Synopsis

My research question Labelling Hitler: the impact of psychoanalysis on biography is the product of much examination and scrutiny concerning the nature of the application of psychoanalysis to history and, specifically, biography. Focusing on Adolf Hitler, my question developed into something practicable. Furthermore, through a synthesis of historical criticisms related to Hitler psychobiography, I came to acknowledge the fundamental nature of psychoanalysis in biography: it provides valuable insight into the psychological forces motivating historical figures, but in doing so raises historiographical issues which have, and continue to, polarise historical opinion.

Thus, my research question incorporates this two-sided nature of psychobiography: a) Constructive impact: in relation to the understanding it provides of the psychological influences contributing to Hitler's irrational actions which are otherwise pigeonholed by 'anti-historical labels'; hence "Labelling Hitler: the impact of psychoanalysis on biography" and b) Non-constructive impact, embodied by the forceful historical debate it has incurred - hence a second implication of "the impact of psychoanalysis on biography". My argument favours the former of the two.

In constructing my essay, I propose that although psychobiography has limitations, its value to broadening historical perspective outweighs its shortcomings. This is espoused by a deconstruction of claims of reductionism, bias, inadequate evidence and the issue of historical 'objectivity' as applicable to psychohistory. In addressing these issues, I employ psychohistorical interpretations of Hitler, and historians' opinions as catalysts for discussion. Threading through my argument is the underlying notion of 'labels' and how psychoanalysis in a biographical framework has helped to transform Hitler from an incomprehensible and often pigeonholed personality to a coherent and understandable historical figure. Nevertheless, I have not attempted to write an all-encompassing, definitive analysis of psychobiography, rather my essay intends to examine key issues which are raised through my specific examination of psychobiography's affiliation with Adolf Hitler.

Essay

Literature has deemed Adolf Hitler a 'psychopathic paranoid', a 'borderline personality' and a 'neurotic' labouring under the 'manic' compulsion to murder. At times, his actions and ethics certainly warranted these descriptions. However, labels have failed an informed understanding of Hitler as an historical figure. Although the facts of his life are known, hardly anything is understood about his true thoughts, "hidden in the privacy of his mind". Psychoanalysis in a biographical framework has sought to probe behind this façade. Based on Freud's concept of human nature, 'psychobiography' has traced the dynamic psychological forces that provoked, stimulated and compelled Hitler to act. However, psychobiographies constitute an unconventional historiography, seldom used by the mainstream. Moreover, the application of psychoanalysis to biography has seen a vigorous and extensive debate regarding its value to historical understanding; few historical methodologies have polarised historical opinion so markedly. Psychobiography comprises a highly controversial historical discipline.

However, hindrances in the practice of psychobiography do not invalidate the undertaking itself. Without psychoanalytic aid, the conundrum remains: how do historians begin to explain the 'non-rational' and the bewildering in human history? That a relationship exists between Hitler's psyche and his political behaviour is clear; to deny the influence of his personality in shaping events is obviously not sustainable and historians are indebted to psychoanalysis for pointing the investigation in that direction. Hence, a thorough examination of the behavioural patterns designated by labels yields very useful results for historical understanding.

Hitler once stated, "I appeal to those who, severed from the Motherland... and who now in painful emotion long for the hour that will allow them to return to the arms of the beloved mother". Conventional history may recognise the poignant use of nationalistic imagery, propaganda and political strategy. Psychohistory realises Hitler was 'painfully' 'severed' from his 'beloved mother'. Klara, who was twenty-three years younger than her uncle and husband, Alois - a drunkard and a
despot\textsuperscript{13}. Undoubtedly, Hitler was a ‘captivating orator’. But he was also much more.

