



Charisma in Modern Islamic Revolutionary Movements: The Case of Ahmad Shah Massoud

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Introduction: Thinking Outside The Chat Room

Security Studies is inundated with scholarship devoted to highlighting the ways in which technology (particularly the internet) is defining terrorist organizations, militias, revolutionary movements, and criminal networks. Still, much as technology has altered our perspective of daily life, there is a danger of becoming too narrowly focused on technology as a means of explaining emerging and evolving revolutionary movements. and not enough focus on the charismatic leaders that continue to motivate, define, and drive revolutionary movements. It is far from certain that the Internet has deposed the charismatic leader of his or her central role in rallying, organizing, and spurring revolutionary movements. Indeed, for every virtual cell and skillfully produced martyrdom video, there is a Moqtada al Sadr or a Sheik Hassan Nassrallah.

Despite the centrality of charismatic leaders today, and throughout history, attempts to analyze the attributes of these leaders, and then to evaluate them empirically have been dismissed as inherently subjective. Charismatic leadership is

interesting as biography, but of little value as a criterion upon which foreign policy decisions could be based.

From an analysis standpoint, the vital question is not only how do we identify a charismatic leader and their followers?¹ But how (and for what) do we use this information? This article begins by broadly re-evaluating the modern typology of charismatic revolutionaries. Next it examines charismatic leadership within an historical Islamic context. Finally, it explores charisma in the context of Afghan society and, particularly, the case of *mujahideen* leader Ahmad Shah Massoud during the Soviet occupation and Taliban take over of Afghanistan. These sociological, religious and cultural layers provide a definite context in which to ground the amorphous idea of charismatic leadership, with the overarching goal to differentiate the adroit propagandist from the true charismatic. However, identifying charismatic leaders alone is of limited utility. The real challenge—and the real foreign policy tool—is to identify not only which generals, ideologues and revolutionaries possess charisma, but which of these leaders are capable of transitioning from the role of an inspiring revolutionary to the role of a leader within an established political system? If we can identify which leaders possess the characteristics and abilities to make the transition from the battlefield to the statehouse without losing their charismatic hold upon the populace, then we may begin to

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understand with whom we should engage in dialogue, and what their triggers, needs and constraints are.

Charisma Defined

The modern term ‘charisma’ is derived from the Greek, *kharizesthai*, translating literally as “divine favor.”² In ancient Greece the person possessing charisma was considered to be in good favor with the gods. Charisma was not something that could be won with hard work or the accumulation of knowledge, but was instead bestowed supernaturally upon the individual. In return for this gift of grace, the individual became a direct conduit for the divine messages of the gods.³

Not surprisingly the belief that a supernatural leader would arise and inspire a devoted following based upon preternatural ability and divine gifts seemed subjective and inapplicable to questions of social science, much less the study of warfare and modern revolutionary leaders. And so for two millennia charisma—more as a belief than a theory—remained rooted in its religio-mystic origins. In the early 20th century, however, German sociologist Max Weber attempted to transfer the theory of charismatic leadership from the purely religious realm of prophets, seers, and mystics to the socio-political world of revolutionaries, demagogues, and civil rights leaders.⁴ According to Weber, a person possessing charisma has “a certain quality [...] by virtue of which s/he is set apart from ordinary people and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.”⁵ Though still subjective in nature, charisma was, for Weber, a legitimate way in which leaders obtained, consolidated, and maintained authority.

Throughout the 20th century, scholars debated the validity of Weber’s theory of charismatic leadership. Dekmejian and Wyzsomirski, Spencer, and Schweitzer, interpret

and apply Weber’s theory to leaders as diverse as Gandhi, Hitler, Lenin, and Mandela.⁶ Others reject the applicability of an inherently religious concept to a secular system, and denounce the way in which the theory’s value-free framework claims to compare the charisma of men like Gandhi and Hitler objectively.⁷

In a speech on leadership in the twentieth century, historian Arthur Schlesinger was blunt in his criticism of charisma as an analytic tool. “Most contemporary usage of the word charismatic is metaphorical,” Schlesinger said. “[T]he word has become a chic synonym for heroic or even just for popular.”⁸ Schlesinger was right to deride the modern metaphorical drift of the term charisma. In many cases it has become a handy epithet bestowed upon romantically conceived revolutionaries by fawning journalists. Moreover, charisma in the modern Islamic context is increasingly exploited only after the death of the leader in what appears to be an attempt to furnish

