hitler was an actor, as was Mussolini, and a devoted student of the possibilities of the new mass media of image and sound. Dikötter notes that it was Mussolini who inspired Hitler to up his game after "the Duce upstaged him" in Venice in June of 1934 (23). "A pale, insecure Hitler," Dikötter writes, "in a baggy yellow coat and patent-leather shoes, had watched [Mussolini] from a

balcony in a neighbouring palace, mesmerised by a man so adored by his people" (23). Hitler would not make the same thespian mistake twice. Hitler's, and his National Socialist Party's, mass rallies in Nuremberg under the stage production of architect Albert Speer (1905-1981) are, let us admit, masterpieces in the genre of political theater. (45) But long before that, Hitler had relied on a man named Heinrich Hoffmann (1885-1957), a photographer who ran a shop in Berlin, to record his heroic figure for the masses and for posterity (37). What Leni Riefenstahl (1902-2003) did for the Nazis' image, not least through her 1935 *Triumph of the Will* film of Nuremberg, Hoffmann did for Hitler's, and in a much bigger way.

Hoffmann's photos of Hitler were everywhere. They were officially endorsed by the Führer himself. Hoffmann's photographs overcame whatever negative press was thrown against Hitler, rescuing him from scandal and rehabilitating him when party politics did not bend to his iron will (38-41). Hoffmann's photographs made of Hitler both a soaring political deity, and an approachable, right-living human being. And Hoffmann made a fortune off of the arrangement. "Since the Führer's image was protected by law," Dikötter explains, "the court photographer [i.e., Heinrich Hoffmann] had a virtual monopoly over the market" (49). Sales of Hitler's mug printed on "portraits, postcards, posters and calendars" as well as in book form sold hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of copies (49). Dikötter's foregrounding of Hoffmann in his chapter on Hitler is a very welcome departure from the usual dreary rounds of the Hitler biography (although, to be sure, the Hoffmann angle is if anything even drearier). A cult of personality requires an endless supply of images (recall that Anthony Fauci spent many of his waking hours on TV for a couple of years), and Hoffmann gave Hitler exactly what he needed to keep the cult in motion.

But every false god will fail. No photograph can paper over the stark political reality of bread lines and disappeared neighbors. Dikötter therefore also does readers a service by focusing on the climate of skepticism vis-à-vis Hitler which spread over Germany as the consequences of the Führer's political maneuvers began to bite at home. American philosopher W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963), in Germany during 1936, observed that "'Germany is silent, nervous, suppressed; it speaks in whispers; there is no public opinion, no opposition, no discussion of anything'" (53-54).

Skepticism at home is easily checked by secret police. All that Hitler needed by the late 1930s was for foreigners to buy his performances. Which, in at least one notorious case, one did. In September of 1938, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain (1869-1940) "travelled to the Obersalzberg, where his host," that is, Adolf Hitler,

received him on the Berghof's front steps. Halfway through a three-hour conversation, Hitler suddenly switched roles, transforming himself from an unpredictable megalomaniac who threatened war into a perfectly reasonable negotiating partner. Hitler pledged not to use force against Czechoslovakia. Chamberlain agreed to the cessation of the Sudetenland, signing the Munich Agreement two weeks later. 'He looks entirely undistinguished', the prime minister admitted to his sister, but Hitler was 'a man of his word'. Hitler clapped his hands in sheer delight the moment Chamberlain left the Berghof. The Sudetenland was occupied without a shot being fired (55-56).

The cult of personality can catch even the most levelheaded of statesmen unawares.

Dikötter's next subject, Josef Stalin (1878-1953), is often presented as Hitler's dictatorial counterpart (see, e.g., 83), but the way that Dikötter frames things it is Mussolini and Hitler who should be seen as a pair of theatrical rivals. I agree. Stalin, as Dikötter makes clear, was much more concerned with inheriting the shade of Lenin than with competing with Hitler and Stalin for best performance in a political play, and Stalin made full use of his own obvious inferiority to Lenin as the very mechanism by which he stole Lenin's mantle and then used it to bring post-revolutionary Russia under his dominion (see p. 67). False humility was Stalin's Venus flytrap, drawing in those who dared challenge what he saw as his non-negotiable title to be Lenin's heir. And as Stalin stepped deeper and deeper into Lenin's shadow, as it were, he was able to be bolder and bolder in reshaping Lenin's revolution into a personality cult redounding to Stalin's power.

