

## [Transcript] The Realignment / 326 | Ian Kershaw: The Personalities Who Built and Destroyed Modern Europe

Marshall here, welcome back to The Re-Alignment.

We are nearing the end of our daily series this month, before the holiday break, so a couple of notes.

Number one, Saga and I are going to be back live in Washington DC for an event slash conference recalling The Re-Alignment Live.

It's running on January 25th, 2023, you can click the link at the top of the show notes or check the social stack on Friday to see how you can get your tickets.

Two, this is a book-centric episode, so it's the perfect time to shout out The Re-Alignment's bookshop storefront.

Honestly, one of the proudest things I could say about the show is that we move a significant number of books.

I have especially noticed that people started picking up more books from the bookshop considering it's the holiday season, so definitely go check the link.

Bookshop supports local booksellers and gives us a hefty commission.

We've built a bunch of lists from our favorite books of the year to ones written by previous guests, including today's guest Ian Kershaw.

The links are available in the show notes.

Last but not least, if you are enjoying these episodes, putting out this daily series, you can go check out [Re-Alignment.Supercast.com](https://Re-Alignment.Supercast.com) or you can click the link at the top of the show notes where you can support the show's work.

On to today's guest, I'm speaking, as I mentioned, with Ian Kershaw, author of the recently released *Personality, Empower, Builders, and Destroyers of Modern Europe*.

He's written numerous books on 20th century Europe, including a monumental biography about of Hitler and one I particularly enjoyed this year, *The End, The Defiance and Destruction of Hitler's Germany, 1944-1945*.

This is a good showcase for the type of episodes I like to enjoy and want to start focusing very specifically on moving into 2023.

So putting together some of a Re-Alignment book club, you guys have really suggested that can just really take advantage of the fact that we all love to read and listen to things unhappily on this show.

So if you have any ideas for books we'd like to explore as a group, next year definitely write in.

You can find our email in the show notes.

Hope you all enjoy this conversation and I will note that Ian was only available by phone, so apologies for any issues with the sound.

Take the link and I'll be supporting our work.

See you guys later.

Ian Kershaw, welcome to The Re-Alignment.

Great pleasure to be with you.

A common refrain about the 20th century it seems in general discourse is that like them or not, the century produced a series of great leaders quote unquote that really make their contemporaries today pale in comparison, Margaret Thatcher and Winston Churchill versus Boris Johnson and Liz Truss.

## [Transcript] The Realignment / 326 | Ian Kershaw: The Personalities Who Built and Destroyed Modern Europe

What do you think about this sentiment?

I think there is a great deal to that.

Great crises produced leaders who were able to combat or even surmount those crises and no crisis was greater than that of facing Britain in 1940 when Churchill came to power and Churchill was the right man in the right place at the right time to counter that existential crisis that Britain faced in May 1940.

It has to be born in mind before then Churchill had not been a massive success in his career. In many ways you could see it as a failure.

After the war he was ejected from office in the 1945 election and then when he came back he was an old man.

So his reputation resides on that period of time in the Second World War in particular in 1940 and Churchill then showed what a superb war leader he was.

Churchill came to power also in different sorts of crises in Britain, a political and economic or governmental and economic crisis in the 1970s and again showed remarkable power and resilience in confronting that crisis and mastering the crisis.

So these two leaders were faced with really extraordinary difficult conditions and I think in the 21st century in Britain we haven't seen anything like the level of leadership that we saw then.

Certainly not in the last 12 or so years where we've had a succession of prime ministers and finance ministers and none of them has really been able to really confront the difficulties that we've been facing in a series of crises since the finance crisis of 2008.

You know it's interesting there are multiple leaders profiled in the book obviously both democratic and non-democratic, do any of them rise to power in non-crisis scenarios?

The only one who came to, of the 12 that I choose anyway in this book, the only one who came to power should we say normally as a result of a normal election victory without any major crisis facing him was the German Chancellor who came to a high office in 1982, Helmut Kohl, and there was a sort of mini-crisis following the 1979 oil shock.

