Biography, political leadership, and foreign policy reconsidered: the cases of Mussolini and Hitler

Christian Goeschel
University of Manchester, U.K.

Abstract: For many historians writing today, person-centred or biographical approaches constitute ‘the shallow end of history’, a field better left to amateur historians. However, since the 1990s, under the influence of cultural history and because of a growing dissatisfaction with structuralist approaches, some historians have become interested in finding alternative approaches towards the genre of political biography, partly inspired by the ‘new cultural history’ of the 1980s that prompted a return to the individual as a site for micro-history.

In this article, I explore from my perspective as a historian of modern Europe what can or cannot be gained from the study of foreign policy through a strong emphasis of leaders’ biographies, an approach which political scientists and IR specialists such as Jack S. Levy have recently advocated. I shall focus on two of the most significant statesmen of the twentieth century, Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler, leaders of the world’s first fascist dictatorships and allies during the Second World War. According to Fascist and Nazi propaganda, Mussolini and Hitler were charismatic leaders exclusively in charge of their countries and above all of foreign policy. The powerful propaganda image of the dictator in total control makes Mussolini and Hitler an ideal case study to rethink the biographical approach towards foreign policy analysis and to ask if and how a biographical approach can shed light on foreign policy more generally. In this way, the article goes some way towards provoking a fruitful dialogue between IR and History.

Keywords: Mussolini, Hitler, Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, leadership, psychology, dictatorship, biography.

INTRODUCTION*

Until the 1970s, for most historians and political scientists alike, there could be no doubt that individuals were the principal forces of foreign policy. Indeed, modern historiography, as Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), one of the founding fathers of history as an academic discipline, had conceived it, was dominated by a focus on

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great men’s biographies. This approach was manifested most succinctly perhaps in Ranke’s essays on Men of World History (Männer der Weltgeschichte). These essays were republished in Germany as a two-volume collection in 1917 in order to boost public morale during the World War and included accounts of personalities such as Prophet Mohammed, Queen Elizabeth I, Emperor Charles V, and Cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin. There was no need in this collection for any discussion about the role of great men in History, as the editors subscribed to Ranke’s conviction that it was great personalities who made foreign policy and, therefore, entered into the annals of history.¹

In this article, I ask what historians and scholars working on International Relations (IR) and Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), concerned with decision-making and causation, can learn from each other. From my perspective as a historian, I will engage with Political Psychology, recently defined programmatically by Jack S. Levy and his co-editors of the Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology as an application of ‘what is known about human psychology to the study of political behaviour, focusing on individuals within a specific political system.’²

More specifically, in this article, I will ask what can or cannot be gained from the study of foreign policy through a strong emphasis on leaders’ biographies and their psychologies. My article has two aims: first, to rethink the problem of causation in foreign policy, and, secondly, to assess how contemporary perceptions influence foreign policy. I will focus on the historiographies of two of the most significant statesmen of the twentieth century, Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler, dictators of the world’s first fascist regimes, allied during the Second World War. According to Fascist and Nazi propaganda, Mussolini and Hitler were in charge of their countries and shaped foreign policy. The powerful propaganda image of the dictator in total control makes Mussolini and Hitler an ideal case study to rethink the biographical approach towards foreign policy analysis and to ask if and how a biographical approach can shed light on foreign policy more generally.³

My article is divided into three sections. First, I shall ask how historians’ understanding of the individual and its psychology has changed since Ranke’s work. This background is essential to my two case studies, the discussion of Mussolini’s and Hitler’s foreign policies, and will help us understand why most historians are largely sceptical of psychological and biographical explanations of political leadership. Secondly, I will explore, as a case study, how explanations of Mussolini’s and Hitler’s foreign policies have shifted since the rise of their dictatorships. In this section, on causation, I will focus especially on changing interpretations of the political significance of the personality and psychology of the dictators in shaping foreign policy. Thirdly, I will outline how to re-integrate political biography into the history of foreign policy and foreign policy analysis more generally. I will conclude that recent work in political science, which claims that a new focus on biography will make us understand foreign policy in a new light, poses some problems. For

² Leonie Huddy, David O. Sears and Jack S. Levy (eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology (2nd edn., Oxford, 2013); for a survey of FPA, see Christopher Hill, Foreign Policy Analysis, in Bertrand Badie et al. (eds.) International Encyclopedia of Political Science (Sage for International Political Science Association, 2011).