Much of that power Stalin used to effect revenge on his enemies. He built a propagandistic case against Leon Trotsky (1879-1940), Grigory Zinoviev (1883-1936), Lev Kamenev (1883-1936), and others against whom Stalin had developed, or long nursed, a grudge. (69-70) By 1929, Dikötter writes, "The party [i.e., the Communist Party of the Soviet Union], under Stalin's leadership, was now sacrosanct, the party line presented as a mystical will that was beyond debate. Stalin became the personification of that sanctity, the *vozh*, or great leader, a term previously reserved for Lenin" (72). Anyone who dared cross Stalin effectively tread on Lenin's own grave. Stalin wasted no mercy on those who could be crushed under the weight of Stalin's wrath and Lenin's borrowed ghost.

In this atmosphere, in which Stalin's mood was life or death, fear became the baseline of human existence. Rafts of breathless and completely over-the-top praise for Stalin reverberated into a kind of standing wave of surreal man-worship.

The usual dupes from abroad made their obeisance, too. In 1931, "the socialist author George Bernard Shaw received a military guard of honour in Moscow and a banquet to celebrate his seventy-fifth birthday," Dikötter writes.

He toured the country, visiting model schools, prisons and farms, with villagers and workers carefully drilled to praise the party and their leader. After a two-hour private audience, masterfully staged by Stalin, the Irish playwright found the dictator a 'charmingly good-humoured fellow' and proclaimed: 'There was no malice in him, but also no credulity'. Shaw never tired of promoting the despot, and died in 1950 in his bed with a portrait of his idol on the mantelpiece (75).

That a professional playwright, most of all, could not see through the masquerade is perhaps the most damning confirmation of Dikötter's cult-of-personality thesis in the whole book. Remember also that Walter Duranty (1884-1957), once a darling of the perennial fake news outlet the *New York Times*, won a Pulitzer for pretending that Stalin had not induced famine in Ukraine—a famine the victims of which Duranty had seen with his own eyes. Like Hitler, and like many other dictators since, Stalin had the strange power to inspire in foreigners the sincere love and even worship which his countrymen begrudged him. As if to confirm that it had all been a tragically empty vaudeville act, the cult of Stalin, and the show trials and Great Terror and bloodbath Great Patriotic War that followed in its train, was over in almost an instant when, in 1953, Stalin mercifully died. "One month after his funeral Stalin's name vanished from the newspapers" (92). No one wants to remember how cowardly he has been or how little he respects himself, even to the point of pretending that a Georgian hooligan is a man of steel. A cult of personality is, in many ways, a survival technique, discarded as soon as it is no longer needed.

(And Duranty got to keep his Pulitzer Prize.)

Dikötter writes next of Mao Zedong (1893-1976). Hitler once felt upstaged beside Mussolini, and Mao, standing on one of Stalin's flanks "when Stalin appeared at the Bolshoi Theatre to show himself to the cameras for his seventieth birthday gala," had, it seems, a similarly uncomfortable experience. "Mao looked dour, awed by his counterpart in the Kremlin but resentful at the way he was being treated. He had expected to be welcomed as the leader of a great revolution that had brought a quarter of humanity into the communist orbit, but had been met at Yaroslavsky Station by two of Stalin's underlings who did not even accompany him to his residence" (93). (The person on Stalin's other flank, by the way, was Nikita Khrushchev (1894-1971), the man who would lead the "de-Stalinization"

campaign later on, a sort of smelling-salts gambit to get the Communist Party to quit swooning over personalities.)

Mao was made to feel insignificant standing beside Stalin, but he might have seen such a slight coming. "For the previous twenty-eight years," Dikötter points out, "the Chinese Communist Party had depended on Moscow for financial support" (93). Mao's rival, Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975), had been on the communist dole, too. And the Comintern was deep in the politics of China this side and that, making decisions about small things and big. Between Stalin and Mao, few, if any, in Moscow had any illusions as to who was boss and who was supplicant.

