

The role of charismatic authority history essay



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The model of 'charismatic authority'[1] developed by the sociologist Max Weber is frequently applied to the regimes of Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler. For some historians, such as those noted within this essay, these regimes represent the quintessential embodiment of 'charismatic authority' and a considerable historiography has been developed along this theoretical model. In this essay the precise role of charisma and 'charismatic authority' in the regimes of Fascist Italy and the Third Reich is explored and the extent of its importance in the establishment and consolidation of power. The question is answered in three distinct sections. In the first, Weber's notion of charisma and his concept of 'charismatic authority' are defined briefly. In the second, the role that charisma played in the Third Reich is considered within the context of analysis offered by Kershaw, particularly with regard to his theory that 'charismatic authority' was of fundamental importance in the Third Reich. In the third and final section the regime of Benito Mussolini is examined and the role that charisma played in its establishment and maintenance of power investigated. In so doing, this essay argues that charisma and 'charismatic authority' played an important part in the establishment and consolidation of both regimes.

When historians of the Third Reich and Fascist Italy debate the significance of charisma in the establishment and consolidation of power, the theory of charisma that is most often cited is the notion of 'charismatic authority' advanced by the sociologist Max Weber. Weber developed the concept of 'charismatic authority' alongside two other forms of authority: 'traditional authority' and 'rational-legal authority'. [2] However, it is the notion of 'charismatic authority' that is Weber's most enduring legacy for as

Schweitzer states " of the many contributions of Max Weber to the social sciences, his theory of charisma has received the greatest attention".

[3]Weber defines charisma as

" a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader".[4]

It is clear, therefore, that for Weber the term charisma refers to a certain unquantifiable power or quality that an individual can possess in order to convince others of their superlative status. The concept of 'charismatic authority' developed by Weber refers to rule by a person of exceptional qualities that inspires others by the abilities that such a charismatic figure possesses. Further to this, Weber states that 'charismatic authority' is " power legitimised on the basis of a leader's exceptional personal qualities or the demonstration of extraordinary insight and accomplishment, which inspire loyalty and obedience from followers".[5]In other words, the charisma of an individual legitimises their rule and authority.

There is considerable debate in the historiography of the Third Reich concerning the role that charisma played in the establishment and consolidation of the regime. One of the most forceful proponents of the notion that 'charismatic authority' had a vital role in the establishment and maintenance of the Nazi state is the renowned historian Sir Ian Kershaw.

Kershaw adapts Weber's concept of charismatic leadership to the Nazi state and argues that the notion of 'charismatic authority' was of fundamental importance in the functioning and consolidation of the Third Reich. According to Kershaw, the position of 'Führer' allowed Hitler to rise above the minutiae of daily government thereby becoming increasingly detached from such tasks. Kershaw believes that this was necessary in order to protect the position of 'Führer' and Hitler's image as being above politics, thereby shielded from any difficulties and controversies that the regime could encounter. Kershaw argues that it was critically important for the German people not simply to see Hitler as another politician, but to see him as a dynamic leader who was in a position to make fundamental and irrevocable changes to the German nation. As Kershaw suggests,

" charismatic leadership predetermined an essentially propagandistic preoccupation with avoiding any harmful inroads into the prestige and image of the Führer, hence the need to refrain from interference in internal conflicts and to remain aloof from day to day decision making and association with possibly unpopular policy options".[6]

