STRONGMEN

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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

STRONGMEN REFLECTS A LIFETIME of thinking about authoritarian rulers and their destructive impact on individuals and societies. My seaside hometown, Pacific Palisades, California, was an unlikely place to have birthed a teenager's meditations on regimes and their atrocities. Yet many exiles from Nazism resettled there or in adjacent towns, from the composer Arnold Schoenberg to the writer Thomas Mann. Even in the 1970s and 1980s, their traces were everywhere, inspiring me to learn more about their histories. A seminar on German exiles that I took during my undergraduate studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, taught by the historian Robert Wohl, gave me the historical context. The senior thesis I did on the conductor Otto Klemperer's transition from Berlin to Southern California introduced me to the pleasures of working in archives and interviewing people. They have not lost their pull decades later.

This book also draws on my firsthand experience of how the main-streaming of far-right political forces damages democracy. I am grateful to the Fulbright Scholar Program for granting me a fellowship that put me in Rome in 1994 when Silvio Berlusconi's center-right coalition brought neo-Fascists into the government for the first time since 1945. I knew Italy well, but felt the political ground shifting under my feet as Italians publicly expressed feelings of nostalgia and admiration for Fascism that they had previously kept private. More than once, I heard shouts of "Heil Hitler" and "Viva Il Duce" coming from the German beer hall across the street from my apartment.

Almost two decades later, when Donald Trump began his

presidential campaign, I had a similar feeling. Watching Trump retweet neo-Nazi propaganda, call for the imprisonment of Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, and lead his followers in loyalty oaths at rallies seemed all too familiar—and filled me with dread. By then I had published extensively on Italian Fascism, documenting how the regime convinced Italians to see violence as a necessary agent of racial and political cleansing and imperial domination. Drawing on this expertise, in 2015 I began to write opinion pieces to warn the public about the dangers Trump posed to American democracy. By the time he was inaugurated in January 2017, I had mapped out the authoritarian playbook he would use to consolidate power. It is no consolation that my predictions proved accurate. I thank Stefano Albertini, Director of the Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò at New York University, my colleagues in NYU's history and Italian studies departments, and James Devitt, Managing Director of Public Affairs, NYU, for their support of these activities. I'm grateful to my first editors at CNN, Richard Galant and Pat Wiedenkeller, who helped my work reach a wide audience.

This book draws on datasets, archival documents, and scholarship in history, gender studies, political science, visual culture, and more. My most precious sources have been the accounts of people who experienced strongman rule, as told through memoirs, graphic novels, records of police and military interrogations, and interviews. I am also very grateful to the men and women who consented to be interviewed by me for this book. Some of their stories are told publicly for the first time here.

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A big thank you to my agent, Wendy Strothman, who believed in this book from the start and gave me wise counsel throughout

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This book is dedicated to my daughter Julia and my partner Bill Scott, who heard more about authoritarian leaders past and present than they ever wanted to and lived far too long with piles of books, organized by leader, invading the house. I feel blessed to have them in my life.

PROTAGONISTS

Idi Amin: President of Uganda, 1971–1979. He entered office through a military coup and was forced into exile by opposition forces.

Mohamed Siad Barre: President of the Somali Democratic Republic, 1969–1991. He entered office through a military coup and was forced into exile by opposition forces.

Silvio Berlusconi: Prime minister of Italy, May–December 1994, 2001–2006, 2008–2011. He came to power each time through elections. His 1994 government fell due to corruption charges. He was voted out in 2006 and resigned in 2011 during the eurozone crisis.

Jair Bolsonaro: Brazilian president, 2019 to the present. He came into office through elections.

Rodrigo Duterte: President of the Philippines, 2016 to the present. He came into office through elections.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: President of Turkey, 2014 to the present. Prime minister of Turkey, 2003–2014 and 2018 to the present. He came into office through elections.

Francisco Franco Bahamonde: El Caudillo (The Leader) of Spain, 1939–1975. He came to power through a military coup and led Nationalist forces during the Spanish civil war (1936–1939). He died in office, of natural causes.

Muammar Gaddafi: Brotherly Leader and Guide of the Revolution of Libya, 1969–2011. He came to power through a military coup and was executed by opposition forces during the 2011 revolution.

Adolf Hitler: Chancellor of Germany, 1933–1945; Führer (Leader)

of Germany, 1934–1945. President Paul von Hindenburg appointed him chancellor. Hitler committed suicide in April 1945.