But as Dikötter shows, Mao was, for all his dependency, a formidable cultivator of personality cult in his own right. Of the eight people featured in *How To Be a Dictator*, Mao deserves, I think, most credit for keeping and grooming his cult by himself. Mao was not one to be pandered to or flattered into distraction. Although he had his ghostwriters (Dikötter mentions Chen Boda (1904-1989) [99]), Mao was also, as the legend goes, a poet, wooden and bombastic by turns but an impassioned versifier all the same (see 105). And, to be sure, Mao wrapped even the worst and most devious elements of society around his little finger as he built his power base and policed the thoughts of the masses. Kang Sheng (1898-1975), for example, was surely one of the most dastardly men in all of twentieth-century China—a real achievement considering the competition (99). But all the while Mao was writing out a kind of political epic, his verse the fluttering rows of students waving the *Little Red Book* in the air, his ink their blood and the blood of those whom he sent them out to murder. Mao did all that. Not his handlers. Mao.

Mao had his Hoffmann, too, a "handpicked... photographer named Hou Bo. She had joined the party as the age of fourteen, and her pictures were soon printed in the millions" (104). The famous 1955 image of "Mao Zedong Swimming Across the Yangzi" was from Hou's lens. Many other shots were, too. Her photos, Dikötter reveals, "were among the most widely distributed images of the twentieth century" (104).

But as garish as Mao's political tastes ran—he was a foul-mouthed yokel at heart who interspersed half-masticated Marxist-Leninist claptrap with earthy slogans rich in the vocabulary of the barnyard latrine—he wisely avoided having roads and buildings and whole cities named after him (104). He was to be, Dikötter says, a "philosopher king of the East," which I think captures Mao's ambitions to a T (104). He was good at dissembling, convincing even the rope-hearted Richard Nixon (1913-1994) to come and pay him homage in his Forbidden City (120). And he was good at getting others to take the fall for his

own bad ideas, even when those ideas—the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution being two of the worst ideas in, I think, human history—left whole fields of corpses in their wake. Mao's cult of personality built and built, as it consumed one lieutenant after the other—Lin Biao (1907-1971), Peng Dehuai (1898-1974), Zhou Enlai (1898-1976), Liu Shaoqi (1898-1969). Those who know the history of “philosopher kings of the East” will know that Mao was every inch their equal.

What Mao did best of all was to involve everyone in his cult of personality in a full-contact way. Mao encouraged all of China to get into the business of fighting for the purity of the revolution (which was exactly the same as fighting for the primacy of Mao). Old scores were settled under the convenient and universally-available pretext of revolutionary zeal. The Red Guards, street punks, who in a saner society would have been in reform school, fought openly in the cities and the countryside. Other factions in other places went for each other's jugulars, too (117). Once the violence had turned almost all-consuming, Mao stepped in and reminded the country that he was the arbiter of all force, for example overseeing a half-million-man army as it paraded through Tiananmen Square in 1967 with, out front of the goose-steppers, “an enormous silver-coloured, plastic figure of Mao pointing the way forward” (117-118). Either you were on Mao's side, or you were a counter-revolutionary and thus marked for death. It was probably the most murderous and heavily populated personality cult of the twentieth century.

And it goes on today. As Dikötter notes, Mao's “portrait still hangs high in Beijing, while his face beams from every banknote in the People's Republic” (122). Not every cult of personality has a built-in stop-date with the leader's death. Xi Jinping, many say, is the new Mao. In graduate school, I had professors who were proud to call themselves Maoists. (The professors fancied themselves philosophers—Mao wins again). So maybe cults of personality are also fungible when the circumstances are right and ambition burns brightly enough to outstrip restraint.

Kim Il-sung (1912-1994), the North Korean tyrant, was very different from Mao. Mao was *sui generis*, a man who had a Patton-like sense of his having been coughed up by Hegelian Geist and put on Earth to do the will of capital-H History. Kim was a Soviet puppet in the beginning, and then, when he and his clique ginned up a cult of personality in the 1950s, Kim became in many ways a plaything of the very political religion of which he was the putative apex. Mao inspired the Chinese people to police one another, to lacerate one another's deepest thoughts so as to maintain a high-pitched devotion to the poet-philosopher in Beijing. Kim ruled with a secret police and labor camps (although Mao had plenty of both of his own), and was constantly, unlike Mao, going among his people to present the smiling face

above the iron fist which kept everyone fearful and in line (131).