But Kohl came to power then fairly normally, his career up to then had been nothing spectacular and his career after that as Chancellor of Germany between 1982 and 1989 was again nothing to write home about it was he was quite an average mediocre Chancellor in many ways.

So in 1989 he was faced with the changes which Mikhail Gorbachev the Soviet leader had really brought about and that was then the collapse of the Soviet bloc in Central and Eastern Europe and of course eventually in the Soviet Union itself and in those conditions Kohl found himself faced with what we might call a beneficent crisis and he rose to the challenge then and he did play a significant part personally in bringing about German unification in 1990 and also in the changes in Europe in 1991 of the Maastricht Conference which then ushered in the European Union as we have it today.

So Helmut Kohl was a normal figure who then found events forced major change upon him which he responded to with a very considerable instinct for power, instinct how to use that and use it very beneficially for Germany.

What does a reader have to gain by analyzing these figures through the lens of personality but what makes this different than great men theory of history analysis?

I dispatch the notion of greatness in the first pages of the book because I think the

## [Transcript] The Realignment / 326 | Ian Kershaw: The Personalities Who Built and Destroyed Modern Europe

term is actually indefinable as in terms of political leadership it's also subject to change over time so we think of great at one point is not so great later on and also it has an unquestionable moral dimension to it so we can't use the term greatness of a figure like Hitler or Stalin for example so I prefer to concentrate on the impact of these individuals and each of these individuals did personally make in the conditions in which they came to power personally make a huge change in the lives of millions of Europeans and to some extent of course in the case of someone like Hitler then there was a global impact as well as we see with the involvement of your own country then in the Second World War a war in Europe but then which becomes a global war involving the Pacific as well so these individuals play a major personal role and what can we see that we can obviously we see episodes in the 20th century in which these individuals did play themselves an immense role none the greater we might say than Churchill in the European leaders in the Second World War and that if we look at the 20th century as a whole then we could probably say that two of the defining perhaps the most defining episodes in European history were the Second World War and the Holocaust and one of the one of the figures of the book Hitler was the chief author of both of those so we see how Churchill we've already mentioned how Churchill responded in 1940 we see how Stalin responds as well in eventually the Red Army conquering much of the Eastern part of Europe so we see then how the world that we've come to understand it although it's changed you know drastically before our eyes the world that we came to understand was forged by these individuals in specific conditions in which they're able to gain power and then to exercise power.

Speaking of the world changing before our eyes how would you characterize and this is a very broad question so take it however you want wherever you want to go but how would you characterize those changes versus the 20th century?

One obvious change is the role of communications now we live in a world that is dominated by the internet and by 24-7 news and by social media none of those existed in the 20th century although figures like Mussolini and Hitler were at the forefront in their own time of using what was then modern technology the radio and newsreels and so on so the usage of modern communications has affected politics I think very considerably drastically you might say and politicians are able to use the advantages that the social media give them while at the same time having to respond to from their point of view the disadvantages they have to contend with the impact of social media and with 24-7 news so that it means that politics has changed quite considerably in that regard and in other ways too if I were writing this second book which I'm not going to do but if I were going to write a second book on the 21st century we're only a quarter way through it of course but it would have to be global and not European in context which demonstrates really that Europe itself has receded in world importance we'd now be looking at the at the impact of our figures like in your own country President Trump between 2016 and 20 or now in Europe itself Putin outside Europe Xi Jinping the Indian Premier Modi and so on so it would have to be a global not European context but I think in the 20th century it's right that we could deal with Europe at the center of attention and with European leaders who brought about many of the changes within Europe so in that regard I think politics are shifted to a global in a global way which was not the case for much of the 20th century.

