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■ Jack Chua
writes about the
psychology of
leadership. His
interests span across
various fields –
from psychometrics
(the science of
measuring the
human psyche), to
developing software
that improve
people's lives.

By JACK CHUA
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'Non-violence can be used practically... without the aid of science of destruction which you have brought to such perfection,' Gandhi wrote to Adolf Hitler in December 1940.

Offering the dictator – a portentous warning – Gandhi continued, 'If not the British, some other power will certainly improve upon your method and beat you with your own weapon. You are leaving no legacy to your people of which they would feel proud.'

ADOLF Hitler and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (Mahatma Gandhi) are two very important figures of the last century. The former went down in history books for war and genocide; the latter, for opposing tyranny with non-violence.

Looking at their biographies, we find that the way leaders reacted to pivotal moments in their lives played a critical role in deciding what kind of leaders they became.

Studies have shown that the struggles we are born to; our gender, abilities and disabilities, even our upbringing, and, the challenges that are thrown at us – having to drop out of school, surviving cancer, being gripped by poverty etc – all build our identity. These struggles heighten our self-awareness in our journey of discovering life's purpose for us.

This is part of the *Leaderonomics* philosophy and if you dive deep into the narratives of Gandhi and Hitler below, you'll understand how their troubled times moulded them.

They were no strangers to the battlefield, where developments in military technology spurred on the killing of millions. Both shared in the suffering of their people and vowed to make things better for their nation. But how did they end up as polar-opposites?

GROWING PAINS

● Porbandar, India – 1860s

Born into the Bania caste in Porbandar, Gandhi was brought up by pious Hindu parents. He underwent an arranged marriage at the age of 13, a custom that he later criticised in his autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. In this autobiography, he described himself as shy and of mediocre ability.

In his youth, he was influenced by friends who tempted him to break his vows by eating meat, smoking and stealing – acts that he became thoroughly ashamed of.

After committing a theft at 15, Gandhi resolved to confess his crime by writing a letter to his father, stating his willingness to accept any punishment and promising never to do it again.

His father forgave him, and this became an early lesson in *Ahimsa*, or non-violence. The following year, the father who showed him mercy passed away.

Upon finishing school, Gandhi would leave his family with a heavy heart to study law in London.

● Germany – 1890s

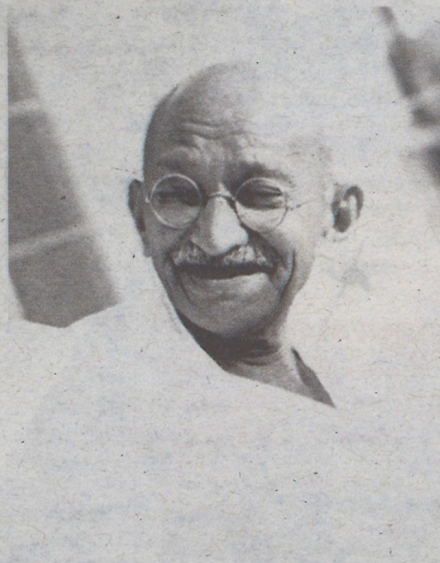
Hitler was born in Austria into a family with three siblings, none of whom survived infancy. The death of his brother had a profound impact on Hitler's temperament.

Conflict defined most of Hitler's relationship with his elders. He constantly rebelled against his teachers and his authoritarian father.

He wished to be a painter – a career choice his father vehemently opposed. In his autobiography, *Mein Kampf* (meaning *My Fight* in German), he revealed that he intentionally performed terribly in the technical school of his father's choice, hoping to be expelled.

HOW HITLER AND GANDHI CHOSE THEIR PATHS IN HISTORY

PAINFUL MOMENTS THAT DEFINE LEADERSHIP



Gandhi wrote a letter to his father, stating his willingness to accept punishment.



Hitler's relationships were mostly defined by conflict. Pic: Wikipedia

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COMING OF AGE (IN TIMES OF WAR)

● South Africa - 1890s

In 1893, Gandhi left for South Africa, after briefly serving as a lawyer in India. Naively unaware of the extent of racism in South Africa, he booked a first-class train ticket to Pretoria. After receiving complaints from a white passenger, Gandhi was removed to a third-class compartment. Refusing to comply, Gandhi was thrown off the train.

Gandhi recalled the moment when he was sitting alone, in the cold winter night, as one of the pivotal moments in his life.