Saddam Hussein: President of Iraq, 1979–2003. He came to power via military coup. Imprisoned in 2003 by American occupation forces, he was tried by the Iraqi Special Tribunal for crimes against humanity. In 2006 he was sentenced to death by hanging and executed that year.

Nahrendra Modi: Prime minister of India, 2014 to the present. He came into office through elections.

Benito Mussolini: Prime minister of Italy, 1922–1925; Head of State and Il Duce of Italy, 1925–1943; Head of State and Il Duce of the Republic of Salò, 1943–1945. King Victor Emmanuel III appointed him prime minister. The Fascist Grand Council removed him from power in July 1943 and imprisoned him. In September 1943, Adolf Hitler had him freed and placed him at the head of the Republic of Salò, a Nazi client state. Italian partisans executed him in April 1945.

Victor Orbán: Hungarian prime minister, 2010 to the present. He came into office through elections. As of April 2020, he rules by decree.

Augusto Pinochet Ugarte: President of the Governing Junta of Chile, 1973–1990; president of Chile, 1974–1990. He came into office through a military coup and was voted out of office by a 1988 plebiscite.

Vladimir Putin: President of Russia, 2000–2008, 2012 to the present. Prime minister, 2008–2012. He came into office both times through elections.

Mobutu Sese Seko: President of Zaire, 1965–1997. He came into office through a military coup. Born Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, in 1972 he changed his name to Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Wa Za Banga, which translates as "the all-powerful warrior who, because of his endurance and inflexible will to win, goes from

conquest to conquest, leaving fire in his wake." He was forced into exile in 1997 by opposition forces.

Donald J. Trump: President of the United States of America, 2016 to the present. He came to power through elections. In 2019 he was impeached by the House for abuse of power and obstruction of Congress. The Senate acquitted him on both counts in 2020.

NOTE ON TERMS AND LANGUAGE

I GIVE THE FULL NAME of individuals on first mention, then the last name only. For individuals from the Spanish-speaking world, I give both the paternal and maternal surnames on first mention, then just the paternal. For example, Augusto Pinochet Ugarte is referred to as Pinochet throughout the book.

There is no dominant spelling for some proper names. I use Gaddafi to refer to the Libyan dictator throughout the book, but readers will see Kadafi, Qaddafi, and other versions used in quotes and sources.

I use fascism for the general system of interwar government and Fascism for the Italian dictatorship. Following common usage, I use neo-Fascism and neo-Fascist for movements and individuals that espouse all varieties of fascism after 1945, and anti-Fascism and anti-Fascist for movements and individuals that oppose all varieties of fascism throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

I use terms as they appear in sources and discussions of the time. Mobutu Sese Seko renamed the Congo Zaire, so I use Zaire to refer to that country during the years of his rule (1965–1997). When speaking of the century-long repression of LGBTQ+ individuals, I use "homo-sexual" for the twentieth century and "LGBTQ+" for the twenty-first century.

All translations from French, Italian, Spanish, German, and Portuguese sources are my own unless otherwise noted.

STRONGMEN

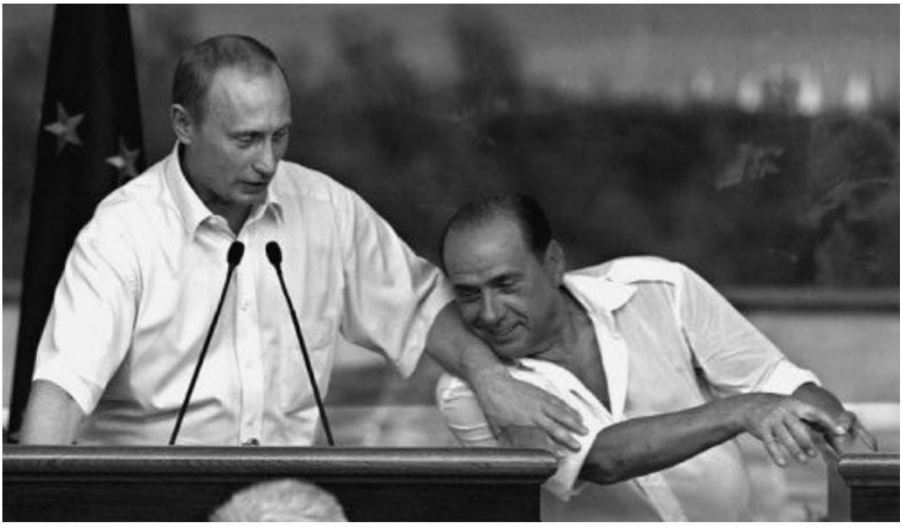
INTRODUCTION

ON NOVEMBER 4, 2008, when many world leaders waited to hear the results of the American presidential election, Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi was in his Roman residence preparing to have sex. "I'm going to take a shower," he told Patrizia D'Addario, his partner for the evening. "And if you finish before me, wait for me on the big bed."