Kim also emulated Mao in some ways, to be sure, such as the 1958 "Chollima Campaign, named after a mythical winged horse that could gallop a thousand miles in a day... designed to propel North Korea into the future... without economic assistance from the Soviet Union or the People's Republic" (133). This was, obviously, a Great Leap Forward with Chosen characteristics (133). And, like Mao, Kim was indifferent to the suffering of everyone but himself, for example doubling down on the "[Juche Thought](#)" campaign of self-reliance, even as North Koreans starved (135-136). The usual cycle of sycophancy followed, increasing in direct and inverse proportion to the failures of the dictator, and before long Kim was, like others of his profession, hailed as a "genius," as this or that heavenly body, as a liberator and a force of history in his own right (136). Again, Mao redux.

But Kim could see that Mao was reckless, that the Cultural Revolution, for example, was "chaos" (136). Mao fought the Americans in North Korea, but Kim knew when to pull back from the brink. Kim skirted war with South Korea and with the United States in 1968, with his generals sending commandos to assassinate South Korean president Park Chung-hee (1917-1979) and seizing the USS *Pueblo* in the same year (137). But Kim was far too smart to push his luck any farther, and he settled for the fortress-socialism in one country of which his grandson is sole proprietor today. Mao left no dynasty. Kim did. Pro tip for those who would be dictators: as Celine Dion might have crooned, your cult can go on and on.

Dikötter doesn't say so, but I cannot help but think that the cult of the Kims, which its inflationary rhetoric of loyalty-signaling and its gargantuan statues and other monuments to the three incarnations of the Kim dynasty thus far, is a kind of compensation for the failure of the Kimist revolution, despite its supporters' bluster and bad behavior, to export communism anywhere, even to the other half of the Korean Peninsula. Communism was supposed to take over the world. In North Korea, it barely keeps a grip on the fifth-rate capital Pyongyang. Hence the huge statues, huge in the way that some older men buy red Ferraris. Also scarring is the fact that the Kims relied heavily on forced donations and forced repatriated labor from Japan (139). Perhaps this explains the Kims' terrorist campaign of kidnapping Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s.

In any event, like Stalin, few truly grieved when Kim Il-sung died. "One five-year-old spat in her hand to wet her face with saliva, making it look as if she was crying," Dikötter writes of average Koreans during the "ten-day mourning period" after Kim's 1994 demise (144).

If Hitler and Mussolini are counterparts, political actors in the most literal sense, in Dikötter's book, then so are his next two subjects. François Duvalier (1907-1971), dictator of Haiti, and Nicolae Ceaușescu (1918-1989), sad-sack tyrant of Romania, seem equally out to sea in Dikötter's telling, equally unaware of the political realities enveloping them and equally unable to control the flow of events as they unfolded.

Duvalier is by far the more fascinating psychological portrait of the two. On Dikötter's reading, Duvalier saw himself as a kind of Voodoo paragon of blackness, a second act of the career of Dumarsais Estimé (1900-1953), under whom Duvalier had once served as "director general of the National Public Health Service" (147-148). Estimé was deposed by an upper-crust, army-backed military man named Paul Magliore (1907-2001) in 1950, but when Magliore met his inevitable fate in the turnstile of Haitian politics Duvalier was able to seize power and avenge his former mentor (147-149). Duvalier had his Hoffmann as well—American journalist Herbert Morrison (1905-1989), whom Duvalier appointed "director of public relations" (149). He also had his secret police, the fearsome "tonton macoutes, a Creole term for bogeymen" (151).

Duvalier also had something that perhaps no one else in *How To Be a Dictator* had, namely, a sincere, if clearly pathological, belief that he was, in all actuality, a living god, even God Himself. Duvalier disported himself in black like "Baron Samedi, the spirit of the dead and guardian of cemeteries" (151). He saw himself as a "houngan," a Voodoo priest (151). But he didn't stop there. "On radio," Dikötter writes, "where his voice was heard regularly, Duvalier portrayed himself as the personification of God, exclaiming 'and the word was made flesh'" (156). Later, "a poster appeared, showing Christ with his hands on the shoulder of a seated Duvalier: 'I have chosen him'" (157). Duvalier idol-worshipped the former Haitian freedom fighter Jean-Jacques Dessalines (1758-1806), "who had declared himself emperor in 1804" (158). but he also seemed to think that he was a metaphysical force as well as a human or even world-historical one, "the spiritual leader of the black world" (159). He proclaimed that he was unafraid of weapons, because "bullets and machine guns capable of frightening Duvalier [(he had taken to referring to himself in the third person)] do not exist.... I am already an immaterial being" (156). *Newsweek* stated the obvious when it wrote that Duvalier was "utterly, irretrievably mad" (156).

