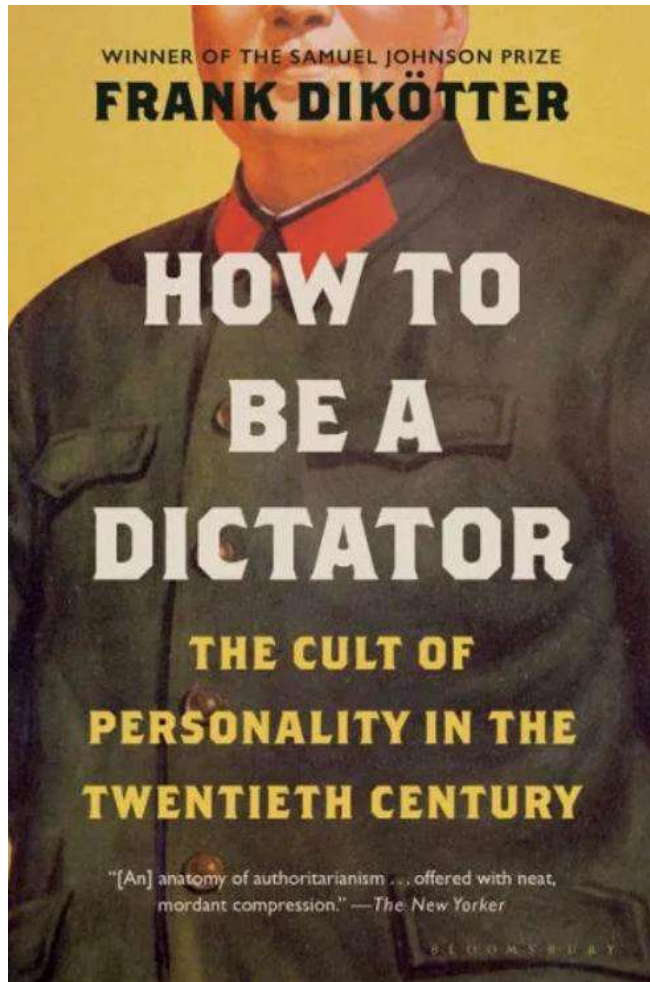


Author gives insight into dictators' rise to power

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"How to Be a Dictator: The Cult of Personality in the Twentieth Century" by Frank Dikötter. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022, 304 pages, \$18.00 (paperback).



“So that in the first place I put for a general inclination of all mankind a perpetual and restless desire of power after power that ceases only in death. The cause of this is not always that a man hopes for a more intensive delight than he has already attained or that he cannot be content with moderate power, but because he cannot assure the power and means to live well which he has present without the acquisition of more.” – Thomas Hobbes

This quote, which Frank Dikötter includes at the beginning of “How to Be a Dictator: The Cult of Personality in the Twentieth Century,” his treatise on some of the most notorious (and ruthless) authoritarian leaders of the last century, sets the stage perfectly for what the reader is about to encounter. But what the imminent scholar and humanitarian has provided is much more than a history lesson from the past – it is a warning and a cautionary tale for what could lie ahead. As such, it should be required reading for anyone who wants the future to be qualitatively better than the past.

In order of their appearance in the primer, Dikötter provides chapters on Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, Kim

Il-sung, François Duvalier, Nicolae Ceausescu, and Mengistu Haile Mariam. What do all these strongmen have in common? Why were they able to come to power? How much human suffering did they cause? What is their legacy? If these are the kinds of questions you are prone to asking, then “How to Be a Dictator” is right down your alley.

The book succeeds on several levels. First, there are the overarching descriptions of each of the dictators' trajectories in their seemingly inevitable rise to power. Second, there are the consequences of this rise to power for the ordinary citizens who often found themselves caught up in something they did not fully understand or appreciate - until it was too late. Finally, there are the character studies focusing on how the acquisition of power inevitably changed the leaders in ways that were somewhat unique yet completely predictable. Some aspects of this transformation seem to be intrinsic to the human experience; consider the following from the chapter on Mao Zedong and see if anything sounds vaguely familiar:

“Mao insisted on absolute loyalty, turning everyone into a flatterer. As a result, decisions were made on the basis of the Chairman's whims, often without any concern for their impact. Already in

the summer of 1959 it was clear that the Great Leap Forward was a disaster. But even a mild letter of criticism by Minister of Defense Peng Dehuai at a party gathering in Lushan was interpreted by the Chairman as a stab in the back. Peng was described as the leader of an ‘anti-party clique’ and removed from all influential positions. Liu Shaoqi stepped in, covering the Chairman with praise. ‘The leadership of Comrade Mao Zedong,’ Liu observed, ‘is in no way inferior to the leadership of Marx and Lenin. I am convinced that if Marx and Lenin lived in China, they would have guided the Chinese revolution in just the same way.’ As Mao’s doctor put it, the Chairman ‘craved affection and acclaim. As his disgrace within the party grew, so did his hunger for approval.’”

As is the case anything Dikötter is involved with, “How to Be a Dictator” is extensively researched, with 39 pages of source notes and a 15-page select bibliography after the preface, 8 chapters and afterward that form the main narrative. The author also includes a 16-page gallery of black-and-white photographs in the centerfold that helps to bring the subject matter to life in a way that would have not been possible otherwise. The literary style is fluid and conversational; although I was familiar with many of the historical events Dikötter describes in such exquisite detail, I found his nuanced way of communicating with the reader to be refreshing and a welcome reprise from other volumes covering the same ground. He is obviously an historian of the first order, but he is writing as if he were talking to you at the local bar; I can see myself sharing perspectives over a beer with the guy.

Before assuming his current duties and responsibilities as Chair Professor of Humanities at the University of Hong Kong and a Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Dikötter was Professor of the Modern History of China in the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, where he also earned his PhD. His previous books include the People's Trilogy, a series of books documenting the impact of communism on the lives of ordinary people in China. The first volume, “Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe,” won the 2011 Samuel Johnson Prize for Non-Fiction, Britain's most prestigious book award for the genre. The second volume, “The Tragedy of Liberation: A History of the Chinese Revolution, 1945-1957,” was short-listed for the Orwell Prize in 2014. “The Cultural Revolution: A People’s History, 1962-1976” concludes the trilogy and was short-listed for the PEN Hessel-Tiltman Prize in 2017.

In the final analysis, after meticulously describing the atrocities precipitated by some of the most notoriously oppressive tyrants in the history of the world, Dikötter is surprisingly optimistic about our current prospects.

“Dictators today, with the exception of Kim Jong-un, are a long way from instilling the fear that their predecessors inflicted on their populations at the height of the twentieth century,” he asserts in the afterward. “Yet hardly a month goes by without a new book announcing ‘The Death of Democracy’ or ‘The End of Liberalism.’ Undeniably, for more than a decade democracy has been degraded in many places around the world, while levels of freedom have receded even in some of the most entrenched parliamentary democracies. Eternal vigilance, as the saying goes, is the price of liberty, as power can easily be stolen.”

“Vigilance, however, is not the same as gloom,” Dikötter adds. “Even a modicum of historical perspective indicates that today dictatorship is on the decline when compared to the twentieth century.”

After making my way through this virtual Who’s Who of murderous despots, I tend to agree. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.