## [Transcript] The Realignment / 326 | Ian Kershaw: The Personalities Who Built and Destroyed Modern Europe

If we think of the way that the 20th century usually told in a historical level it's framed as a broad liberal democracy defeating communism obviously then to the case of dictatorship as a form of government it doesn't seem like dictatorship comes out ahead to put it lightly would you say there were any did any dictators make it out of the 20th century I don't want to say unscathed but with a degree of legitimacy.

No I don't think they did I think when we came to the end of the Cold War in 1991 we thought we were entering a new age then where democracy would triumph in much of the world and there were even of course analysts who then spoke about the end of history that the triumph of liberal democracy it hasn't worked out that way 30 years later or more we're now faced with new challenges brought about by the pandemic of course and now also by the war in Ukraine with its global consequences so I think I can't think of a dictator who really survived into the 21st century with as you put it with the legitimacy intact dictators came and went of course and there were still dictators coming about in the early 21st century but I think the trend after the end of the Cold War seems to be moving in the direction of liberal democracy I think since 2008 and the wave of crises which we've faced since the finance crisis 2008 strongman rule as some people called it autocracy and authoritarianism has now come back to the fore and democracy is facing those challenges from without with figures like Putin but it's also facing challenges from within with the rise of populist leaders who want to challenge democracy from within and so you get somewhere like Orban in Hungary now speaking about illiberal democracy

that he's that he's created in his own country so a lot of significant changes have come about but I think we've seen the revival of authoritarianism rather than its consistent demise another question would be then could you introduce to the audience obviously you know I've read both

of your penguin histories of the 20th century in Europe you really just introduced the conditions maybe in the 20s and 30s that produced a great number of the figures that you profile now yes the what runs through the book as a leitmotif is is the notion of crisis and the crisis was in European political and economic and institutions and in society was never greater than it was in the 20s and 30s in the 30s quite especially when democracy was a very fragile flower which was in infertile soil and it was swept away by authoritarian leaders coming to the fore in so many countries and in the in what became the Soviet Union Russia first of all in the Soviet Union obviously by the Leninist experiment which was an experiment that's so successful that it lasted for the for the following 70 years as an alternative form of government so a left-wing former communist government then in the Soviet Union which after the war extended of course over half of Europe but also democracy was as it came about in the 20s was in a very weak very weak condition and was then swept away by right-wing governments authoritarian governments and most notably of course by the fascist government

of Italy that came to power where Mussolini came to power in 1922 and by Hitler who came to power

11 years later in 1933 and these dictators made no secret to the fight that they didn't just want to undermine democracy in the way in which maybe some modern democratic leaders you use democracies

## [Transcript] The Realignment / 326 | Ian Kershaw: The Personalities Who Built and Destroyed Modern Europe

facade to undermine it I mentioned all about in Hungary as a case in point but rather Hitler and Mussolini both made no secret of the fight they wanted to destroy democracy to sweep it away and democracy was not in any way established in Europe at that time in the way that it has been since the second world war and so by the time that we're into the mid 1930s democracy is really the preserve of only about a third of Europeans and two-thirds of them already lived in various forms of authoritarianism so that was one of the major issues then that the second one of course is also the extent of economic crisis which was of a graver kind than we've seen in the 21st century or 10 times since the end of the second world war the crisis which we generally call the great depression which destroyed economies and with them massively affected societies and politicized them

into the extremes of left and right and brought brought to power fascism and also the threat of communist government which fostered fascism the threat of communism in a number of European countries so we don't see anything quite like that today but we do see democracy being undermined from within by politicians populist politicians who claim to be democrats themselves and where democracy then becomes largely a facade for authoritarian rule speaking of the personality part of the title is there are there any shared personality traits between the 20th century later as you profile yes there are a number they of course when we when we speak of these shared personality traits then we have to bear in mind the circumstances in which these people came to power

the difference between let's say a fascist style government and a democratic style government so bearing those in mind a number of the personality traits which individuals would have in common included for example the the fact that these were driven individuals in each case they were single minded they were massively ambitious and more than average were determined in their in their personality the way in which they contended with with opposition they were also individuals who were

