

The Tyrant's Hopelessness [Jakub Grygiel](#)

The ancients knew: to understand a tyranny, you have to understand the tyrant's soul.

Tyrants, degenerate kings who ruled according to their own will and not the law, occurred relatively frequently in the history of ancient Greece (with the exception of Sparta) and Rome. They are also the protagonists of tragedies, dialogues, and histories written by classic authors, from Herodotus to Tacitus, from Plato to Cicero. The ancients found the term "tyrant" appropriate as a descriptor for a corrupted form of political regime based on personal rule, as well as a useful analytical tool. They were correct then. More importantly, they are still correct now.

Regrettably, modern language and thought have effectively expunged the word "tyrant" from our lexicon, diminishing our ability to assess many of our enemies. In modern times the simple definition, as mentioned above, is deemed to be unsophisticated. It puts a lot of emphasis on the individual leader, whereas we prefer to seek explanations in large impersonal forces, ranging from contests of ideas and economic systems or the *élan* of the masses. We are also wary of embracing a "great man" view of history because this assigns responsibility to an individual for political outcomes, and there seems to be a widespread allergy to accountability. (Hence, "mistakes have been made", rather than "I made a mistake", is a common talking point for today's leaders.)

Furthermore, to call a political leader a "tyrant" is to impart a nefarious connotation and to render judgment that a leader is personally responsible for the brutality of his state in its domestic as well as foreign acts. The modern presumption, since perhaps Weber, is that political analysis ought to be pursued not so much *sine ira et studio* (as Tacitus put it in the first lines of his [Annales](#)) but without expressing moral judgments. Calling somebody a tyrant expresses a "value judgment," and carries a tinge of anger and partiality too. For the well-heeled modern mind, "tyrant" is a slur, not an analytical concept. Hence, we prefer to study the institutional arrangements that may be less than optimal for freedom, to measure the material conditions that impede the exercise of freedom, or to ignore *in toto* the reality of a tyrant by adopting euphemisms such as "rogue state" or "strongman."

Another source of the modern skepticism toward the term "tyrant" is the belief that the 20th-century version of dictatorship has been marked by the lethal and unique combination of ideology and science. The modern dictators—Hitler and Stalin come to mind—are essentially deadly managers of ideological dogmas and scientific tools (giving rise to a "dark age, made more sinister, and perhaps more prolonged, by the lights of a perverted science" as [Winston Churchill famously said](#))—racial purity and paganism combined with armored divisions and gas chambers, atheistic materialism prodded by the atom and industrial power. The resulting totalitarian systems were thus more than anything an individual tyrant could erect. They were all-pervasive political systems, and could not sustain themselves by the sheer will of one tyrant.

But there is still an analytical place for tyrants. In fact, many of today's strongmen—say, Vladimir Putin—resemble more ancient tyrants than modern ones. Ideology and science play less of a role in their hold on power. Today's tyrants are ideological opportunists—postmodern leaders who shape their "narrative" according to public relations needs. They also face science, or technology, which can strengthen their rule but also has ways of undermining it. Instead, today's tyrants exercise personal rule through brute force and murder, but also through skillful cooptation of society. They are good pupils of Niccolò Machiavelli, and expend energies to avoid being hated by the majority of their subjects. They

are feared, to be sure, but they buy the servility or docility of their populations through economic welfare and propaganda.

Putin's tyranny, for instance, is built on targeted violence (the recent assassination of Boris Nemtsov is one in a long list), propaganda (the television channel "Russia Today", the most visible tool abroad, is just one part of a much larger apparatus of disinformation), nationalism (the invention of "Novorossiia" as a distinct Russian land encompassing, of course, the Donbas region is one example) and bribery of Russians (a project that may be more difficult to continue given the fiscal troubles of the regime). It is personal rule, maintained for the personal benefit of the leader. A tyrant is a violent narcissist. And his will trumps all law, positive and natural.

What do ancient writers say about tyranny, then?

A useful ancient text to understand tyrants—and for our purposes, how tyrants may behave in their foreign relations—is a minor work by Xenophon of Athens (430–354 BC). A student of Socrates, he wrote, among many other dialogues, treatises, and histories (notably, the [Anabasis](#)), *Hiero or Tyrannicus*, a brief dialogue between the eponymous tyrant of Syracuse and the poet Simonides. Somewhat forgotten, this short text was brought back to our attention by Leo Strauss, who in 1948 wrote [On Tyranny](#), a commentary that spurred a vibrant debate on Xenophon as well as on the wider subject. While the dialogue revolves around the question of whether tyrants can be happy (the answer is no, not really—in large measure because they must remain dissatisfied hedonists), it also offers a window into the minds of these solitary rulers whose will is the law of the land.

In Xenophon's description, tyrants have a few particular traits that, by implication, make them behave in unique, distinguishable ways.