> D'Addario: Which bed? Putin's?
> Berlusconi: Putin's.
> D'Addario: Oh, how cute. The one with the curtains.

Whether the bed was a gift from Vladimir Putin or the former Russian president and then-prime minister had merely slept there is unclear. Yet Berlusconi's "Putin bed" symbolized the intimacy of a friendship sustained by the leaders' common drive to exercise as much personal power as their political systems allowed and to appear to the world—and each other—as virile.[1] The men broke a record for bilateral visits among heads of state. In February 2003, they bonded at Putin's retreat in Zavidovo, near Moscow; in August they held a press conference in Sardinia, where Berlusconi had a villa. In the play by Dario Fo and Franca Rame, *The Two-Headed Anomaly,* which premiered that year in Rome, Putin was killed and his brain transplanted into Berlusconi.[2]

Silvio Berlusconi and Vladimir Putin in Zavidovo, Russia, February 2003.
VIKTOR KOROTAYEV / AFP / GETTY IMAGES



Berlusconi and Putin in Sardinia, Italy, August 2003.
STR / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

The Berlusconi-Putin relationship brought two supremely transactional individuals together as they traced two paths for twenty-first century authoritarian rule. The former developed an autocratic style of governance within a nominal democracy. He exerted strict control over his party, Forza Italia, and his ownership of commercial television networks gave him more influence over the formation of public opinion than any Italian leader since Benito Mussolini. Putin suppressed democracy as he domesticated Parliament, the media, and the judiciary, assassinated and jailed critics, and plundered the economy.

The close relationship of the two premiers worried Ronald Spogli, the American ambassador to Rome. In January 2009, he warned Hillary Clinton, secretary of state of the new Barack Obama administration, that Berlusconi regularly voiced "opinions and declarations that have been passed to him directly by Putin." Berlusconi's private envoy, Valentino Valentini, traveled frequently to Russia on his behalf, and the two men handled Italy's Russia policy, leaving the Italian Foreign Ministry "in the dark." Spogli suspected that a "nefarious connection" accounted for the secrecy. The Italian leader was likely profiting from deals between the Italian and Russian energy companies ENI and Gazprom in exchange for supporting Russian efforts to "dilute American security interests in Europe."[3]

When a Wikileaks document dump later made Spogli's memos public, the Italian Parliament launched an investigation. It confirmed that Berlusconi was poised to make a percentage profit from an ENI-Gazprom South Stream pipeline to be built under the Black Sea. By the time construction on the pipeline began in 2012, sex and corruption scandals and the eurozone crisis had driven Berlusconi from office. That year, *Berlus-Putin,* the Russian adaptation of Fo and Rame's play, opened in Moscow. In the

revised version, Berlusconi dies and his brain is transplanted into Putin, the political survivor between the two.[4]

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OURS IS THE AGE OF THE STRONGMAN, of heads of state like Berlusconi and Putin who damage or destroy democracy and use masculinity as a tool of political legitimacy. In America, Turkey, Brazil, and other geo-politically important nations, such rulers have exploited their countries' resources to satisfy their greed and obstructed efforts to combat climate change. Their dependence on corruption and censorship and their neglect of the public good mean that they handle national crises badly and often bring ruin upon their people. How to combat this authoritarian ascendance is one of the most pressing matters of our time.[5]

The initial responses of illiberal heads of state to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic are a case in point. All crises are leadership tests that clarify the core values, character, and governing style of rulers and their allies. Yet a public health emergency exposes with particular efficiency the costs of a perennial feature of autocratic rule: the repudiation of norms of transparency and accountability. The coronavirus outbreak started in Xi Jinping's China, a country of entrenched one-party rule. Wuhan doctor Li Wenliang warned his peers in December 2019 about the virus's destructive potential. The Chinese police silenced him, classifying his truth-telling as "illegal behavior," since it conflicted with government assertions that the disease was "preventable and controllable." In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán used the pandemic to complete his process of autocratic capture. He declared a state of emergency and then instituted rule by decree to give himself dictatorial powers. In Brazil, where democracy is under assault, President Jair Bolsonaro claimed that COVID-19 was no worse than the flu and fired his health minister, Luiz Henrique Mandetta, for advising the public to practice social distancing. In each case, the leader's

priority was not to save lives, but to maintain or expand his power. With climate change likely to cause increased levels of disease and scarcity, the spread of the strongman style of rule doesn't just endanger democracy, but also poses an existential threat.[6]

