Preface

Wake, Amakó, wake!
And muster for the war:
The wizard wolves from Keisi’s brake,
The vultures from afar,
Are gathering at Uhlanga’s call
And following fast our westward way,
They shall have glorious prey!
(George F. Angas, *The Kafirs Illustrated*)

Vain the ambition of kings
Who seek by trophies and dead things
To leave a living name behind,
And weave but nets to catch the wind.
(John Webster, *Vanitas Vanitatum*)

… [S]o shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forc’d cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall’n on the inventors’ heads.
(William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*)

I make war on the living, not on the dead.
(Charles V, comment made after the death of Martin Luther)

I shall be an autocrat: that’s my trade. And the good Lord will forgive me: that’s his.
(Catherine the Great, attributed)

Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac.
(Henry Kissinger, quoted in the *New York Times*)

Dionysius, a Greek tyrant of Syracuse in the fourth century BC, once invited a courtier named Damocles to dinner. Damocles had earlier flattered him about the might of his army, the magnificence of his treasures, the beauty of his palaces and the immense resources at his disposition. He had exclaimed, ‘With those riches, no one could ever be happier.’ To which Dionysius had responded, ‘Since you think that my life is so pleasant, would you like to have
a taste of it yourself?’ Predictably, Damocles had answered in the affirmative, saying that he would be delighted. The dinner invitation had followed.

On the night of the dinner Dionysius laid out a magnificent banquet for his guest. When Damocles arrived, he was ushered to a couch of gold, covered with beautiful tapestries, and offered perfumes, garlands, the best food in the land, and beautiful men and women eager to be of service. But Dionysius had included one small extra item in his opulent setting. He had ordered a sharp-edged sword to be suspended from the ceiling by very slender horsehair, just over the seat his guest would be offered. When, after taking his seat, Damocles saw what was suspended over his head, he had neither the courage to rise and remove himself, nor the ability – given the threat – to enjoy his meal. In spite of the splendid meal and the magnificence of the surroundings, Damocles was in a complete state of terror, expecting the string to break at any moment. Dionysius took note of his fear and remarked, ‘Now you know what this glorious life I live is all about! There will never be any happiness for me, because I am threatened continually by danger. I can never feel safe.’

This anecdote illustrates the dilemma faced by tyrants such as Dionysius. In spite of all their possessions, in spite of all their power, such people have to be perpetually on their guard. Haunted by anxiety and the constant fear of assassination, they trust nobody. The resulting strain makes them unpleasant to be with and influences the way they deal with others. The absolute rulers of today – men such as Robert Mugabe, Fidel Castro, and Kim Jong-Il – must all live with this kind of pressure.

For years I have been curious about what makes despotic leaders tick. As a lifelong student of leadership, I have often wondered what motivates political leaders who resort to destructive activities unimaginable to the normal mind. What can be said about the personality structure of such despots? What makes them behave the way they do? How did they become so cruel? On a lesser (and far more common) scale, what can be said about people who engage in ruthlessly abrasive behavior in the workplace? What is wrong with business leaders who seem to have lost their sense of humanity? Why and how do they create a culture of terror in their companies?

The behavior of such people raises questions about power. What happens to human beings when they acquire power? Is the abuse of power inevitable? Apparently Thomas Jefferson thought so: he once wrote in a letter, ‘Whenever a man casts a longing eye on offices, a rottenness begins in his conduct.’ Power can be like pestilence, contaminating those who touch it; it can be like a narcotic, turning the power-hungry into addicts. Many people who seem quite sane to all outside appearances have suddenly engaged in pathological behavior when given power. In fact, we all seem to possess a darker side – one that shows itself only in certain situations, such as the acquisition of power. The violent potential deep within has surprised many a person.
Although each tyrant is unique in what he or she tries to accomplish, this book focuses on a single ruler, in order to illustrate the characteristics of despotism and gain insight into its psychodynamics. For this purpose, one of the most controversial African leaders of all time has been selected: the Zulu king Shaka kaSenzangakhona – or Shaka Zulu. During his short reign, this unusual leader established one of the most successful regimes based on terror that has ever existed. Although some people idolize this great warrior-king and excuse his excesses, to many inhabitants of southern Africa his name still inspires fear. His life story – rich in adventures and battles and decisions that had an enormous impact on the geography of southern Africa – is the stuff of which legends are made. A close look at that life story will allow us to better understand the psychology of terror. Shaka Zulu serves, in the pages of this volume, as a proxy for all despots in all times. Using his short, dramatic life as a case study, we will discover what drives despots and what makes for totalitarian societies. We will also examine human nature more generally. We may learn that all of us have a Shaka Zulu in the attic.

A ROAD MAP

The primary objective of this book is to give the reader a greater understanding of what despotic leaders are all about, what leadership lessons can be learned from them, what makes for totalitarian states, and what can be done to prevent despotic leaders from coming to the fore. To provide a modicum of structure to this vast topic, I have divided the book into four parts.