Psychoanalysis in biography exposes some of the previously undiscovered information in the available data, making possible explanations of some of the logical and psychological defects in Hitler’s development. The Germans, as a whole, invariably referred to Germany as the “Fatherland”. Hitler almost always refers to it as the “Motherland”\textsuperscript{14}. Familial images in Hitler’s public declarations and in \textit{Mein Kampf} lend themselves readily to a psychoanalytic investigation of Hitler’s family background, and specifically his Oedipus complex\textsuperscript{15}. Robert Waite, a leader in the psychohistorical school, evokes the Oedipus theory as a critical, character-forming psychological force in Hitler’s early life. This interpretation suggests that in Hitler’s case, the unconscious love for his young mother and the hate for his old father assumed morbid proportions, and that it was this conflict that drove him to love and hate and compelled him to save or destroy peoples who really stood for his mother and his father\textsuperscript{16}.

Similarly, Hitler’s anti-Semitism is linked by Rudolph Binion, noted psychohistorian, to an unresolved Oedipus complex. Binion points out that Hitler’s mother was treated unsuccessfully for breast cancer by Dr. Eduard Bloch, a Jew. He concludes that if Hitler’s mother had not died so tragically of breast cancer, he would not have turned into the ‘radical anti-Semitic’ he became in later life. “Abusing ‘the Jew’ was for Hitler a means of abusing Bloch”, Binion concludes\textsuperscript{17}. Clearly, Hitler’s anti-Semitism cannot be explained on purely pragmatic, political grounds, since there is no doubt that his intense hatred towards Jews was both domestically and diplomatically counterproductive\textsuperscript{18}. Historians have recognised the importance of Hitler’s personal anti-Semitism but have been unable to explain it. The conundrum remains: why was Hitler attracted to anti-Semitism so much so it was the cornerstone of his life and work?\textsuperscript{19} Psychohistorians have examined this ‘non-rational’ behaviour\textsuperscript{20}. The psychoanalysis’s projection theory, that is, that Hitler transferred his subconscious needs to the Jews and thereby exercised his feelings, opens up new and significant vistas for the study of how and why Hitler became a ‘brutal anti-Semitic’\textsuperscript{21} at the core of such a persecutory regime.

Although it is true that Hitler displayed an abnormally pattern of unbound aggression in his later life, whether this can be reduced to the effects if a disturbed attachment to his mother is disputed. Lawrence Stone’s point of view epitomises much of this argument: “I just do not think that such things as the extermination of six million Jews can be explained by the alleged fact that Hitler’s mother was killed by treatment given to her by a Jewish doctor\textsuperscript{22}. Thus, the problem of reductionism in psychobiography is elucidated. Importantly, Hitler could analyse a diplomatic problem skilfully and respond with unprecedented effectiveness. To ignore that fact and to become preoccupied with his abnormalities or to reduce him to patterns of unresolved Oedipal feelings is to “caricature both Hitler and history”\textsuperscript{23}. wherein psychological factors are overemphasised at the expense of external societal factors. However, this charge is fallible. There is an important difference between claiming that childhood experience is the cause of later events, and developing interpretations of adult behaviour, or forming hypotheses about the meaning of Hitler’s adult behaviour sourced in childhood experiences. Hence, accurately practised psychobiography uses Hitler’s known childhood experiences as characterological ground that favoured, and not instigated, the development of his adult personality. Internationally renowned psychoanalyst, Erich Fromm, notes this: “…in [Hitler’s] childhood...certain necrophilious roots... are conducive to [the] development of a full-fledged necrophilious character as one of several real possibilities”\textsuperscript{24}. Psychoanalysis used in this manner offers further perspective from which to view some of the otherwise inexplicable influential forces in the development of Hitler as a human and historical phenomenon.