"NO HISTORIAN CAN GET INSIDE the heads of the dead ... But with sufficient documentation, we can detect patterns of thought and action," writes Robert Darnton.[7] This book aims to do just that by looking at the evolution of authoritarianism, defined as a political system in which executive power is asserted at the expense of the legislative and judicial branches of government. I focus on Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, Francisco Franco Bahamonde, Muammar Gaddafi, Augusto Pinochet Ugarte, Mobutu Sese Seko, Silvio Berlusconi, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Vladimir Putin, and Donald Trump, with Idi Amin, Mohamed Siad Barre, Jair Bolsonaro, Rodrigo Duterte, Nahrendra Modi, Viktor Orbán, and others making cameo appearances.

To illuminate the entire arc of authoritarian rule, starting with how democracies are degraded or destroyed, I do not include Communist leaders like Xi who take power in an already-closed system. I do acknowledge the ways Communist and other authoritarianisms developed through mutual influence. Zairean anti-Communist president Mobutu learned from the personality cults of Communist leaders like Nicolae Ceausescu of Romania and China's Mao Zedong. He took one of his titles, the Helmsman, from the latter.[8]

Some readers may wonder why I do not discuss strong female leaders in modern history, such as Britain's prime minister Margaret Thatcher or India's prime minister Indira Gandhi. While some of these women may have had certain strongman traits (Thatcher's nickname was "The Iron Lady") or engaged in repressive actions against minority populations, none of them sought to destroy democracy, and so they are not addressed here.

MANY STUDIES POINT TO recent historical events to explain today's turn away from democracy, like the 2008 recession and increases in global migration that heightened racist sentiments. Other works go back to the collapse of Communism in 1989–1990. Unleashing nationalist and tribalist sentiments in Eastern Europe, it encouraged the resurgence of the far right in Western Europe as well. Putin, the former Communist functionary who is now a leader of the global right, successfully rode that tide of political upheaval and ideological transformation.[9]

Populism is a common term for the parties and movements that carry forth this illiberal evolution of democratic politics. While populism is not inherently authoritarian, many strongmen past and present have used populist rhetoric that defines their nations as bound by faith, race, and ethnicity rather than legal rights. For authoritarians, only some people are "the people," regardless of their birthplace or citizenship status, and only the leader, above and beyond any institution, embodies that group. This is why, in strongman states, attacking the leader is seen as attacking the nation itself, and why critics are labeled "enemies of the people" or terrorists.[10]

Strongmen argues that today's leaders also have deeper roots. They recycle rhetoric and actions that go back to the dawn of authoritarianism in the 1920s and are invested in rehabilitating their autocratic predecessors. Putin has approved the erection of statues of Joseph Stalin in cities like Novosibirsk and Moscow, and Russian scholars who write about the mass graves of Stalin's victims have been imprisoned.[11] Berlusconi spread the lie that Mussolini "never killed anyone." Bolsonaro makes the false claim that Nazism was a left-wing phenomenon. Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz sent fascist-nostalgia signals in 2018 when he called for an "axis of the willing" among Hungary, Italy, and Austria (all fascist or collaborationist states during World War II) to combat illegal migration. To understand today's authoritarians and their

allies, we need a historical perspective.[12]

FOR A POLITICAL SYSTEM THAT affects the lives of so many, authoritarianism remains a surprisingly fuzzy concept. We still lack a common language to speak about the governments of twenty-first century authoritarian rulers who repress civil liberties but use elections to keep themselves in power. Orbán celebrates his transformation of Hungary into an "illiberal democracy," using the term Fareed Zakaria coined in a landmark 1997 article in *Foreign Affairs*. More recently, labels like "hybrid regimes," "electoral autocracies," or "new authoritarianism" (the term used here) proliferate as scholars seek to classify this new wave of antidemocratic rule.[13] A long view of the authoritarian style of governance, which highlights baseline features that recur in different historical circumstances, as well as what changes over time, can help us to understand authoritarianism as it manifests today.

