

Mithridates Eupator, a historical personality

It is just over a century since Georgij Valentinovitj Plekhanov wrote his essay "*K voprosu o roli litjnosti v istorii*", "On the question of the role of the personality in history", published in St. Petersburg in 1898. The questions that he raised and the problems that he identifies, however, remain valid for historical scholarship and historical philosophy today.

It was in the course of the nineteenth century that history developed into the scientific discipline that we know today. Until then, narrative had been the core of history: narrative focused on historical actors, or if you prefer, historical personalities. The scientific revolution of the nineteenth century changed all that. The result was a new kind of history, history as a science dealing with the evolution of human society.

The problem with any kind of evolutionism is that it leaves so little room for the individual. Carried to its logical conclusion, evolutionist history would deny that the individual choices and actions of persons have any long-term effect on the course of history. This runs counter to what most people would consider common sense: did the actions and choices of Saint Paul, Charlemagne, Henry VIII or Adolf Hitler have no impact on the course of history? If persons were unable to influence the course of history, there would be no point in forming political parties or taking political action – ("the lunar eclipse paradox").

The inherent conflict within history, which on the one hand draws its material from actions of individuals, on the other hand is concerned with the evolution of the collective, is at the centre of Plekhanov's essay. In the course of his discussion, Plekhanov names a series of historical actors: Lycurgus, Louis XV of France, Bismarck, and of course Napoleon. For nineteenth-century historians, Napoleon was the great enigma of history.

Plekhanov argues that though personalities matter in history, they rarely change the long-term fate of nations. Certainly the history of revolutionary France would not have been the same without Napoleon, but France would still have been a major European power in the nineteenth century. There were other brilliant young officers among his contemporaries. One of them could have taken his place, if that place had not already been taken. But on the other hand, the personal history of Napoleon would not have been the same without the exceptional opportunities that revolutionary France offered him.

Mithridates Eupator was *not* among the historical examples studied by Plekhanov, and that is a pity, for the career and achievements of the Pontic king illustrate the paradox of the personality in

history. Without the charismatic and daring leadership of Mithradates, a petty kingdom would hardly have developed into a trans-Euxine territorial state and a military power capable of challenging the power of Rome. In this respect, the story of Mithradates proves the point that great personalities make great differences in history. But it can also be used to support the opposite view: the spectacular achievements of Mithradates were unimportant in the long run – fifty years after his death, the Romans were masters of all Asia Minor, as they had been before and were to remain for centuries to come.

Even if the story of Mithradates Eupator is in a certain sense a historical parenthesis, it is still an interesting story worthy of historical inquiry; and it is equally clear that it cannot be understood or explained without taking into account the person of Mithradates himself.

But can we ever hope to draw a coherent picture of Mithradates *wie er eigentlich gewesen?* All our literary sources are Roman: they show the king from the perspective of his enemies and his victors. The historical novelist Alfred Duggan, who published a much-read biography of Mithradates in 1958, reacts against the negative tendency of the Roman sources by painting a somewhat more positive portrait of the Pontic king, downplaying the darker sides of his personality and in places tending to identify himself with his subject, as often happens to biographers. A more balanced picture is, in my view, provided in the biography of Mithradates by Hermann Bengtson in the *Herrschergestalten des Hellenismus*.

Bengtson warns us against taking the uniformly negative image of Mithradates provided by the ancient writers at face value, yet he also acknowledges that the king had many lives and many crimes to answer for. “To his contemporaries,” Bengtson writes, “Mithradates was a sinister figure, combining contradictory and seeming incompatible traits of character: cruelty and clemency, friendship and enmity, loyalty and treachery, magnanimity and envy, culture and barbarism; ... a man of great will-power and even greater ruthlessness.”

Both Duggan and Bengtson acknowledge that the personality, or character, of Mithradates was enigmatic and something out of the ordinary. But how far out of the ordinary? Did he possess what a modern psychologist would call a deviant personality? This question deserves to be asked. For the answer, we must look to the discipline of pathography, a branch of history concerned with the personal medical or psychiatric history of historical actors.