American psychoanalyst, Dr. Walter C. Langer’s \textit{The Mind of Adolf Hitler: The Secret Wartime Report}, written in 1943 and publicly published in 1972\textsuperscript{25}, is a valuable psychobiographical work, not only for the issues it raises. This classified profile forced conventional historians to consider Hitler “at the center of a parallelogram, the components of which are Hitler’s conscious self-image, his subconscious fears and perversions (using a Freudian definition), his followers’ and associates’ conscious image of their Führer, and the same followers’ subconscious behaviour patterns.”\textsuperscript{26} By studying Hitler in this way, Langer isolated the ego-serving nature of Hitler’s political aims as well as queried a relationship between Hitler’s psyche and those of his mass following\textsuperscript{27}, or as Langer himself puts it, “the degree of correlation between Germany’s madness and Hitler’s”\textsuperscript{28}. Thus, Langer promoted recognition of external historical factors, concentrating not only on the all-important childhood experiences and unconscious
psychological factors which compelled Hitler to act, but also on the significance of time and place in his psychobiographical assessment. Thereby, Langer eliminated the possibility of reductionism and provided valuable insight into the "fundamental nature of the character structure" (that is, Hitler's) which was reflected in the Nazi Regime. Langer's application of psychoanalysis to biography was momentous for its time and was a significant attempt to apply psychoanalytic insight to warfare and the man later labelled the 'greatest villain of modern history'.

However, Langer's study was intentionalist and retrodictive, such that the problematic yet fundamental bias of psychoanalysis in biography is espoused. Langer admits, "A survey of the raw material, in conjunction with our knowledge of Hitler's actions as reported in the news, was sufficient to convince us that he was, in all probability, a neurotic psychopath bordering on schizophrenia." That hurdle cleared, he states, the rest was easy. Theoretically, events and circumstances of Hitler's later life, notably the Holocaust, should merely be confirmation of a foundational characterological analysis. Consequently, instead of applying the basic rules of evidence and methodological approach which historians advocate, Langer judged the reliability and usefulness of his sources by the way they fitted into the his preconceived image of Hitler. Some of the most important conclusions of The Mind of Adolf Hitler are therefore based on non-existent, unreliable or misinterpreted evidence.

Contentions of insufficient evidence, of evidence of the wrong kind, and of not enough evidence from the right period are problematic for psychobiography. Additionally, as is charged of Langer's work, inadequate evidence "tends not to inhibit psychobiographers: where information is lacking, imagination tends to take over." For example, Robert Waite, like Langer, claims that one of the crucial events in Hitler's life was a primal scene between his parents that little Adolf witnessed at the age of three. The source for it is a passage in Hitler's Mein Kampf describing the unhappy life of an urban worker's family. Waite quotes of Hitler, "...the parents fight almost daily, their brutality leaves nothing to the imagination; then the results of such visual education must slowly but inevitably become apparent to the little one." There is nothing to indicate that Hitler intended the passage to be autobiographical, and even if it is "a thinly disguised autobiographical memoir" as Waite argues, the question of whether it is an unconscious confession of a primal scene trauma is dubious. Thus, claims of insufficient, unreliable evidence give rise to the argument that in the absence of adequate historical evidence, it is just not possible to develop credible psychoanalytic interpretations of the lives of historical figures—let alone provide valuable historical insight. This is not substantiated.

The implications of problems associated with insufficient evidence do not mean that psychoanalysis in biography is "bunk", as has been suggested, rather that it is best aimed at historical personalities, such as Hitler, about whom there is sufficient evidence to develop and test psychoanalytic interpretations. In fact, the use of psychoanalytic method is all the more important with Hitler because he repressed the awareness of his passions and ardours to a notable degree and in many different ways. Although it seems undeniable that the psychobiographer has less access to material such as free associations, dreams, and transference reactions than does the clinical psychoanalyst, they have the advantage of having information about a person who has lived their entire life from a range of retrospective and introspective sources. Consequently, in discovering the dominant psychological influences on the subject's emotional development, at the psychobiographer's disposal is "a broader spectrum of behaviour through more decades of life than has the analyst with a living patient." For Adolf Hitler, a considerable amount of evidence is available in which a clear psychological malfunction is presented. Thus psychoanalysis in biography, carried out with historical rigour and empirical objectivity, is practicable, and more so, indubitably useful for historical purposes.