From Mussolini through Putin, all of the strongmen featured in this book establish forms of personalist rule, which concentrates enormous power in one individual whose own political and financial interests prevail over national ones in shaping domestic and foreign policy. Loyalty to him and his allies, rather than expertise, is the primary qualification for serving in the state bureaucracy, as is participation in his corruption schemes. Personalist rulers can be long-lasting rulers, because they control patronage networks that bind people to them in relationships of complicity and fear. Making all political activity bolster his own authority allowed Franco to stay in power in Spain for thirty-six years.[14]

The leaders discussed here have all put their mark on the authoritarian playbook—a set of interlinked tools and tactics that have evolved over a century. *Strongmen* focuses on propaganda, virility, corruption, and violence, as well as the tools people have

used to resist authoritarianism and hasten its fall.[15] The practices and behaviors of today's rulers—and those of their opponents—have their own histories. When Putin poses shirtless, he recalls Mussolini's pioneering bodily display. Philippines president Duterte boasts of throwing enemies out of helicopters, evoking Chilean dictator Pinochet's practices. Resource extraction has inspired strongman partnerships from Mussolini and Hitler to Berlusconi and Putin. American president Trump's 2019 view of his country's interest in Syria is in this spirit: "We're keeping the oil. We have the oil. The oil is secure. We left the troops behind, only for the oil." I bring into focus histories of violence and plunder that are too rarely examined in a transnational and transhistorical frame.[16]

Strongmen adds to discussions of authoritarianism by highlighting the importance of virility and how it works together with other tools of rule. The leader's displays of machismo and his kinship with other male leaders are not just bluster, but a way of exercising power at home and conducting foreign policy. Virility enables his corruption, projecting the idea that he is above laws that weaker individuals must follow. It also translates into state policies that target women and LGBTQ+ populations, who are as much the strongman's enemies as prosecutors and the press. Anti-colonial leaders like Mobutu and Ugandan president Amin were often as misogynist and anti-homosexual as their racist imperialist peers.

The authoritarian playbook provides continuity through the book's three periods of strongman rule: the fascist era, 1919–1945, the age of military coups, 1950–1990, and the new authoritarian age, 1990 to the present, the first two unfolding in dialogue with continuing Communist governance. Part I, Getting to Power, focuses on how such leaders get into office. Part II, Tools of Rule, first examines their projects of national greatness, revealing the logic of their policies. I then explore their use of propaganda,

virility, corruption, and violence to stay in power. Part III, Losing Power, tracks resistance to the strongman, the decline of his authority, and his exit from office. Moving through Europe, the Americas, and Africa, *Strongmen* covers a century of tyranny under leaders that promise law and order and then enable lawless behavior by financial and sexual predators. It reveals how such leaders think and act, who they depend on, and how they can be opposed.

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FOR ONE HUNDRED YEARS, charismatic leaders have found favor at moments of uncertainty and transition. Often coming from outside the political system, they create new movements, forge new alliances, and communicate with their followers in original ways. Authoritarians hold appeal when society is polarized, or divided into two opposing ideological camps, which is why they do all they can to exacerbate strife. Periods of progress in gender, labor, or racial emancipation have also been fertile terrain for openly racist and sexist aspirants to office, who soothe fears of the loss of male domination and class privilege and the end of White Christian "civilization." Cultural conservatives have repeatedly gravitated to antidemocratic politics at such junctures of history, enabling dangerous individuals to enter mainstream politics and gain control of government.[17]

From the start, authoritarians stand out from other kinds of politicians by appealing to negative experiences and emotions. They don the cloak of national victimhood, reliving the humiliations of their people by foreign powers as they proclaim themselves their nation's saviors. Picking up on powerful resentments, hopes, and fears, they present themselves as the vehicle for obtaining what is most wanted, whether it is territory, safety from racial others, securing male authority, or payback for exploitation by internal or external enemies. A wildly gesticulating

Mussolini demanding justice for his country struck some as a histrionic "carnival-barker Caesar," but the politics of raw emotion he employed remains powerful today. So do the rhetoric of crisis and emergency and the comfort of knowing who to blame for the nation's troubles—and who to trust to solve those troubles once and for all. As the anthropologist Ernest Becker observes,

> It is [fear] that makes people so willing to follow brash, strong-looking demagogues ... capable of cleansing the world of the vague, the weak, the uncertain, the evil. Ah, to give oneself over to their direction—what calm, what relief.[18]