power hungry they were authoritarian in instincts even the democratic leaders like de Gaulle or Adnan offer that much of Churchill and Pratchett they they were they lent themselves towards in many

ways towards authoritarianism within in their case within a democratic framework and there was also a streak of ruthlessness this is ruthlessness of course taking to extreme levels with a Stalin or a Hitler but also a level of of readiness to be ruthless in the usage of power applied to the democrats as well so there were elements of that maybe just one other point these people were inspirational sometimes in their immediate entourage first of all but inspirational for certain people for reasons now which we wouldn't sympathize with at all in the case of the fascist leaders but nonetheless they were able to mobilize people because they found they could inspire those

around them in the first instance the small groupings which then became extended and they were some of these in most of these individuals in fact saw themselves as somehow men there was only one woman in my list of men men of destiny and they thought themselves as sometimes they spoke openly of that of leading the society because they were destined to do so to restore their societies to great to lost greatness and so all those I think were characteristics that people had in common some of them of course had some very endearing and positive characteristics seen from today's values something like Churchill for example it would have been enjoyable to spend an

## [Transcript] The Realignment / 326 | Ian Kershaw: The Personalities Who Built and Destroyed Modern Europe

evening with Churchill he was witty he was humorous he was very convivial enjoyed good society it would have been a very interesting and enjoyable evening you can't say the same for many of the others especially the dictators of that includes the book another question that comes to mind is this this idea of lessons and checks and balances so to your point the 20s and 30s had a series of crises that led to the rise of these authoritarian dictatorships how did the countries in the european continent reform if at all their processes in the latter half of the century to prevent similar crises let's say the 2008 financial crisis from also producing dictatorships well I the two obvious things well one of them was was a global change it wasn't just european but in 1944 at the brett woods conference then new economic rules were introduced which brought about the help to bring about anywhere the revival of global trade in the aftermath of world war two and the the fact that the trade expanded so massively that the economy flourished in the rebuilding of of europe after world war two this meant that the by the time we're into the 1950s prosperity was was really extensive more throughout europe and this um even in the eastern bloc things were far better than they have been in the 20s and 30s so that um this was the platform for sounder sound a political for a sound of political framework but the second thing is that europe itself had learned from the ultra nationalism of the interwar period and from the destruction that brought about in the second world war and so one thing that started in in 1951 actually and then

by 1991 after a variety of changes emerged as the european union this meant that uh that an element of super nationalism was created with institutions there which both economically and politically sought to unite europe rather than divide it and this was the most fundamental change i think in the political structures of europe since world war two and to this very day of course it's a an in many ways an uneasy compromise between super nationalism and still the dependence of the populations on their national governments but nonetheless the introduction of the european economic community as it was initially called and then or early on was called and then the european union after 1991 this has been a fundamental shift in the political structures of post-war europe which has meant that it's much more difficult than it was in the interwar period to destroy economies and to destroy the political structures alongside them definitely and i think um my question i'm about to ask you gets to your point of avoiding the word greatness because there's a moral dimension to that but you've obviously written multiple books on adolf hitler looking at the other figures in the book which i don't want to say which was your favorite um you don't want to say stalin is your favorite but what who who interested you the most um i i think the person that i um apart from church will be the one uh that i had uh some um liking for or sympathy for um and that that wouldn't accord for with many of the individuals of the book most of them i thought were um i had hearty dislike for them but for um apart from church or the one that i really felt as some um liking for was gorbachev and i single him out as the outstanding figure in europe in the second half of the 20th century gorbachev a highly ambivalent figure of course he destroyed his own country and we're seeing some of the legacy of that even today with putin who was an indirect part of gorbachev's legacy so destroyed his own country with baleful consequences you might say but on the other hand he brought

freedom to millions of europeans in central and eastern europe he um uh attempted along with president reagan uh to um curtail the arms right the nuclear arms race uh at the time and um he