The application of psychoanalysis has not led to much agreement among historians as to what facilitated 'Hitlerism': its force and 'ruthless aggression'. According to psychoanalyst Alice Miller, "Having been demeaned and humiliated by a father who maltreated him, [Hitler's] childhood was filled with experiences of being persecuted, and in the end, he became the persecutor himself." Another psychoanalyst interested in Hitler, Helma Stierlin, was convinced he had detected the essence of Hitler's problems in the dynamics of the family process, but in a much different manner to Miller. Stierlin advances the argument that Hitler became the delegate of many Germans in the same way his mother had delegated him to be her source of comfort and support after the loss of her first three children: "Hitler's emotions generated the sense of mission to aim at
removing the feelings of guilt among his fellow Germans after the unsuspected defeat of the nation in 1918. There are many reasons put forward why Hitler adopted a political theory that institutionalized distrust and hatred, aggressive warfare and exalted brutality. From a suspicion of Hitler's own, of being "tainted" with Jewish blood, to an undeniably 'necrophilous personality', effectively no two explanations of Hitler's ideologies and actions are identical. Consequently, claims of subjectivity, methodological looseness and historical fallibility afflict psychobiographical endeavours.

However, it is to be expected that biographers will differ in their interpretations of Hitler because they are dependent on the sources they use: Hitler was successful in his efforts to deceive both himself and anyone seeking to know him, and because his contemporaries saw him in different ways, their memoirs, letters and diaries offer inconsistent testimony. Furthermore, interpretations will differ because if Freudian theory is to be accepted, then the psychohistorian's own personality and unconscious forces threaten to take on as much significance as the analysis of the events they examine. As psychohistorian Peter Loewenberg warns, "No phenomenon has an inherent meaning. The historian's personality accounts not only for the historical material and themes selected but also for the conscious and unconscious conceptual schemata imposed upon it". This reveals a paradox at the heart of the psychobiographical endeavour: it is a supposedly 'scientific' approach, but the psychobiographers are 'subjective consciousnesses in the whole enterprise'. Objectivity in psychobiography is fundamentally unattainable. It has been suggested that an analysis of the psychoanalyst be carried out in order to understand why and what they have done with the data. Yet a 'reductio ad absurdum' of a historiography which does not interpret or explain how and why the events of the past occurred.

Endnotes
2 For example "fanatical anti-Semitism", "psychopathic", "neurotic". A failure to elaborate on these abnormal aspects of Hitler's thought system, as reflected in these labels, is anti-historical as complex personalities are reduced to a simplified diagnosis which does not interpret or explain how and why events of the past occurred.


5 Central to Freud's work is his fundamental theory of a causal relationship between childhood experiences and adult behaviour (this concept of human nature). According to Freud's theory, the early years of life, if filled with traumatic episodes, are highly likely, if not definite to produce personality defects and disturbances in later life. Conversely, problems visible in adulthood can be said to be attributable to early character-shaping influences. Additionally, the existence of both unconscious as well as conscious mental processes and their very powerful role in human behaviour is crucial in Freudian theory.

6 One of the three main divisions of Psychohistory: history of childhood, group psychohistory and psychobiography. "Psychohistory" is defined by William Todd Shultz (practicing psychobiographer) as the analysis of historically significant lives through the use of psychological theory and research. It is not just biography or psychology: it is a fusion of both. Freudian psychoanalysis or some variant thereof tends to be the theory of choice for most psychobiographers, but it is not the only theory used (Shultz, W.T. "Psychobiographer FAQ". Psychobiography.com, <http://www.psychobiography.com/faq.html>). Note: In the psychobiographies of Hitler of psychohistory however, Freudian psychoanalytic theory is the only "psychological theory" utilized—see following discussion. Also note, 'psychohistory' and 'psychohistory' are terms used interchangeably throughout the discussion: psychobiography is a form of doing psychohistory and they are therefore closely related.