Duvalier made the usual rounds of executions and terror-campaigns (161-162), but of all the dictators in Dikötter's book, I am guessing that Duvalier's body count was lowest. He executed his enemies and had others shot for good measure and to keep the people in line, of course. And the *macoutes* were a terror and a scourge to the average impoverished Haitian. But still, Duvalierism was, violence-wise, mild

compared with the hecatombs offered up to, say, Hitler, Stalin, and Mao. And yet, the terminology used to describe Duvalier, some of it virtually verbatim from Catholic teaching and liturgy only with Duvalier's name transposed with that of the Deity, is surely the most outlandish of all. That Duvalier had outlawed the Catholic Church might explain, in part, his felt need, as perhaps it was, to act as understudy for the God he had exiled (151, 154).

Duvalier tried the dynasty thing, too. Like Kim Jong-Il, Duvalier's son, Jean-Claude, "Baby Doc," turned out to be even more unsavory than his insane father. When Jean-Claude died in 2014, the Duvalier dynasty died with him.

In comparison with Duvalier, Nicolae Ceaușescu was a regular stick in the mud. Although he sat like a knob atop a nightmarish killing machine, Ceaușescu was as nondescript as surely any dictator in the twentieth century. His wife, Elena (1916-1989), was, it seems, the real hate behind the throne. Not that Nicolae was innocent, though. He was certainly party to, and in part author of, the horrors carried out in his name. But still Ceaușescu seemed too dense to understand what was going on around him. He sat by rather stupidly, acquiescing, for example, acquiescing as the most preposterous lines of obsequiousness were printed and read out loud about him. The communist paper *Scinteia* said of Ceaușescu, for example, that he was "Julius Caesar, Alexander of Macedonia, Pericles, Cromwell, Napoleon, Peter the Great and Lincoln... our lay God, the heart of the party and the nation" (174). On his sixtieth birthday, in 1978, Romanians fell over themselves to laud him: "He was 'the measure of all beings and things in this blessed country called Romania'. He was the Christ-like incarnation of the people, 'a body from the people's body, a soul from the people's soul'" (175). He was compared, in addition to the historical figures just listed, to "Mircea the Elder, Stephen the Great, Michael the Brave, all rulers of medieval Wallachia" (178). Ceaușescu was not floridly insane, like Duvalier, but he still went along with the political psalmody about him, smiling lamely and appearing only moderately discomfited by the idiocy surrounding him.

But even if Ceaușescu was all that the people and his government lackeys said he was, and more, the Romania over which he lorded it was in ruins, and getting worse. There was not enough food, not enough anything. As the economy collapsed and people went hungry and cold in the dark, the cult of personality surrounding Ceaușescu became ever more frantic (179). This is another very strong feature of cults of personality. "The greater the misery," Dikötter pithily sums up the dynamic, "the louder the propaganda" (179). It was, ironically, Mikhail Gorbachev (1931-2022) who helped bring Ceaușescu down (183). Ceaușescu had always postured as a communist purist over and against the various heresies of

the Soviet Union. Ceaușescu amped up this rhetorical line when Gorbachev came to power, with the latter's talk of perestroika and his "lalying] out a vision of democratisation in January 1987" (183). But by setting himself, and with himself the political destiny of Romania, against the historical tide, now turning in favor of democratic revolution instead of communist, Ceaușescu sealed his own fate (184). And that of Elena. In late 1989, Christmas Day to be exact, the husband and wife were shot. One day before that, during a disastrous speech, it had become apparent that the Ceaușescus had lost their psychological grip on Romania (185). Yet another cult of personality evaporated in a moment. Yet another living god had failed.

With Mengistu (1937-) Dikötter comes to the last float in his sad dictator parade. I find the Mengistu float to be the least interesting, to be honest, even duller than that of Ceaușescu. Not that it was all bland. Mengistu—who may have had Emperor Haile Selassie (1892-1975) killed—later "had the emperor's remains buried underneath his office, placing his desk right above the corpse (189). As should be apparent from this macabre revelation, Mengistu should be seen as a kind of Stalin, an unworthy slipping into an exalted shade. But there is something even more past-ripe about Mengistu than even Ceaușescu, the latter a diehard true-believing communist who, according to Dikötter, apparently sang the "Internationale" as the firing squad prepared to dispatch him and his wife. (Elena, we are told, remained in character to the end as well, shouting at the firing squad, "Fuck you!" [185]). Mengistu was railing against "feudalism," unleashing the already-clichéd "Red Terror" on Ethiopians, "modellling] himself on Fidel Castro," and interpolating his revolutionary portrait among those of Engels, Lenin, and Marx (189, 191, 193, 195). It was all old hat before Mengistu even got started. By Mengistu's day, a Marxist revolution was just hopelessly outdated.

