

Narcissistic leadership in Hitler, Putin, and Trump shares common roots, new psychology paper claims

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[June 2, 2025](#)

A recent study published in [Frontiers in Psychology](#) makes the case that the narcissistic traits of Adolf Hitler, Vladimir Putin, and Donald Trump—traits that have shaped their political leadership—can be traced back to common patterns in their early childhood and family environments. According to the research, all three leaders experienced forms of psychological trauma and frustration during their formative years, grew up with authoritarian fathers and emotionally supportive mothers, and showed signs of pathological narcissism in adulthood.

The study, authored by Yusuf Çifci of Muş Alparslan University in Türkiye, aimed to explore how early childhood conditions and family structures contribute to the development of narcissistic political leadership. The research focused specifically on comparing the upbringings of Hitler, Putin, and Trump to identify shared familial causes of narcissism.

Psychological research has long acknowledged the link between narcissism and leadership. Narcissists often seek attention, approval, and admiration, and these motivations can fuel political ambition. But while many previous studies have examined the rhetoric, behaviors, or public personas of political leaders, Çifci's work focuses on earlier developmental influences—particularly the role of family dynamics in shaping narcissistic traits.

Since it is not possible to assess living or historical leaders through direct clinical interviews or standard psychological tests, Çifci used an interpretive method that draws on biographical and historical accounts. By analyzing known facts about the childhoods of Hitler, Putin, and Trump—especially regarding parental behavior, trauma, and emotional support—he sought to identify the formative conditions that contributed to their later personalities and leadership styles.

Central to the study is the distinction between two types of narcissism: healthy (or constructive) narcissism and unhealthy (or reactive/pathological) narcissism. Healthy narcissism supports self-esteem and confidence. It emerges when children receive appropriate care and face manageable frustrations that help them build resilience. In contrast, unhealthy narcissism tends to result from emotional disturbances during early development—particularly trauma, inconsistent caregiving, or overbearing parenting.

According to the study, Hitler, Putin, and Trump all experienced significant psychological stressors during their childhoods that may have disrupted the healthy progression of narcissistic development. Each leader grew up in a household dominated by an authoritarian father figure and a mother who offered warmth and attention. This combination—harsh discipline from one

parent and compensatory affection from the other—can create emotional instability in children, leading them to form a grandiose self-image as a defense against feelings of worthlessness or insecurity.

For instance, historical records show that Hitler was subjected to frequent physical abuse by his father, who beat him with a belt made from hippopotamus skin. His mother, in contrast, doted on him, particularly after losing three previous children. This imbalance may have contributed to Hitler's inflated self-concept and intense need for dominance and recognition.

Putin's family story reveals similar dynamics. His parents lost two sons before he was born, and he grew up hearing stories of wartime suffering. Putin has publicly described being beaten with a belt by his father as a child. Like Hitler, he was a "replacement child" who became the focus of his mother's emotional attention. According to the study, this context may have nurtured a fragile sense of self that required reinforcement through displays of control and strength.

In Trump's case, the evidence points to emotional abandonment rather than physical abuse. At the age of 12, he was sent to a military boarding school, which he later interpreted as a rejection. The experience of being expelled from the comfort of the family home and placed in a strict, hierarchical environment during a key stage in emotional development may have shaped his adult drive for dominance and praise. His older brother Fred's death from alcoholism also contributed to a family atmosphere of emotional tension and unspoken trauma.

Across all three cases, Çifci identifies the experience of trauma or age-inappropriate frustration as a central factor. Children need moderate levels of challenge and frustration to develop emotional resilience. When the demands placed on them are overwhelming or traumatic, the resulting psychological disturbance can lead to the formation of reactive narcissism—a defensive grandiosity used to manage deep feelings of vulnerability.

The study also discusses other familial risk factors, including growing up as a replacement child and living with alcoholic family members. While Hitler and Putin fit the replacement child profile, Trump's experience is somewhat different. However, the death of his older brother from alcoholism may have created an emotionally unstable family environment.

In all three cases, the authoritarian father figure emerges as a common denominator. These fathers exercised strict control, withheld affection, or were emotionally unavailable—traits that, combined with maternal overcompensation, disrupted healthy self-concept development.

The research suggests that the grandiosity, need for admiration, hostility toward criticism, and lack of empathy observed in these leaders may stem not only from personal ambition or ideology but also from unresolved childhood wounds. But there are important limitations to consider. Because it relies on biographical and historical data rather than direct psychological assessments, it cannot make definitive clinical diagnoses.

Additionally, individual variation in response to childhood adversity is wide, and not all people exposed to trauma or authoritarian parenting develop narcissistic traits. The study is also limited

to male leaders from a specific cultural and historical background, which may limit generalizability.

The study, “[Child, family, and narcissistic political leadership: a comparison of Hitler, Putin, and Trump](#),” was published May 20, 2025.