The first, and perhaps most striking, characteristic of a tyrant is that he has little hope. As Xenophon writes, "in this pleasure of hope [tyrants] are worse off than private men" (1:18). The subject of the discussion at this point of the dialogue between Hiero and Simonides is the pleasure of food and how the ability to be served with every conceivable delectable deprives the tyrant of the pleasant expectation of something he cannot obtain. But the point is larger: tyrants can get anything they want in great abundance—horses, gold, food, and women—and as a consequence they lack the anticipation of greater delights. Fantastic wealth and absolute power are not the sources of joy but of constant disappointment. What we see of tyrants is their wealth and castles—in Putin's case, his expensive watches, gold-laden mansions, and bank accounts—but this does not tell us much about them. As Hiero says, this "keeps what is harsh hidden in the tyrants' soul, where human happiness and unhappiness are stored up.... [T]his escapes the notice of the multitude." (2: 4-5).

Why does this matter? Who cares if a tyrant is unhappy or, perhaps more crassly, if he is a hedonist unable to enjoy pleasure? The darkness of a tyrant's soul is no private predicament because it alters his outlook, and hence his behavior. The inability to hope leads to a lack of appreciation of the future. The expectation of a better tomorrow—in terms of more scrumptious food or a more just and peaceful political environment—can create incentives to moderate one's behavior in the present as a means of achieving goals. Or to be more precise, it makes personal sacrifices possible: one works hard to build something for tomorrow, or saves money to acquire a possession later on. A tyrant lacks this sense, according to Hiero's argument; his is a barren soul, incapable of understanding the benefits of personal sacrifice.

The result is not inaction or peace. On the contrary, a hopeless tyrant is “insolent” and lives off constant and destructive plunder. The poet Simonides understands the tyrant when he explains that “it is inbred in some human beings, just as in horses, to be insolent in proportion as the needs they have are more fully satisfied” (10:1). Aristotle went even further, writing that “the greatest crimes are caused by excess and not by necessity. Men do not become tyrants in order that they may not suffer cold” (Aristotle, *Politics*, Book II, Part 7). Xenophon, through Hiero, admits that “tyrants are compelled most of the time to plunder unjustly both temples and human beings, because they always need additional money to meet their necessary expenses. For, as if there were a perpetual war on, [tyrants] are compelled to support an army or perish.” (4:11) Incapable of hope, living in fear of losing what he has, the tyrant is constantly preying on his own subjects but also on subjects of neighboring states.

Another source of a tyrant’s myopia is implied in the above description. Tyrants are perennially insecure. Their lives are ruled by the desire—and the need—to hold on to power, a preoccupation that is always immediate.

Xenophon describes the fear with which tyrants must travel. They all “proceed everywhere as through hostile territory” (2:8). All men tend to experience risks in foreign territory, but only tyrants “know that when they reach their own city they are then in the midst of the largest number of their enemies.” (2:9). A tyrant is therefore a “soul distracted by fears” (6:5), who believes he sees “enemies not only in front of [him], but on every side” (6:8). Euripides also observes in a [fragment of a lost tragedy](#) that the “tyrant must ruin his friends and put them to death; he lives in very great fear that they will do him harm.” The tyrant’s life is constantly at risk: there may be no tomorrow if today the tyrant stops increasing his domination of others, acquiring greater wealth, accumulating more power, and consequently plundering ever more. Xenophon again: “Their largest and most necessary expenses go to guard their lives” (4:9).

For the tyrant, the future is irrelevant because the present is perennially at risk. Or, another way of putting this is that the tyrant is a narcissist whose only preoccupation is his own wellbeing and survival. The future is circumscribed to his own personal survival, no matter what the costs may be.

A tyrant is a shark who perishes when he stops swimming, as [George Weigel comments on Putin](#); the tyrant dies (or rather, is killed because few retire peacefully) when he stops dominating others.

Two immediate consequences, relevant for how we assess the strategic interactions with today’s tyrants such as Putin, stem from this ancient wisdom.

First, threatening a tyrant with future costs is ineffective. In [War and Human Nature](#), Harvard professor Stephen Rosen observes, “Tyrannies have shorter time horizons within which strategic costs and benefits are calculated. Specifically, tyrannies [are] prone to be strongly affected by incentives and disincentives that appear near in time to the moment of choice.” What speaks to a tyrant is costs or pain that can be imposed here and now; tomorrow is less relevant. In practical terms, this may mean that imposing economic sanctions on a tyrant is less effective because the costs of such punishment will become a reality slowly, at some future point. As such, sanctions are less likely to alter a tyrant’s behavior today or in the immediate future.

Second, tyrants do not understand the concept of peace. The tyrant of Syracuse, Hiero, explains to the poet Simonides that “for private men, relief from war is brought about both by treaties and by peace. Whereas for tyrants peace is never made with those subject to their tyranny; nor could the tyrant be

confident trusting for a moment to a treaty.” (2:11) The constant, perennial war that the tyrant himself is causing means that even when he has killed the enemy he feared, he cannot rest and be glad (2:18). In brief, one would be foolish to trust a treaty or ceasefire or even a “peace” with a tyrant. He is inherently incapable of respecting it.