If he fled back to India, or stayed and endured the injustice, he would be a coward. Fighting back with violence was out of the question. He needed a way to resist them.

Not long after settling down in Johannesburg, a Zulu "rebellion" occurred. Gandhi signed up to be part of an ambulance corps. He witnessed first-hand the destructiveness of war, as thousands of Zulus were mowed down by British machine guns. This led him on a journey of soul-searching.

● Vienna and Munich – 1900 to 1918

The young Hitler – an aspiring painter – applied to the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts, but was rejected twice. Failing to fulfil his dreams, he signed up for the military and served as a dispatch runner in the First World War.

The gruelling war lasted nearly five years, with the world's major superpowers incurring death tolls running into millions.

In October 1918, a mustard gas explo-

sion at the trenches left Hitler blinded. Lying on the hospital bed in Pasewalk, he received news of Germany's traumatising defeat.

The defeated Germans signed the *Treaty of Versailles*, which sided strongly in favour of the victorious Allied forces. Discontentment and humiliation among the Germans grew as their nation was forced to cede territory and pay reparations for the war.

Economically, Germany was spiralling into a crisis because of the Weimar Republic's indiscriminate printing of money. Communism was also rising in Germany, with radical workers' staging violent revolts.

Dejected, Hitler became strongly convinced that his Fatherland was only defeated because of the combined threat of Judaism and Communism. In contrast to Gandhi, Hitler vowed vengeance against his scapegoats, believing this to be the only means for Germany's salvation.

THE MAKINGS OF A LEADER

● Gandhi's Path

Discriminatory policies in South Africa prevented Indians and black people from voting, owning property, and marrying. In one of Gandhi's rallies to protest against these policies, a man stood up and exclaimed that he would rather sit in prison than abide by unjust laws. This gave Gandhi a spark of insight.

His philosophical thought culminated in the concept of *satyagraha*, or "force (or insistence) of truth" the term he used for collective non-violent civil disobedience. These forms of resistance included hunger strikes, boycotts, peaceful rallies, and endurance of police brutality or imprisonment.

● Hitler's Path

In 1920, Hitler joined the National Socialist Workers' (Nazi) Party – a party with a strong racial and nationalist agenda.

After a failed attempt to take power, Hitler was put in prison, where he spent

his time penning his book, *Mein Kampf*. The book summarises his leadership philosophy, born from his many years of suffering.

His idea was that a great authoritarian leader must lead the German race in its fight for survival and purify it from harmful influences.

After his release in 1926, Hitler led the Nazi party with his dazzling charisma. A growing number of resentful youths who have suffered under the economic and political turmoil showered him with support. His party won the largest percentage of votes in 1933. That year, he was appointed as the Chancellor of Germany.

Hitler's eventual seizure of power led to autocratic rule. War and genocide followed as Hitler's plans became increasingly bloodthirsty in its persecution of Germany's "enemies".

THEIR LEGACY

After the two-decade struggle in South Africa, Gandhi succeeded in getting the government to repeal its discriminatory laws and returned to India in 1915.

He started organising more peaceful strikes against the British. In the process, he also established an ashram for all castes to state his peaceful stand against caste and racial discrimination within India. This is the point where he adopted a simple lifestyle, wearing a loincloth and shawl and leading a life of austerity which earned him the honorary title of "Mahatma" (great soul).

While coordinating national strikes against the British, he urged his followers to hold dearly to the principle of non-violence in securing its independence, even after the Amritsar massacre when British forces opened fire on peaceful protesters, killing hundreds. India obtained its independence on Aug 15, 1947.

Adamant in promoting peace between Hindus and Muslims, he was finally assassinated by a Hindu extremist in 1948.

On the other end, Hitler's authoritarian leadership kept him stubborn and suspicious, causing traits such as greed and self-centredness to take over.

While Hitler had the charisma and forward-thinking abilities of a leader – which he already possessed as a child – he became deeply authoritative, immoral, non-egalitarian and power-hungry once he entered politics. Hitler's interest in German nationalism became more profound when he observed the effects of World War I on his country's economic status, and this was what spurred him to manipulate his people to be anti-Semitic.

The Munich agreement signed in 1938, which handed Sudetenland back to Germany, only made Hitler more aggressive by continuously persecuting Jews and invading nations across Europe. Hitler's stance provoked other major nations to combine forces against the Axis powers.

In 1945, Hitler met his end by committing suicide, as the allied forces fought their way to Berlin – leaving behind a shameful legacy for his nation, just as Gandhi foresaw.