But what was new was, I think, the global response to the horrific famine which Mengistu, his disastrous communist policies, and his obsessive persecution of war with Eritrea and with internal foes had caused (200-201). As the Eritrean forces reached within striking distance of Addis Ababa and Mengistu, revolutionary manqué, fled to the protection of a much more interesting dictator, Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe (1924-2019), in 1991, the old Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist-Maoist brand was already staler than week-old toast. What was increasingly in vogue was the kind of soft-pedaled globalism of the 1985 "We Are the World" celebrity charity campaign for all of Africa, a campaign held in large part to help the Ethiopian people survive the famine which their dictator had helped cause. The charity initiative countering Mengistu-ism was a new kind of internationalism, one driven by business, fashion, and PR. Personality cult was the essence of the Western schmaltz. Michael Jackson, himself a moonwalking demi-god, was in his hair-sprayed pantheon, and Mengistu was entirely outclassed. There is more than one kind of Marxism, and more than one kind of ready-made idiom of global control. Perhaps the

revolution was televised after all.

And there is, as the King of Pop reminds us, more than one kind of personality cult. What I mean is that not all personality cults center on dictators. When we look back now and wonder how anybody could have been so slavish toward Ceaușescu or Stalin, perhaps we ought also to ask how anyone ever took seriously Kim Kardashian. Not that the latter is a dictator. But cult of personality is a funny thing, and hardly confined only to the hyperventilating world of theatrical politics. You buy toothpaste and automobiles because famous people tell you to. Don't you?

Frank Dikötter's *How To Be a Dictator* is, of course, not a how-to guide for the aspiring despot. But it is a reminder that human beings are the bearers of a pretty weird psychological makeup, and we are never really inured against becoming enablers of dictators in our own time. When a ruler rules through fear, many people will get by by flattering the ruler to save their own skins, or at a minimum keeping their heads down and playing along. That phenomenon became especially pronounced in the twentieth century, when mass media and concomitant advances in the organization of mass groups quickly gained in power. A dictator could, through his image and voice, be everywhere at once. His spies and informers, and jailers, could do the rest.

Dikötter thinks that dictators are on the wane. Is this true? To his great credit, Dikötter skirts the Trump question so handily that I was left wondering if the book was not a very subtle jab at those who spent the four years of the Trump Administration breathlessly insisting that we were on the verge of another Reichstag fire. Or perhaps Trump is to be made conspicuous by his absence.

Notice one more absence from Dikötter's book: Vladimir Putin. Putin is a strong leader, that is unquestionable. But is he a dictator? He has no cult of personality, which would seem to go far, on Dikötter's rubric, toward disqualifying Putin from dictator status. To argue in 2023 that Putin is not the Slavic Hitler, however, is to invite those who cultivate personality cults along the Potomac River to level charges of "disinformation," "working for a foreign power," and "undermining our sacred democracy."

You can see, then, why I am not so sure I agree with Dikötter that dictatorship is on the way out. Communication technology is a couple orders of magnitude beyond what was available to opinion manipulators in, say, the 1930s. And as the Twitter Files have made clear, the conglomerates which throttle our communication are perfectly willing—eager—to cooperate with naked political power. Naked political power returns the favor. Want to know what's really going on behind the media-

Democrat-academic curtains? Try mentioning "Ukraine," "vaccines," or "FBI" in public and see what happens.

Also, one of Dikötter's sub-themes in *How To Be a Dictator* is that dictators are often messiahs for people who have stopped believing in revealed religion. Unless the world recovers faith in God, we are all sitting ducks if anyone comes along promising this-worldly salvation. Anyone can be a dictator in a Godless country. Ask Joe Biden, kingpin of a crime family and occupier of a stolen office. But all is well, dear reader, in Washington. So saith the anchors of the evening news.

To my mind, *How To Be a Dictator* is much more than work of history. It is also a word of warning.

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Featured: "Long Live! Long, Long Live Chairman Mao, the Reddest and Reddest Sun in Our Hearts!" Poster, ca. 1967.