Hitler was remarkably successful in protecting his image and his popularity throughout the course of Nazi rule. The Nazi party itself was often not particularly popular with the German people and in many cases the lower levels of Nazi officialdom were often deeply resented by the German people. However, as Kershaw demonstrates, such variations in popularity did not apply to Hitler, because of the careful manner in which he protected his image. " The soaring popularity of Hitler, contrasted with the massive unpopularity of the party and of so many aspects of the daily

experience of Nazism, can only be attributed to the image of a Führer who seemed to stand aloof from political infighting and the grey daily reality of the Third Reich".[7]Welch agrees with Kershaw's assessment of the role that 'charismatic authority' played within the Third Reich and emphasises the fact that Hitler's authority was inextricably bound up with a rather pure expression of Weber's concept. According to Welch, " the charismatic nature of his authority was dependent on his ability to convince a plebiscitary electorate of his 'exemplary' character".[8]Historians have often focused upon the extent to which the type of 'charismatic authority' embodied by Hitler rested not only upon his ability to convince other politicians or his party of his credentials and messianic talents, but rather on his ability to convince the German people of his unique mission. For Leitz, " the relevance of the model of 'charismatic authority' to Hitler seems obvious".[9]It is clear, therefore, that the concept of 'charismatic authority' played an important role within the Third Reich and that such notions have been attached to the type of rule exhibited by Hitler in the Nazi state.

The role that 'charismatic authority' played in the establishment and consolidation of the Nazi regime was substantial according to Kershaw. He has developed his own concept relating to Hitler's 'charismatic authority' and argues that his notion of " working towards the Führer"[10]is more apt concerning the extent to which the Third Reich was established and maintained using the power of charisma. Kershaw claims that the entire Nazi state was infused with a clear understanding of Hitler's will and that subordinates and officials in the Nazi state understood and articulated what

they believed to be the will of the Führer and actively worked towards implementing his perceived wishes:

" The concept of 'working towards the Führer' - and comments of this nature hint at the way charismatic authority functioned in the Third Reich - anticipation of Hitler's presumed wishes and intentions as 'guidelines for action' in the certainty of approval and confirmation for actions which accorded with those wishes and intentions".[11]

Kershaw argues that his notion of 'working towards the Führer' applied not only to the Nazi state, but also to the German people at large. For instance, ordinary citizens who denounced neighbours to the Gestapo were 'working towards the Führer' in their own way. Indeed, Leitz contends that it this relationship between Hitler and the German people that was the central feature of Hitler's 'charismatic authority' and that this was responsible to a large extent for the establishment and consolidation of the Third Reich. " The essence of the Hitlerian 'charismatic claim' was the 'mission' to achieve 'national rebirth' through racial purity and racial empire".[12]According to this model of 'charismatic authority', the role that charisma played in the establishment and consolidation of the Third Reich was critical. The concept of 'charismatic authority' in this interpretation can be taken as useful in helping to depict " the bonds with Hitler forged by various social and political forces, enabling the form of personalised power which he represented to free itself from all institutional constraints and to legitimise the destructive dynamic intrinsic to the Nazi gamble for European hegemony through war".

[13]Orlow agrees with this assessment arguing that even in the early days of the Nazi movement " Hitler's deliberately schizophrenic facade created a

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strong emotional bond between leader and followers in both sections of Germany".[14]It is clear, therefore, that the concept of 'charismatic authority' is highly applicable with regards to the Third Reich and forms a common thread that runs through the earliest days of the Nazi movement through to the establishment and consolidation of the Nazi state. As Jablonsky confirms, " the corollary to this distrust of institutional links was Hitler's re-emphasis on personal loyalty, which had marked the basis of his 'charismatic authority' from early 'Kampfzeit' days, until it was elevated to a dominant governmental principle".[15]It can be noted, therefore, that charisma and 'charismatic authority' played a vital role in the establishment and consolidation of the Third Reich.

Whilst there appears to be consensus in the historiography concerning the role that charisma played in the establishment and consolidation of the Third Reich, there is less congruity regarding the role of charisma in the establishment and consolidation of Mussolini's regime. Nevertheless, some historians have indeed suggested that 'charismatic authority' played a crucial role in the establishment and maintenance of the Italian Fascist state. Rodogno argues that the fascist dictatorship was certainly less authoritarian than that of Hitler's state because Mussolini was " unable to impose the primacy of the party on the state and give concrete form to its totalitarian project".[16]However, despite the fact that Rodogno maintains that Mussolini's regime was less authoritarian in nature than that of the Third Reich he nonetheless contends that charisma played a vital role in Fascist Italy, particularly in the consolidation of Mussolini's regime. According to Rodogno, " its distinctive feature was the progressive centralisation of

powers to the person of Mussolini, the charismatic leader - in Max Weber's sense of the term - of a regime intent on realising its totalitarian designs".