As he gains a following, the aspiring leader tests out tools like propaganda and corruption that will later help him rule. The decay of truth and democratic dissolution proceed hand in hand, starting with the insurgent's assertion that the establishment media delivers false or biased information while he speaks the truth and risks everything to get the "real facts" out. Once his supporters bond to his person, they stop caring about his falsehoods. They believe him because they believe *in him*.[19] Many future autocrats pose as fresh alternatives to a morally bankrupt political system, even if they have a police record (Mussolini, Hitler) or were under investigation (Trump, Putin, Berlusconi). "All they have ever cared about are their own interests and those of their corrupt followers," a pro-Fascist lawyer wrote about the Italian political establishment in 1922, sounding like those who support populist parties and authoritarian leaders a century later.[20]

While not every ruler uses repression to get to power, all of them are skilled in the art of threat. Proclaiming a personal capacity for violence while running for office is a common twenty-first-century tactic, as when Trump declared he could shoot someone on Fifth Avenue and not lose any followers in January 2016. Some warn the nation that they intend to target certain categories of people. "I am telling the Filipino people not to vote for me, because it will be bloody," declared Duterte in 2015 of his

vow to kill thousands of drug dealers and criminals if elected president.[21]

Shock events, or grave incidents that often prompt declarations of states of emergency, drive forward authoritarian history. They propel some individuals into office and give others who are already in power the excuse to do things they've wanted to do anyway, like securing their hold on government and silencing the opposition. In such situations, the temporary state of emergency may become normalized, "no longer the exception but the rule," as the anti-Nazi philosopher Walter Benjamin put it. For a century, knowing how to capitalize on calamity, whether you had something to do with it or not, has been an essential strongman skill.[22]

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IN HIS 1931 BOOK *The Technique of the Coup d'Etat,* the Italian-Austrian journalist and writer Curzio Malaparte cautioned that Mussolini, in power for a decade, was "a modern man, cold, audacious, violent and calculating," and predicted that Hitler, then rising in popularity due to the Depression, would be even worse. The Austrian might look like a waiter and rant like a fool, but Germans had acclaimed him as "an ascetic, a mystic of the cult of action," just as many Italians had responded to Mussolini. If Hitler got into office, Malaparte warned, he would try to "corrupt, humble, and enslave the German people, in the name of German liberty, glory, and power."[23]

Journalists, aides, and others who have witnessed the strongman's dangerous character firsthand echo Malaparte's chillingly accurate forecast. Authoritarianism has had vastly divergent outcomes as it evolved over a century. The fascists committed genocide, while twenty-first-century leaders tend to favor targeted assassinations and mass detention. This makes the coherence of the collective portrait that emerges, the traits of one

ruler eerily echoing those of others, more striking. Hitler resembled many later leaders in being an indecisive and insecure ruler behind his all-powerful Führer facade, his opinions sometimes reflecting the last person he had spoken to. Mobutu was hardly the only authoritarian to be "obsessively concerned with slights to his Presidency," as US ambassador to Zaire Brandon Grove asserted. Nor was Mussolini alone in spending hours each day reading the press "where every item dealing with him ... has been marked by subordinates. He reads them with the air of a man seeking something," in the journalist George Seldes's 1935 observation. Putin continues the lineage of personalist rule in translating his private preoccupations with "loss of status, resentment, desire for respect, and vulnerability" into state policy.[24]

The strongman's impulsive and irascible nature (most have severe anger issues) and the "divide and rule" practices he follows to prevent anyone else from gaining too much power produce governments full of conflict and upheaval. Erdoğan's unpredictable decision-making, which is worsened by surrounding himself with family members and flatterers, is typical. So is the time the authoritarian leader's officials spend doing damage control when he has once again "insulted adversaries, undermined his aides, repeatedly changed course ... and induced chaos." Gaddafi took chaos to an extreme, repealing entire legal frameworks from one day to the next. Being unpredictable energized him, as it did Amin and others who "have ideas of grandeur, think that they have the answer to complicated problems and in a sense lose touch with reality," in the words of Dr. David Barkham, Amin's personal physician. Amin's self-imposed title—His Excellency, President for Life, Field Marshal Al Hadji Doctor Idi Amin Dada, VC, DSO, MC, Lord of All the Beasts of the Earth and Fishes of the Seas, and Conqueror of the British Empire in Africa in General and Uganda in Particular—says it all.[25]