## [Transcript] The Realignment / 326 | Ian Kershaw: The Personalities Who Built and Destroyed Modern Europe

was uh a figure who wanted to bring about peace throughout europe and a new sort of europe which in a sense did happen after the end of the cool war which he of would be he did more than any other individual to usher in the end of the cool war so gorbachev for me was the outstanding figure and um he was also in contrast to all the other soviet leaders uh who preceded him he was a figure of some personal charm as people like reagan and thatcher discovered so gorbachev i think is the one for me who if all the figures in the book um i found most sympathy with uh perhaps apart from church was the same the gorbachev question brings to mind something that i think american or broader

western listeners are probably going to be thinking about more now which is unresolved conflicts from

the 20th century that we thought were resolved obviously the case of gorbachev and putin today would be an unresolved post-soviet union status quo in eastern europe but one of the examples to you of 20th century issues that maybe flew under the radar but in recent decades have really come back to the fore of things um well just the top of my head the one that one thing that i would um point to perhaps is the the still unresolved um set of rumbling issues in the bulklands in particular in yugoslain former yugoslavia um one of the figures in my book is tito and um i found as i was writing the chapter on tito i was learning new things because i uh wasn't really so well read up on tito as maybe on one or two of the other figures that i was dealing with um but um tito's legacy was compared with some of the other figures was an extremely short duration he died in

1980 and had single-handedly more or less held together yugoslavia and within 10 years of his death yugoslavia had fallen apart and was uh was uh with warring nationalities within it so um tito was an extraordinary figure who did that but if you look at you former yugoslavia some of those problems are still lingering with us today the problem of kosovo which was part of the collapse of yugoslavia in the uh at the end of the 80s and beginning of the 1990s um that problem is still in a way unresolved it's rumbling on there behind the behind the scenes and is waiting for a long term solution so is the problem of bosnia another part of former yugoslavia so that area is still an area with potential problems for the future and of course also we see now um heightened by putin's war against ukraine the difficult issues left by the former soviet satellites in eastern europe i'm not speaking now about so much about um the former german democratic republic

or hungary or bulgarian but rather more about uh places like uh latvia and estonia and lithuania the balkan country the Baltic countries who which had been annexed by by Stalin and found their freedom

in 1989 and 1990 and now face the prospect of of possible aggression from putin and are very fearful about the future so that's another lingering issue from the from the 20th century into deep into the 21st in the last few questions here i speak with a decent number of prominent figures within the the tech industry and a conception they have is that the power of non-state actors such as tech companies is such that folks who would have gone into the political system or would have been highly ambitious and driven in the way you describe these 20th century leaders often now go into industries like tech because if you're jeff bezos you in many ways wield the power of a state what do you think of of of that idea is is there something that is that is there is there a personality that maybe would have been attracted to power in the 21st century in the political

## [Transcript] The Realignment / 326 | Ian Kershaw: The Personalities Who Built and Destroyed Modern Europe

sense that now has other outlets for its energy yes i think it's a perceptive point and and um it's it's obviously applies to the tech industry but it applies probably to other areas of the of the modern world such as for example banking finance in general where people are are drawn to those areas because the areas which offer great personal greater personal prospects than entry into politics and also the other side of the coin is that entry into politics now going back to the point we were making earlier politics which is dominated by relation to social media as well as 24 seven news is a is in many ways an even tougher business than it used to be and you have to have a skin the thickness of a rhinoceros to survive in that in that cut through a will now so there's politics itself is a deterrent for many people while finance banking other areas of of of modern economy but above all the tech industry are very attractive for the personal wealth that they can bring to individuals so politics in many ways they lose this from both of those developments from the to push side through the the unattractiveness of facing up to the the appropriate on the criticism the vilification that you that each of them into attracts through the mass media and also through the lack of maybe wealth accruing possibilities that they get through the tech industry and other areas of modern finance the last big question and this is a work of history so the word advice may be a little improperly used but i'm i'm guessing a listener who's particularly interested in this topic would also be looking for perspective on this century obviously with authoritarianism serving as like the primary hinge point where western democracies are going to be in either competition or conflict with what would your perspective or advice be for anyone looking at the strengths and weakness of authoritarianism moving forward given your work in this field well um it just did make the obvious point first of all that that um the study of history helps assure us where we've come from not necessarily to give prescriptions from where we're going to so historians are really not able to offer um great advice for the future it's always overtaken by events but if we're looking at broader trends which history can certainly point to then at the minute it's obvious to everybody that democracy as we understand is facing uh severe challenges from outside from authoritarian leaders Putin obviously Xi Jinping um other leaders such as Modi in India theoretically a democratic leader but with strong authoritarian tendencies Erdogan in Turkey and so on and uh not least then in your own country from the impact still of the presidency of Donald Trump and the divisions within the USA