[17]Morgan agrees with the assessment that 'charismatic authority' was a fundamental feature of the Italian Fascist state and argues that entire Italian Fascist movement was infused with the importance of bonds of personal loyalty, not unlike the ones that have been observed in Nazi Germany. For example, he cites the example of the Fascist leader Turati " who launched the leadership cult with the slogan 'Mussolini is always right'".[18]The type of 'charismatic authority' exhibited by Mussolini emanated from a " personal hold over loyal and dedicated followers"[19]and " dovetailed perfectly with the kind of consent which the Fascist regimes wanted to manufacture".

[20]Turner goes even further in his assessment of the role that charisma played in Fascist Italy and argues that Mussolini represented the " ideal type of 'charismatic authority' and indeed of authority in general".[21]It is clear, therefore, that a number of historians believe that charisma played a vital role in the establishment and consolidation of Mussolini's regime.

In contrast to the Third Reich, however, there are strong arguments lending gravitas to the notion that charisma does not apply so easily in the establishment and consolidation of the Italian Fascist state. Gentile argues vehemently that Mussolini displayed none of the features of 'charismatic authority'. According to Gentile, " his personal magnetism was not translated into any form of 'charismatic authority' even amongst the meagre, scattered group that made up the first Fascists".[22]Gentile points to Mussolini's conspicuous political failures that undermined his credibility such as defeat at the 1919 elections. As a result, Gentile concludes that " Mussolini was not

at all a charismatic leader within the Fascist movement".[23]Spinrad goes further, arguing that the application of the theory of 'charismatic authority' to Mussolini and Hitler is a flawed intellectual exercise. Spinrad argues that the hypothesis of charisma has been used by historians in order to explain historical developments that they struggle to explain by traditional means and historical investigation. Accordingly, " dramatic consequential historical developments, such as the Bolshevik Revolution and the rise of Nazism, have been blithely explained via the personal appeal of charismatic leaders".

[24]This interpretation stresses the fact that an exclusive focus upon charisma and 'charismatic authority' undermines the role that other crucial factors played in the establishment and consolidation of the respective regimes. Instead, the study of these factors is replaced with a lightly substantiated(REFERENCE?) assumption that 'charismatic authority' played the decisive part in the establishment and maintenance of both Fascist regimes. It is clear, therefore, that a number of historians reject the argument that charisma played a vital role in Mussolini's regime.

In conclusion, it is evident that academic opinion is divided whether charisma and 'charismatic authority' played a vital role in both Hitler's and Mussolini's regimes. The argument made by Spinrad that the concept of charisma and its application to historical thought are flawed has some merit and in some cases it is probably correct to argue that historians have applied the concept too liberally to figures such as Hitler and Mussolini. However, the argument that charisma and 'charismatic authority' have played no role in the establishment and consolidation of both regimes is not without repudiation either. It presupposes that all historians have applied the

concept of charisma to Hitler and Mussolini in a carefree(REFERENCE?) and uncritical manner and this is certainly not the case. For example, historians such as Kershaw have built careful edifices explaining the establishment and consolidation of the Third Reich that incorporate a vast number of different factors. Such historians have argued, however, that charisma and 'charismatic authority' were important in the establishment and consolidation of the Third Reich, rather than Fascist Italy. The evidence suggests they are right to do so. There also appears to be a greater consensus in the historiography concerning the role of charisma in Germany compared to its role in Fascist Italy. It is clear, therefore, that charisma and 'charismatic authority' played a vital role in the establishment and consolidation of both regimes, but it is likely that 'charismatic authority' was of greater importance in the Third Reich than in Fascist Italy.