On one issue, the strongman has been consistent: his drive to control and exploit everyone and everything for personal gain. The men, women, and children he governs have value in his eyes only insofar as they produce babies, fight his enemies, and adulate him publicly. Each tool of his rule has its place within this scheme. Propaganda lets him monopolize the nation's attention, and virility comes into play as he poses as the ideal take-charge man. Repression creates confinement spaces full of captive bodies. Corruption lets him claim as his own the fruits of the nation's labor. The writer Jon Lee Anderson sums up a common authoritarian pathology of possession: "the technologies of paranoia, the stories of slaughter and fear, the vaults, the national economies employed as personal property, the crazy pets, the prostitutes, the golden fixtures"—anything that can chase away their fear of not having enough or losing what they already have. When they finally depart office, dead or alive, there is a sense that "their mania had left room in the country for nothing else."[26]

Personalist rulers can be the most destructive kinds of authoritarians because they do not distinguish between their individual agendas and needs and those of the nation. Their private obsessions set the tone for public discourse, skew institutional priorities, and force large-scale resource reallocations, as happened most famously in Hitler's war against the Jews. Authoritarian history is full of projects and causes championed by the ruler out of hubris and megalomania and implemented to disastrous effect. Mussolini's 1935 invasion of Ethiopia to give Italy an empire bankrupted the Italian state. Mobutu's massive projects for the Congo River—two Inga Falls dams and an Inga-Shaba power line—caused a debt crisis in Zaire. Trump's border wall with Mexico has claimed federal funds meant for defense and disaster prevention.

Authoritarianism has been reputed to be an efficient mode of governance, but my study of the dynamics and costs of personalist

Saddam Hussein, and Mobutu.[33]

THE HISTORY OF THE STRONGMAN can make for difficult reading. These rulers promise a bright national future, but the emotions they elicit are bleak. The line between everyday life and horror in their states can be razor-thin. Amin entertained diplomats at Kampala's swanky Nile Hotel, enjoying the knowledge that his security forces were beating dissidents in the basement. Pinochet's military made some leftists watch the torture of people they knew on a blue-lit "stage." Gaddafi had a "Department of Protocol" to procure his sexual captives. As the philosopher Hannah Arendt argued, authoritarian states thrive on the synergy of bureaucracy and violence.[34]

Along with these histories, there are others of hope and inspiration. *Strongman* relates the quiet heroism of men and women who tried to keep social bonds and family ties strong "under the most adverse external conditions imaginable, across space and time," as Gabriele Herz wrote from the Moringen work camp in Germany in 1937. Herz, a Jew, felt fortunate to have gotten off relatively lightly, emigrating with her family after nine months in captivity. Her memoir pays tribute to the solidarity she found in Moringen and the resilience of her fellow prisoners. Victoria Hösl, a Communist worker, sent a picture of herself, sketched by a graphic artist inmate, to her son, whom the authorities had placed in a convent after the Gestapo took her away. "I recognized you right away, dearest Mommy, even though I haven't seen you for years," he wrote back touchingly.[35] Such stories of love that resists the state's attempts to destroy it call out to us today.

language to mobilize people. He pitched Fascism as "both subversive and conservative": it favored national unity instead of class conflict, imperialism and force instead of international solidarity, and promised modernization without loss of tradition.[5]

Both the National Fascist Party (PNF), founded in 1921 by Mussolini, and the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP), which Hitler led as of 1921, electrified followers with the idea that revolution could be used to suppress rather than enable the sweeping political and social emancipation wrought by the war. Reversing female empowerment at a time of mass male injury and declining birth rates was one target of fascism; neutralizing workers galvanized by the Russian and 1918 German and Hungarian revolutions to demand more rights, another. The spread of atheistic Communism also seemed to threaten White Christian civilization, as did the perceived loss of imperial controls over peoples of color. The 1919 Versailles Treaty deprived Germany of its colonies, and the Paris Peace Conference that produced the treaty recognized the world's first independent Arab state, the Tripolitanian Republic, inside Italian Libya.[6]

The disaffection with conventional politics and politicians after a ruinous war created yearnings for a new kind of leader. The cults that rose up around Mussolini and Hitler in the early 1920s answered anxieties about the decline of male status, the waning of traditional religious authority, and the loss of moral clarity. Those who saw these men speak in person, like Heinrich Class, chair of the Pan-German League, and the critic Ugo Ojetti, felt they were witnessing "something entirely new in the political life of our nation": the comfort of "the world reduced to black and white," presented by someone with "absolute faith in himself and in his own powers of persuasion."[7]

Out of the crucible of these years came the cults of victimhood that turned emotions like resentment and humiliation into positive elements of party platforms. The Versailles Treaty, which

a young Florentine squadrist in 1921.[10]

Mussolini's partnership with conservatives provided a template for later authoritarians. On their own, the Fascists would have gone nowhere— those who ran independently in the 1921 elections got 0.4 percent of the vote. In alliance with Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti's National Bloc coalition, though, they entered Parliament as the PNF. Neither Giolitti nor his peers worried much about Fascist violence. Taming the left was the competency the ruling class most desired in a leader, and they stuck with Mussolini until it was too late to save Italian democracy.