There are several variants of pathography. First, there is the study of clinically ill individuals, for example Christian VII of Denmark, Ludwig Maximilian II of Bavaria, or the last tsarevich of Imperial Russia. Second, attempts to explain the behaviour of whole groups or nations

by recourse to psychological theory, such as Geoffrey Gorer's swaddling hypothesis, Erich Fromm's theory of the authoritarian personality, or Robert Waite's study of the German Free Corps movement.

In recent decades, the scope of pathography has been widened to include persons who are not ill or mad in a clinical sense, but suffer from physical or mental disorders that on the one hand do not incapacitate them in relation to their duties, but on the other hand crucially affect the way in which they perform those tasks. For instance alcoholism, epilepsy, manio-depressive disorder, borderline psychosis, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Two well-known examples are Lord Moran's case history of Winston Churchill, or the recent book on Slobodan Milosevic. Less well known outside Scandinavia is Schioldann Nielsen's 1983 doctoral dissertation about prime minister D.G. Monrad. Drawing on a wide array of sources, Schioldann Nielsen demonstrated that Monrad's behaviour was consistent with a fairly severe manio-depressive disturbance and that it was during one of his manic periods that he provoked Denmark's disastrous war of 1864 against Germany and Austria.

The general reaction to Schioldann's book was that he went too far. Not in relation to his sources, but to national feelings. To Danes, the war of 1864 is The Great Patriotic War, a struggle for national survival against overwhelming odds. To suggest that it was started in a fit of light-headedness by a slightly unbalanced prime minister ... too much.

Another controversial contribution to the field is Lawrence A. Tritle's *From Melos to My Lai: War and Survival*, published in 2000 to mixed reviews. In chapter 4, Tritle gives us a detailed, almost clinical analysis of the Spartan Klearkhos as portrayed in Xenophon's *Anabasis*, and argues that Klearkhos is undoubtedly suffering from PTSD. Another possible ancient example of PTSD, according to Tritle, is Alexander the Great.

But let us return to Mithradates. He was clearly not mad in the general sense of that word. George III of England, Christian VII of Denmark and Ludwig Maximilian of Bavaria probably suffered from schizophrenia; Mithradates did not. His actions reveal a tendency to underestimate problems and adversaries, but the overall picture does not suggest a manio-depressive disposition. One may identify typical paranoid traits in his character, but then anyone growing up at a Hellenistic court had good reasons to be paranoid.

Did Mithradates possess what psychologists would call a borderline personality? A borderline personality is also known, in everyday language, as a psychopath. One widely used checklist of psychopathic characteristics lists the following traits :

1. Glibness/superficial charm.
2. Grandiose sense of self-worth.
3. Need for stimulation/proneness to boredom
4. Pathological lying
5. Conning/manipulative
6. Lack of remorse or guilt
7. Shallow affect
8. Callous/lack of empathy
9. Parasitic lifestyle
10. Poor behavioral controls
11. Promiscuous sexual behavior
12. Early behavior problems
13. Lack of realistic, long-term plans
14. Impulsivity
15. Irresponsibility
16. Failure to accept responsibility for own actions
17. Many short-term relationships
18. Juvenile delinquency
19. Revocation of conditional release
20. Criminal versatility

This list was drawn up from a study of psychopaths in American prisons, and it tends to emphasize their negative characteristics. There are, however, also “successful” psychopaths; in fact they are more successful than average. It is estimated that 5-7% of the male population and perhaps 1% of the female population fall into this category, and that among leadership cadres in government, business and the military, the proportion is higher, perhaps 10-15%. Several explanations have been proposed for this over-representation. One is that ruthlessness and insensitivity to the sufferings of others are seen as positive qualities in certain male hierarchies such as finance corporations or the army. Another is that psychopaths strive for positions involving power over others. According to Gordon Banks (1990), “they are attracted to certain vocations having great

opportunity for exerting power such as politics, the law, or medicine” and we should note in passing that Mithradates exerted power by all three of these means.

It needs to be remembered that the traits listed above are not unique to borderline personalities; persons with a strongly manio-depressive disposition will also act irresponsibly and without realistic long-term plans, while those suffering from PTSD often lack empathy and have difficulty establishing long-term, personal relationships.