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living evidence of the deceased’s martyrdom status. Indeed, the Ahmad Shah Massoud leveling a steely, Guevara-esque gaze from two-story posters in downtown Kabul is the result of an Afghan government desperately seeking both a national hero and a symbolic rallying point in a period of change and uncertainty. However, by the time of his death at the hands of two Algerian suicide bombers

carrying stolen Belgian passports and posing as journalists, Massoud was indeed the very figure around whom Afghans and the international community rallied in their effort to defeat the Taliban.⁹

An ethnic Tajik, Massoud earned the nom de guerre The Lion of Panjshir after his successful defense of the Panjshir Valley (his birthplace and the home of Afghanistan’s Tajik community) from the Soviet and Taliban campaigns. Massoud had become so vital to the resistance that the Afghan United Front initiated a disinformation campaign to prevent confirmation of his death until a week

later.¹⁰ In less than a week, however, the events of September 11, 2001 would transform the Afghan United Front. This coalition of militias went from a cornered and increasingly desperate resistance, to the entry point for the United States' bid to oust the Taliban and capture or kill Al Qaeda leader and suspected 9/11 mastermind, Osama bin Laden.

The nature of the attack on Massoud—a suicide mission carried out with a bomb concealed in a video camera—and the fact that it was carried out just two days before the 9/11 terrorist attacks, fueled allegations that the two events were directly linked.¹¹ If this is the case, then bin Laden, it could be argued, recognized Massoud as the lynchpin of the resistance and as a key U.S. ally in the event of American retaliation on Taliban and Al Qaeda targets.¹² The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had also identified Massoud as an indispensable leader of the mujahideen resistance to the Taliban. Though both bin Laden and the CIA understood the centrality and charismatic power of Massoud's unquestioned leadership, it can easily be conjectured that bin Laden may have acted on this understanding in making the strategic decision to eliminate him. The CIA was forced to settle for whatever leader remained.

After Massoud's death, the battle-hardened general, Mohammed Fahim stepped in to continue the fight with the U.S. to push the Taliban back into the tribal areas along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Even the most brilliant commander, however, would not be able to fill the void left by Massoud's death. An assessment by *Jane's Intelligence Review* ten days after Massoud's assassination touched upon the vital and ultimately mysterious nature of charismatic leadership. "While seen as a competent and reliable military commander," the report states, "the self-effacing Fahim has none of the *personal charisma, strategic vision, and political sense* that over the years underpinned Massoud's unchallenged leadership."¹³ So what exactly did Massoud have that Fahim lacked? To determine this we need to examine those Massoud led.

The chief problem with using a charismatic rubric to analyze a revolutionary leader (or any leader for that matter) is the very subjectivity of charisma itself. If we look at journalistic accounts,

documentaries, or even first-hand, scholarly field research of the leaders themselves, we cannot help but view the leader through a tinted lens. Simply, it is in the mind of the follower that a charismatic leader emerges and it is from these followers that the charismatic derives his authority. Indeed, the central tenet of charisma is the effectual relationship between the leader and his followers. If we are asking, who is a charismatic leader? One answer may simply be to find the leader towards whom the sentiments of awe and enthusiasm are directed.¹⁴ Dekmejian and Wyszomirski offered the same starting point in their charismatic assessment of the Madhi of Sudan:

The ultimate judgment of the leader's "goodness" or "badness" or "genuineness" or "spuriousness" lies solely with his followers. The opinions of "outsiders" or "noncommunicants" who have not succumbed to the leader's charisma are irrelevant. Whatever the leader's personal qualities or morality, the fact remains that these were acceptable to his followers and proved instrumental in convincing them of the truth of his message.¹⁵

These Followers are essentially incapable of achieving order on their own, and their lack order is never more apparent or urgent than in times of crisis or upheaval. Thus they are awed by the leader's intellect and ability to put forward a coherent vision of the (often incomprehensible) reality that is war.¹⁶ An informative example of this type of charismatic leadership is found in an account of a mujahideen war council, led by Massoud, the night before an attack on Taliban positions in the Panjshir Valley in 2001.