Benito Mussolini, 1920s.
PHOTO 12 / ANN RONAN PICTURE LIBRARY / AGEFOTOSTOCK

By then, word of Mussolini's mystique was spreading. Robust and 5 feet 7 inches tall, with a bald head and jutting jaw, he seemed to inflate in front of a crowd. He reminded many of

Maciste, a popular Italian muscleman and film star. Mussolini's intense gaze attracted much attention, as it seemed to be powered by a mysterious energy source. One admirer felt overcome by Mussolini's "magnetic energy"; another felt "electrified." The young officer Carlo Ciseri hated politicians until he saw Mussolini speak in 1920. "I immediately felt hugely drawn to him. I liked his words, I liked his pride, his force, and the look in his eyes.... I have seen something exceptional in this man," he wrote in his diary.[11]

"Does Fascism aim at restoring the State, or subverting it?" Mussolini teased his followers, playing on his movement's ideological ambiguity. He was the sole reference point and interpreter of Fascism for his motley crew of backers that included bankers, rural dwellers, and housewives. Imperialism also held Mussolini's Fascism together. Although Italy then occupied Eritrea, Libya, Somalia, and the Dodecanese Islands, Mussolini claimed that imperial France and Great Britain invoked a double standard by denying Italy the right to an empire. "It is our destiny that the Mediterranean return to being ours," he told Italians in 1921.[12]

After so much violence, Mussolini did not have to stage a coup to take power. King Victor Emmanuel III, commander of the Italian armed forces, could have easily disarmed the Fascists, who never counted more than 30,000 in a country of about 40 million people. Instead, this shy man chose the path of least conflict, appointing Mussolini to the post of prime minister in October 1922. The American ambassador to Rome, Richard Washburn Child, had already assured Mussolini that the United States would not object to a Fascist-led coalition government. While violence prepared the path, the March on Rome, celebrated by Fascists to this day on October 28 as a populist uprising, was an elite-approved transfer of power.[13]

Over the next two years, as blackshirt violence continued, Mussolini pioneered authoritarian strategies to weaken Italian democracy. He turned Parliament into a bully pulpit and

denounced negative coverage of him and Fascism as "criminal." He created the Fascist Grand Council and the Voluntary Militia for National Security as parallel governance and defense structures, but elites did not heed these red flags. The art critic Margherita Sarfatti, the most important of the Italian leader's lovers of the 1920s, polished his image to help him win over financial and industrial elites. Privatizing the electric, telephone, and insurance sectors helped even more. Italian Parliament passed a Fascist-sponsored electoral reform that gave any party receiving over 25 percent of the vote two-thirds of seats. This measure, plus voter intimidation and fraud, gave the Fascists 64.9 percent of the vote in the April 1924 election.[14]

Mussolini, now known as Il Duce, was on top of the world—and then the Socialist leader Giacomo Matteotti threatened to ruin everything. Matteotti, trained as a lawyer, was all that Mussolini was not: tall, urbane, and known for his integrity. Fascist thugs had already physically assaulted him several times for denouncing Fascist electoral interference and destruction of the rule of law. Matteotti ignored the shouted death threats coming from Fascist deputies in May 1924 as he called out Italy's slide into "absolutism" in Parliament, joking to his allies, "now you may write the eulogy for my funeral."[15]

The fastest way to lose your life to a strongman is to publicly denounce his corruption. Matteotti wasn't just an outspoken anti-Fascist, but also a crusader for government ethics, who had spent nights and weekends compiling an exhaustive dossier of PNF crimes. It contained evidence of illegal financial transactions, such as bribes paid by the American oil company Sinclair (already tainted by the American Teapot Dome Scandal) to Fascist officials in return for a monopoly on oil exploration rights in Italy. Mussolini's brother Arnaldo, who served as his fixer, featured in the documents that Matteotti was set to read at the next parliamentary session.[16]

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