The Rise of Stalin and Mussolini: The Importance of Historical Context in the Study of Leader Emergence

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Abstract

This study uses historical comparisons of Joseph Stalin and Benito Mussolini to better understand the factors that contribute to leader emergence. Leader effectiveness is not evaluated in this study. The focus of these historical inquiries is early ascensions to power during the early to mid-1920s. The factors that contribute to leader emergence can be divided into the categories of 1. individual traits and skills and 2. social, cultural, and political contexts of the follower base. The conclusion of these historical analyses is that leader emergence is facilitated as an interaction between historical contexts and the traits and skills of the leader. Sole emphasis on individual leadership abilities is inadequate to explain leader emergence. This finding provides the theoretical justification for the further integration of historical inquiry along with psychological studies in the field of leadership studies.

Joseph Stalin: “The Man of Steel”

The Individual:
- Shrewd
- Ruthless
- Discrete in ambitions
- Ideologically Marxist

Skills:
- Talented politician
- Tactful manipulator
- Effective bureaucratic operator

Historical Context:
- The Rise of the Communist Party:
  - Stalin ascended within Communist Party apparatus rather than greater Soviet society
  - Success of the Bolsheviek Party in 1917 and during the Russian Civil War was an essential component to Stalin’s later consolidation of power
  - Stalin’s early alliance with Lenin proved an essential asset when Lenin eventually asserted control of the party
- Conditions within the Communist Party following Lenin’s death:
  - Factionalism between Stalinists and Trotskyites
  - Lack of centralized authority to control regional peripheries of the party apparatus

Benito Mussolini: “Il Duce”

The Individual:
- Powerful charisma
- Strong intelligence
- Exhibitionism
- Disdain for decadence and luxury

Skills:
- Displayed exceptional work-ethic
- Unique oratory flair
- Mastery of image-building
- Talented politician

Historical Context:
- Risorgimento:
  - Unification of the numerous nation-states of the Italian peninsula throughout the late 1800s
  - Failed to produce a cohesive society
- Legacy of World War I:
  - Question of neutrality vs. intervention fractured Italian society and politics; caused a divisive split between socialists and the liberal establishment
  - Post-wars years saw inflation, government debt, and high unemployment
  - Poor treatment of Italy at Paris Peace Conference despite nominal victory angered masses
- Modernism in Italian Culture:
  - Following WWI, Italian society desired a modern, efficient, and powerful unified state
  - Resentment towards the failure of liberal institutions in early 1900s

Integration and Analysis

Mussolini:
- Personal charisma and nationalistic oratory
- Satisfied Italian need for unity following the failed Risorgimento and the chaos following World War I
- Embodiment of fascist image of the “new Italian man”
- Fulfilled modernist desires within Italian society to break from the stagnant liberal years and rapidly emerge as a global power

Stalin:
- Talent as politician and manipulator
- Utilized preexisting factionalism and structured factions within the Communist Party to consolidate power; gained genuine support of subordinates by solidifying their positions of power along with his own
- Effective bureaucratic operator
- Fulfilled Party need for order and consolidation caused by the Central Committee’s lack of centralized authority and inability to control regional party apparatuses

Emergent Leaders Compared

Similarities:
- Both opposed liberalism; supported powerful government institutions
- Gained support in the post-WWI period, directly benefiting from instability and societal unrest caused by the aftermath of the war

Fundamental Difference: Mussolini founded an ideology and a movement with himself as the leader; Stalin operated within an organization that existed before him and continued to operate after his death. Mussolini lead the Fascist Party before the party rose to power, while the Communist Party rose to power before Stalin emerged as the leader of the party.

Implication: How should individual traits and skills versus social, cultural, and political contexts be weighted in terms of their respective causal impacts on leader emergence?

Implications for Leadership Studies

- Supports understanding of leader emergence as a result of the interaction between individual traits and skills and the social, cultural, and political contexts driving followers
- Provides justification for the use of historical inquiries in coordination with psychological studies in leader emergence theory
- Promotes use of the historical comparative method to understand past leader emergence and to predict future leader emergence
- Imply potential value of such predictive leader emergence theories for business, government, and intelligence sectors

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Sources:
Secondary source materials came from authors including Hannah Arendt, R.B.J. Bosworth, Roger Griffin, James Harris, Christopher Hibbert, Steven Kukin, Christopher Monty, Erik van Ree, Robert Service, and Denis Mack Smith. Please inquiry for a comprehensive list of citation materials.