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The Dictator's Playbook

By Robert Weiner and Emma Paris

The historical record is clear. Perhaps the oldest example that comes to mind is Attila the Hun who ruled from 434-453 A.D. Attila the Hun successfully made significant expansions of the Hunnic Empire. To the Romans, he was [nicknamed](#) "Flagellum Dei (the scourge of God)" due to his barbaric warfare and scavenging of Roman cities and populations. During his time, he ransacked over 70+ cities, killing millions in his path across the Roman Empire until his death in 453 A.D.

Similarly, another key expansionist emperor was Genghis Khan of the Mongol Empire. He lived from 1162-1227, beginning his brutal rule in 1206 A.D. Genghis Khan [rose](#) from a fractured childhood on the Mongolian steppe to build the largest land empire in history. His hunger for a large, powerful empire led to frequent wars that left populations starving and getting caught in the crossfire, creating massive numbers of casualties. Overall, these conquests across China and Central Asia left cities destroyed and populations decimated. He died in 1227 during a campaign against the Xi Xia, leaving behind an empire that continued expanding long after his death.

Napoleon Bonaparte [ruled](#) France and was another expansionist emperor. His wars reshaped Europe from the victories at Austerlitz and Wagram to the sweeping reforms of the Napoleonic Code that centralized power at home. His empire began to unravel after the catastrophic 1812 invasion of Russia, where his army of 600,000 was reduced to a fraction of its size, followed by defeats in Spain, Leipzig, and ultimately Waterloo. Forced to abdicate twice, he spent his final years exiled on the remote island of Saint Helena where he died at 51.

More recently, whether in Cambodia, Uganda, China, Spain, etc., the international community has rarely toppled a dictator through moral outrage alone but when brutality, destabilization, and the threat of global interests become impossible to ignore.

Pol Pot's rule in Cambodia shows how a dictator can fuse ideological extremism with absolute repression to devastating effect. From 1975 to 1979, his Khmer Rouge [emptied](#) cities, outlawed religion and private property, and caused the deaths of an estimated 1.5 to 2 million people through starvation, disease, overwork, and execution. His regime ultimately collapsed not because the world intervened, but because Vietnam invaded after years of border attacks and regional destabilization.

Idi Amin's eight-year rule in Uganda shows how a dictator can sustain power through terror while driving a nation into economic collapse. After [seizing](#) control in a coup in 1971, he carried out mass executions, expelled tens of thousands of Asian residents, and empowered security forces that killed an estimated 300,000 civilians as the country's institutions and economy unraveled. His regime ended when Tanzanian forces and Ugandan exiles captured Kampala in 1979 which was triggered by Amin's own cross-border aggression.

Mao Zedong came to power promising to end a century of humiliation and transform China through sweeping socialist revolution. But his experiments soon produced some of the darkest chapters in the country's modern history. The Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution (campaigns meant to industrialize the nation and ignite perpetual revolution) [led](#) to catastrophic famine, mass violence, and the near-collapse of the Communist Party itself. Yet despite the tens of millions of deaths, Mao remained insulated from external pressure. This illustrates how dictators who command vast populations and national identity often fall due to internal party shifts rather than international intervention.

Muammar Gaddafi seized power in a 1969 coup and spent the next four decades reshaping Libya through a mix of ideological experimentation, political repression, and oil-funded state control. He [dismantled](#) existing institutions, nationalized the oil industry, and imposed his Jamahiriya system. At the same time, he persecuted remnants of the old regime and alienated much of the international community through erratic foreign policy and internal crackdowns. His rule collapsed only when the Arab Spring ignited nationwide protests in 2011 which triggered a civil war that ended with rebel forces overthrowing and killing him. This outcome was driven less by global consensus than by the regime's own violent overreach and loss of domestic control.

Saddam Hussein ruled Iraq through fear, tight control of the government, and a series of violent decisions that hurt his own people and destabilized the region. After [becoming](#) president in 1979, he used loyal security forces to crush opposition, launched wars like the invasion of Kuwait, and carried out brutal attacks that isolated Iraq and caused enormous suffering. His regime ended only when a U.S.-led coalition removed him in 2003, showing how dictators who threaten regional stability often fall because of outside intervention rather than moral pressure

Francisco Franco ruled Spain for 36 years after winning the Spanish Civil War. He [created](#) a dictatorship built on traditionalism, anti-communism, and the power of the Catholic Church. He banned political opposition, repressed critics, and kept Spain isolated for years, only gaining broader international acceptance in the 1950s as the Cold War shifted global priorities. His regime endured until his death in 1975. This shows how some dictators remain in power not because they maintain popular support, but because their systems are built to outlast both internal resistance and long periods of international isolation.

According to the book *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the 20th Century* by Timothy Snyder, Joseph Stalin controlled the Soviet Union by relying on a loyal party leadership that claimed to speak for "reason" and the future. In the early 1930s, his government seized land from peasants and used harsh propaganda to justify it, causing a man-made famine that killed millions in Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Russia. With the NKVD executing nearly 700,000 people during the Great Terror, Stalin's wider communist system stayed in place until it finally collapsed in 1989. Adolf Hitler rose to power in Germany by taking advantage of democratic rules and the willingness of many people to obey without question. Once in control, he used groups like the SS and regular police to carry out the mass murder of millions of Jews, first through shootings in Eastern Europe and later through large, industrialized killing centers. His dictatorship ended only in 1945, when a worldwide military alliance defeated Nazi Germany after twelve years of emergency rule.

Taken together, these cases reveal a sobering truth. Dictators do not fall because the world suddenly discovers its conscience. They fall when their pillars of power crack. When repression becomes unsustainable, when co-opted elites turn away, or when their actions provoke forces stronger than themselves. If the international community hopes to confront future autocrats more effectively, it must understand not only the horrors these regimes inflict, but the structural weaknesses that ultimately bring them down.

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