I begin with an introduction to set the stage, explaining the kind of magnifying glass used to examine the actions of this despot. Then, in the three chapters of Part I, I offer a historical description of the life of Shaka in the context of the Zulu culture. In these opening chapters I give an account of the dramatic career of this warrior-king. In Part II, consisting of five chapters, I scrutinize the question of character, attempting to get inside the despotic mind. Integrating developmental, interpersonal, cognitive, psychodynamic and biological configurations, I explore the personality make-up of the despot, paying close attention to the psychopathological aspects of his character. Although Shaka is still the focus in Part II, this psychological exploration extends far beyond the character of Shaka. Many of the insights provided are applicable to any despot in any time.

In Part III, consisting of two chapters, I explore the nature of the interface between the leader and the led, studying the complex group dynamics that enable despots to manipulate their subjects. I offer a pragmatic discussion of what makes for exemplary leadership as a way to highlight its converse, suggesting a number of lessons on leadership that can be learned from Shaka’s
behavior – both from what he did well and from his failures. In the two chapters of Part IV, I deconstruct the self-destructive cycle of totalitarianism, scrutinizing the levers of power used by totalitarian leaders and inspecting the building blocks of totalitarianism. I conclude by offering suggestions on how to prevent totalitarian leaders from gaining power.

This book on the psychology of leadership by terror is not meant to be a linear study. I discovered when I first approached this subject matter that it does not lend itself to straightforward investigation. Thus I have indulged in considerable divergent thinking, shifting as the topic demanded within a constant interplay of intrapersonal, interpersonal, group and societal perspectives. My purpose is to demonstrate to the reader how, and to what extent, the ‘inner theatre’ of leaders – the demons that populate their internal stage, and the script from which those demons read – influences the architecture of the societies they create. I want the reader to recognize how powerfully each leader’s dreams, aspirations, fears and anxieties affect his or her external world.

Because understanding is the first step toward prevention, it is my hope that the reader will become more sensitized by these pages to the psychology of terror and totalitarianism, recognize the societal abyss created by despots, and take a stand when the situation warrants it – in other words, that the reader will resist when the sirens of demagoguery are singing. Too many despots have created too much misery throughout the ages. They continue today, in many cases unchallenged, leaving their devastating mark in the form of genocide, war crimes and other forms of cruelty. Caveat emptor!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Fortunately, only extremely rarely, during a personal consultation or at one of the two leadership seminars I run at INSEAD, have I come across someone whose personality make-up bears close resemblance to Shaka’s. However, participants in my top-management seminar, The Challenge of Leadership: Creating Reflective Leaders – all of whom wield considerable power in their organization – offer important insights into the despotistic mind, albeit on a modest scale. Aspects of the behavior of some of these participants mirror the behavior of what we know of despots – an insight that surprises (and even alarms) these executives.

One important task during the above-named seminar is to make the senior executives who participate aware of how their behavior and actions affect others – in other words, what influence their behavior has on their organization’s culture and patterns of decision-making. During the course of the program some of the participants come to realize that one or more of their
behavior patterns are destructive to self, others and/or the organization. Although my interactions with these participants can be difficult, they generally result in a great learning experience, not only for them but also for me. I have learned a lot about my own foibles and frailties during my interactions with these men and women. As I respond to these executives during the seminar, my reactions, along with the comments of their peers, help them to better understand their actions. Such insight is a precondition to change – and in fact changes in destructive behavior patterns often result from the seminar.

I would like to thank all of the seminar participants who have struggled with me to create healthier organizations. More than any other source of information and insight, these executives have helped me make sense of the vicissitudes of leadership – and indeed to recognize, on rare occasions, psychopathology. Their contributions, and those of my other faculty members of INSEAD’s Global Leadership Center – Elisabet Engellau, Sudhir Kakar, Roger Lehman, Erik van der Loo and Martine van den Poel – are very much appreciated.

I realized as I began this project that to understand the inner world of a Zulu king, I would need to understand the Zulu culture. My starting point for this aspect of the project was certainly not highbrow: I watched period movies such as Zulu and Zulu Dawn. Watching the controversial television mini-series Shaka Zulu at a later date augmented my preliminary visual indoctrination. The next step – reading about the battles of Isandlwana and Rorke’s Drift – led to deeper insights about Zulu culture than the big screen can convey. Nothing, however, is better than actual interaction. Once, many years ago, I spent some time at the World Economic Forum in Davos with Chief Butelezi, the leader of the Inkatha Freedom Party, as he advocated his view of a post-apartheid Africa. Subsequently, during occasional visits to KwaZulu Natal, I have met a number of people who informed me about some of the intricacies of the Zulu culture. That personal contact is in part what led me to delve deeper into the subject. The observations and aspirations of the people I spoke with helped me better understand cultural behavior patterns. I am no expert, however, and as a novice I hope that in my portrayal of the Zulu culture of old I have not engaged in too many faulty representations.

I am grateful to INSEAD for providing me with the time and space to engage in what surely is an unusual research topic for a business school. Members of the research department and committee – particularly Landis Gabel, Anil Gaba and Alison James – have been extremely helpful, supporting me in my activities. For helping to create writing space in what can be an intrusive environment, I am very much indebted to my personal assistant and administrator at the Center, Sheila Loxham. Her talent at what now is called ‘positive organizational behavior’ – that is, the constructive reframing of
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