the most important democracy in the world which are having a global impact so democracy in so many ways is on the defensive and populist politics is is um uh posing a major challenge of that from within as well as from through autocracy from without um we we can see that democracy uh is far more resilient than it was in the interwar period at point we've already made far more resilient it's far stronger than it was it's able to withstand some of these challenges and the challenges uh can go as well as come so we don't know what the future holds over the next uh decade or so some of these challenges might look very different to what they do today and it's by no means uh asserted to let's even even a probability that democracy as we know it will collapse or subside in the way that it did in the in the interwar period after all democracy has provided us with so many freedoms people like freedom they're not willing to see that freedom go

or be eroded so there will be there will be challenges and people will fight against those challenges and resist them and there's every hope that over time we'll see populism recede



## [Transcript] The Realignment / 326 | Ian Kershaw: The Personalities Who Built and Destroyed Modern Europe

and democracy with its benefits and advantages as we've known them revitalize so i think we have to be careful of what we wish for is a message which i mentioned in the book when we're looking to the allure of populist leaders who seem to offer um an instant or rapid solution simple solution to grave problems we should be aware and be careful that we don't invite powerful politicians into power who can then use that power for very damaging sometimes even catastrophic effect and last actual question here ian you have obviously written extensively about out of hitler and and nazi germany there's been a resurgence in just reference references to hitler and the nazis these past few years do you have any broad perspective on that reality it demonstrates the uh the lasting moral legacy of hitler in that on the nazi era um that we we still um worry massively quite rightly so about any resurgence of nazism in in europe um we now have a government in italy which is um which is led by um a prime minister georgia meloni who admits to her own neo fascist past we're nothing like so worried about that as we are worried by um minority tastes in the resurgence of of nazism in germany there isn't a threat to the german political system or its stability through nazis through neo nazism today it's an extraordinary unpleasant minority taste but it's not likely to gain to have a resurgence or come anywhere close to gaining power in the way that the nazis were able to do in the early 1930s that's not to be complacent it's only to remark upon the realities that today's germany is a very different place to what it was in the early 1930s elsewhere we have residual neo fascism and neo nazism in nearly all modern democracies uh usually it's a it's kept to a relatively small minority in some places as we see now in italy it can gain parts of the um extending to the conservative arena to the extent that a a neo someone with a neo fascist past can actually be brought to power we'll have to wait and see whether that um that government in italy stabilizes itself most italian governments don't last very long this may be uh similar to that we'll have to wait and see on that but at any rate um i think we need to uh obviously take cognizance of the fact that neo nazism and neo fascism is uh attractive to minorities in most european and some non european countries but also to acknowledge the fact that democracy is far stronger than it was and these neo fascist movements are usually a relatively small minority that doesn't come anywhere close to gaining power and this has been incredibly interesting thank you so much for joining me on the realignment it's been a pleasure to be with you i've enjoyed our discussion thanks ever so much hope you enjoyed this episode if you learned something like this sort of mission or want to access our subscriber exclusive q and a bonus episodes and more go to [realignment.supercast.com](http://realignment.supercast.com) and subscribe to our five dollar a month fifty dollar a year or 500 for a lifetime membership so