

Spring 2008



Studies in Charismatic Leadership: Winston Churchill and Adolf Hitler

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Course Description:

Charisma is a strange, fascinating, and ultimately puzzling phenomenon. This course will study its expression in the charismatic leadership of Winston Churchill and Adolf Hitler. These two men had radically opposed ideas and values, yet they each expressed various aspects of this complex phenomenon. Ironically, Churchill's greatness emerged most fully in response to Hitler's threat to engulf the whole of Europe as the two faced one another across the English Channel during the fateful, destiny-shaping days of 1940-41.

We will explore several theories of charisma, applying them to an analysis of both Churchill and Hitler through written, video, and audio materials and we will visit some of the many sites in or near London associated with Churchill's life and career. In addition, we will extend these theories and their insights into a broader understanding of society itself.

Why Study Charismatic Leadership?

The concept of charisma – literally meaning “the gift of grace” – was introduced to the social sciences in the writings of the great German scholar Max Weber early in the 1900's. Since that time the term has gained a wide and often misused currency in our popular vocabulary. Part of the rationale for this course is to correct those misunderstandings and to gain a theoretically grounded and clear insight into the meaning of the idea. Fortuitously, recent history has provided us with two powerful exemplars of charismatic leadership in the persons of Winston Churchill and Adolf Hitler. In 1940 they were locked in what historian John Lukacs has characterized as “the eighty days duel” in which “Churchill was *the* opponent of Hitler, the incarnation of the reaction to Hitler, the incarnation of the resistance of an old world, of old freedoms, of old standards against a man incarnating a force that was frighteningly efficient, brutal and new.” These two figures commanded the world's attention during what was arguably the greatest crisis of the twentieth century. There exist film and radio recordings of both men, as well as a



huge body of scholarly analysis exploring their lives; this provides a rich source of primary and secondary materials through which we can gain an understanding of charisma. In spite of all their differences, their careers and characteristics as charismatic figures have startling parallels. Hitler may actually have been the more charismatic of the two, but as William Manchester has written, "Churchill's prospects were dramatically altered [when] Adolf Hitler entered his life.... By provoking his titanic wrath, this challenge from Europe released enormous stores of long-suppressed vitality within him." The many forms of that vitality make Churchill a particularly compelling and attractive study in his own right.

Churchill and Hitler both rose to power in the context of what was to become World War Two. Comprehending their leadership requires knowledge of the context in which their leadership emerged, and so a secondary purpose of the course is to gain the knowledge of that context and to see its relevance to the present day.

Objectives of the Course:

From a strictly academic point of view, the study of charismatic leaders is especially revealing of a number of significant insights into the workings of society – exploring the characteristics and behaviors of charismatic leaders is an exciting way to learn a great deal of sociology. From a more practical point of view, it is helpful to understand the phenomenon of charismatic leadership in order fully to appreciate the influence of various leaders in political and social life today. Finally, and perhaps most important, for those of us who are interested in becoming better leaders ourselves, the study of charismatic leadership offers occasions rich in insight and example of how leadership works. The course introduces a specific theoretical paradigm for examining and understanding charismatic leadership, together with a more general framework for locating the role of charismatic leadership in the creation and maintenance of social realities. Both of these elements are readily generalizable to other forms of leadership.

Course materials will include excerpts from Ruth Willner, *The Spellbinders*; John Lucas, *The Duel*; James Humes, *Churchill: Speaker of the Century*; Andrew Roberts, *Hitler & Churchill: Secrets of Leadership*; and Michael A. Toth, *The Theory of the Two Charismas*.

This class will utilize both video and audio materials that portray many of the dynamic elements of the charismatic leadership of Churchill and Hitler. Lectures and discussions will accompany these materials to provide the theoretical perspectives that help make sense of how charismatic leadership occurs and will also provide context and background to the actual historical events. Additional materials portraying other leaders and incidents will be used to provide other insights into the social dynamics of charismatic leadership.

Students will be expected to attend and participate in every class session, maintain a course-long journal with responses to weekly questions, prompts, and field trip excursions, and explore in greater depth a self-selected topic of personal interest relevant to charismatic leadership.

Basic Course Outline:

(the course will include both weekly class sessions and outside excursions)

Week 1: Background to understanding charismatic leadership.

Reality as a social process. The fundamental praxis of OMM.

Week 2: Expressions of Charismatic Leadership.

Churchill, Hitler, FDR, JFK, MLK, others.

Week 3: A useful model for understanding charismatic/all leadership.

Vernon's ISAS model & its application, Martin Luther King, Jr. in Montgomery, Alabama, parallels with Germany.

Week 4: Weber's classic typology: three types of leadership.

Concepts of power, authority, legitimacy, charisma, the sacred.

Week 5: Churchill as a charismatic leader, Hitler as a charismatic leader.

Extracting the essential characteristics.

Week 6: Hitler in his own drama: "Seduction of a Nation,"

Weaving spells through word and image.

Week 7: Churchill in his own words: "mobilizing the English language."

Weaving spells through word and image.

Week 8: Are we impervious?

Case studies and other examples.

Week 9: What happens when charismatic leaders depart?

Routinization and crises of succession.

Wk 10: Remaining issues: omissions, dangers and prospects.

The question of gender. Is charisma still possible? Still desirable?

A Note about Class Excursions:

London offers many fascinating sites to visit: the Imperial War Museum (which has an excellent time-line historical display of the war years, an extensive collection of military weapons, and a walk-through diorama of the London Blitz), the House of Commons (which was the center of Churchill's long career), the underground Cabinet War Rooms and Churchill Museum (from which Churchill commanded the British war effort during the early 1940's), and the "Our Finest Hour" display of the Battle of Britain located at the RAF Museum, just outside London proper. These latter two provide a glimpse of the intense drama of the period of Churchill's compelling wartime leadership. We hope to include a daylong excursion to Chartwell, Churchill's lovely home and grounds in Kent, kept largely just the way he lived in it and which now also serves as a museum with a large collection of his art. Reactions to and reflections on these excursions will be part of students' journaling activities.



Some Recommended Advance Surfing:

If you would like to do some advance reading here are two excellent web sites:

Winston Churchill at <http://www.winstonchurchill.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=34>

Adolph Hitler at <http://www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/riseofhitler/index.htm>