8 Nicholas, S. "History and Psychoanalysis"; *Making History*, 2004, p. 133.

9 Ibid. p.129: "Perhaps only postmodernism comes close.

10 As Robert Waite points out, Hitler "created both his own political theory and a government that could not exist without him. It was he who set the standards for art, music, medicine, and poetry. His whim became national law. He dictated statutes which set forth the religion of household servants, the colors artists could use in paintings, the way lobsters were to be cooked in restaurants, and how physics would be taught in the universities. He decided whom Germans might marry. what students could study at the universities. He decided whom servants might marry. and even prisoners who had known Hitler and even prisoners who had been imprisoned for political reasons could name their children, where they could be buried. At the universities. He decided whom Germans might marry. what students could study at the universities. He decided whom servants might marry.


15 Ibid. The Oedipus complex in Freudian psychoanalysis is named after the Greek mythical character Oedipus, who unknowingly kills his father, Laius, and marries his mother, Jocasta. In essence, according to the theory, between the ages of three and five, the child affected has an unconscious desire for the exclusive love of the parent of the opposite sex. This desire includes jealousy toward the parent of the same sex and the unconscious wish for that parent's death. See "Oedipus Complex"; A2psychotherapy, <http://www.a2psychotherapy.com/psychotherapy_guide/oedipus_complex.htm>.


17 Ibid.

18 Haffner, Op cit. p. 143-145. Notably, in December 1941, Hitler made his final choice between the two incompatible aims which he had pursued from the outset—German domination of the world and the extermination of the Jews. He abandoned the former and entirely concentrated on the latter. Haffner comments, "Hitler the politician finally abdicated in favour of Hitler the mass murderer".

19 Waite, Op cit. p. 163.

20 For other examples of an examination of anti-Semitism: Waite, Op. cit. p. 163-165. Waite goes further and traces the Oedipus complex problems back to the "primal scene traumas". He recounts that when young Adolf was three years old, he allegedly witnessed his drunken father raping his beloved mother. Waite argues that observing parental intercourse has devastating consequences, even though Freudian practitioners admit that it is often a fantasy and not an actual experience. He claims that watching parental intercourse was a concrete and devastating event in Hitler's life. Also Waite, 1993. p. 456; Influential biographer, Franz Liszt: "Hitler believed that his father was of Jewish origin and cited as evidence the fact that Hitler had obliterated the region of his father's birthplace and turned it into a military training ground. He therefore links Hitler's anti-Semitic tendencies to his 'insane hatred of his father and a desire to erase the 'shame' of his Jewish blood.'

21 Ibid. p 363


23 Waite. Op cit. p.432


25 In 1943, Wild Bill Donovan of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) commissioned a complete psychological profile of Adolf Hitler. It has been claimed that this report was one of the most remarkable attempts by a government intelligence agency to apply psychoanalytic insight to warfare. It was classified as secret for almost a quarter of a century. The few historians and scholars who had seen it before it was declassified and published, regarded it as a "masterpiece of psychobiographical reconstruction." Dr. Walter Langer had access to many classified documents about Hitler, to publicly available writings, personal interviews arranged by the OSS with informants who had known Hitler, and even prisoners who had known or interacted with him more recently.

26 Orlow, Op cit. p. 134


28 Ibid.

accounts of behaviour and relationships by persons other than the subject, with their own biases and special relationship to the subject. Major objections have been raised because the use of this material does not allow for the interaction between therapist and patient which is the domain within which psychoanalytic data customarily has its existence and meaning. See Shore, Miles P. "Biography in the 1980's: A Psychoanalytic Perspective". Journal of Interdisciplinary History. Vol. 13, No 1, (Summer, 1983): Pages 99-95.

58 Nicholas, Op cit. p. 133
61 Validity of interpretations needs to be assessed in terms of consistency with a full range of available evidence and credibility relative to supplementary interpretations. Since at least the 1970s, many have defined psychohistory to include the use of any form of psychology. Psychoanalytic psychobiography could, in principle, be complemented by phenomenological psychobiography, behavioural psychobiography or cognitive psychobiography as one part of a 'multifaceted biographical approach'. [Rumian, William McKinley. From the study of lives and psychobiography to historicising psychology: A conceptual journey. 2003. <http://socialwelfare.berkeley.edu/faculty/Rumian/

Bibliography
For Jillian’s extensive bibliography, see HTA NSW website.