Common to most borderline personalities are a strong sense of self-importance and superiority; ability to lie or dissimulate; ability to manipulate others; inability to form lasting personal relationships; lack of conscience, guilt or remorse; reluctance to take responsibility for own failures; tendency to focus on short-term solutions to long-term problems. In addition, successful psychopaths are often intelligent, highly charismatic, and adept at manipulating others. A classical example from literature is Long John Silver in Stevenson’s novel *Treasure Island*.

A problem with historical borderline personalities is that they are so difficult to identify in our sources. Even under clinical conditions, a reliable diagnosis requires extended observation. Since successful borderline personalities are rarely perceived as sufferers, their symptoms are often overlooked by those around them.

The mental problems of George III, Christian VII, Ludwig Maximilian and Winston Churchill are known to history because their eccentric behaviour – or in the case of Churchill, his alcoholism – led to their being placed under medical supervision. The epilepsy of Julius Caesar is recorded because it drew the concern of some contemporaries. But as long as the going is good, a borderline personality may go unnoticed. If their careers had taken a different turn or been cut short, Slobodan Milosevic and Peter Brixtofte, to take two recent examples, could have gone down in history as charismatic and successful political leaders. Instead, both now have to stand trial. They are both possible examples of borderline personalities.

If Mithradates was a borderline personality, he was one of the successful ones. It is obvious from our sources and from his ability to rally soldiers and supporters that he was highly charismatic. It is equally clear that he was entirely ruthless, not only towards his attackers, but towards anyone who stood in his way, including members of his own family. He had difficulty in creating durable alliances, even with rulers who were his relatives, such as the king of Armenia. That he was vengeful towards the defeated and he had a grandiose perception of himself in relation to his subjects there is no doubt. His love life is not well documented, but there were a series of perhaps not very profound liaisons after the murder of his wife and sister Laodike. However, being

charismatic is no vice in itself, and ruthlessness, fratricide, disloyalty, grandiosity and promiscuity were the norm rather than the exception in the Hellenistic kingdoms.

Looking at the military successes of Mithradates Eupator, the common denominator is the element of surprise, from his first attacks on Roman interests at the turn of the century until his final desperate march along the Black Sea from Colchis to Pantikapaion. The Pontic king did what others would not have tried or dared – perhaps because of a natural tendency to underestimate the obstacles involved.

On the other hand, having won, he soon enough abandoned his conquests in the face of Roman pressure. One wonders: was there a long-term plan to the military policy of Mithradates? He tried to present himself as the liberator of Asia from the Romans, and in this he is supported by the hostile Roman tradition that portrays him as the arch-enemy of Rome. His advances were costly in terms of money and soldiers' lives, yet after each retreat he somehow managed to rally another army behind him, a testimony to his charisma though not necessarily to his realism. That his sense of realism did not improve with age is suggested by the story that when cornered in Pantikapaion, Mithradates hatched a fantastic plan to raise a new army and march along the Danube from the Black Sea to the Alps, then invade Italy from the north. The story is told by Appian and is accepted as authentic by Duggan, but rejected by Bengtson.

It is characteristic of the borderline personality that it tends to focus on short-term, immediate objectives, disregarding long-term consequences and risks. It seems possible, but cannot be proven, that Mithradates was a successful psychopath. In historical terms, the question is of considerable interest, though not of crucial importance. The salient features of his personality are the same whether we are able to put a diagnostic term to them or not. He was a ruthless and charismatic Hellenistic monarch; he was a risk-taker; and he succeeded in creating a great kingdom and bringing it down over his own head.

Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht, as Schiller observed. How does history judge Mithradates, the historical person? Alfred Duggan describes him as “a great warrior, a great horseman, a great administrator ... he lived in honour, and died with pride”. Hermann Bengtson gives a rather different verdict: “Can we count him among the great rulers”, Bengtson asks, and continues to give the negative answer: “not really, for he lacked the qualities of a truly outstanding leader, above all, he produced no lasting results”. Plechanov would have agreed with Bengtson. The impact of Mithradates on history was dramatic, but he was not unique among Hellenistic monarchs,

his achievements were ephemeral, and in the long run, he made no lasting impact on the world. Except, as a cynic might observe, that all the people who were killed by Mithradates remain dead.