His commanders—many of them older than he, most veterans of the Soviet war—listened in slightly chastised silence, like schoolboys who hadn't done their homework. "The type of operation you have planned for tonight might not be so successful, but that's okay; it should continue," [Massoud] said. "This is not our main target. We're just trying to get

them to bring reinforcements so they take casualties. The main thrust will be elsewhere." Massoud was so far ahead of his commanders that at times he seemed unable to decide whether to explain his thinking or to just give them orders and hope for the best.¹⁷

At the outset of internal conflicts, the dignity and purpose of belonging to a resistance movement, combined with the charismatic leader's strategic vision, are often enough to secure and maintain loyalty. As Weber noted, when there is a chronic state of war the charismatic figure able to channel strategic prowess becomes a permanent fixture. As Spencer notes: "The prototype of such a figure might be the war leader or general who is recognized as being formidable at his craft, but nothing more."¹⁸ Yet, because of the one-dimensional nature of this type of charisma, the revolutionary's power is fleeting and can vanish in defeat.¹⁹ The leader possessing battlefield mastery but little representational or organizational skills often finds it difficult in times of peace to institute the social, economic and political changes they fought so brilliantly to secure.

This transition from martial to political leadership constitutes the spectrum of the leadership cycle. "At the culmination of the cycle," Dekmejian and Wyszomirski explain, "the leader will have presided over a transition from charismatic authority to one that increasingly relies upon 'rational-legal' means of legitimacy; with the passage of time the system may also acquire traditional legitimacy as well."²⁰ The progression from guerilla leader to traditional government leader is known as *routinization*. Based on the legitimacy derived from his charisma, the leader must build a foundation for a new, lasting order. In order to ensure such stability, routinization should occur "at the height of charismatic leadership, before inevitable reverses erode the leader's charisma."²¹

Yet, switching over to an administrative framework, while still retaining the charismatic quality that allowed the leader to inspire a following and ascend to a position of power, has proven difficult. Associated political trappings as

well as the need to build consensus often overwhelm a charismatic revolutionary. As Arthur Schweitzer noted in *Theory and Political Charisma*, "Administrative staffs and economic support will squeeze out the original charismatic quality as soon as the movement becomes a consolidated regime."²² According to this theory, the routinization of a charismatic revolutionary essentially kills his charisma. Yet the relatively long periods of routine rule by Mussolini, Hitler, Nehru, and Mao seem to refute the self-destructive nature of the charismatic revolutionary.²³

However, if it is possible to retain charisma during the period of routinization it is not, necessarily, probable. It must first be determined

whether the nature of the charisma of the particular leader is essentially one-dimensional mastery or multi-dimensional representation. This is an essential first step in evaluating a revolutionary's ability to assume the traditional reigns of government. Not

only must a charismatic leader be able to represent the needs of followers, the leader must also be willing to undertake tedious administrative endeavors, coalition building, and the normalization of foreign relations.

During his campaigns against the Soviets throughout the 1980s and again during his resistance to the Taliban in the 1990s, Massoud proved a master at uniting and coordinating an ethnically diverse coalition of Uzbek, Hazara, Tajik, and even Pashtun mujahideen forces. Formed in May 1990 in a bid to oust the communist-backed Najibullah government (still clinging to power four years after the Red Army had been expelled) the National Commanders Shura (NCS) was a coalition composed of, among others, the abrasive Uzbek Socialist Rashid Dostum and Ismail Khan, a former Captain in the Afghan National Army that had since taken up command of a mujahideen force in the eastern

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province of Herat. In a move to alleviate the ever-present ethnic tensions within the coalition, Massoud opened a military academy at his base in the Panjshir Valley to train volunteers from various provinces.²⁴ Additionally, Massoud instituted a parallel government to address the needs of the mainly Tajik community in the Panjshir Valley in order to build and maintain popular support for the mujahideen.

More than the other mujahideen parties within Afghanistan at the time, Massoud relied strongly upon local sources for the economic development of the region. In addition to promoting local small businesses and instituting a parallel government to address the basic social needs of the largely Tajik Population inhabiting the Panjshir Valley, Massoud was also able to coordinate the evacuation of civilians in the valley in advance of mujahideen battles with the Red Army.²⁵ By instituting a parallel government and creating a wartime economy, the people of the Panjshir Valley could now offer input in the resistance effort.²⁶ Nearly a decade after he began these reforms in the Panjshir Valley (and amidst a string of debilitating defeats at the hands of the Taliban in the north), Massoud proved an effective international statesman and orator when addressing the European Union in Paris and Strasbourg in an effort to galvanize international support for his increasingly beleaguered resistance. This range of skills shows Massoud to have been more than just a general or student of Mao. However, the routinization of Massoud's charismatic leadership never occurred. There are several reasons for this lack of routinization in the case of Massoud that deserve closer examination.

When Afghanistan's Soviet-backed communist government led by President Najibullah finally crumbled on April 26, 1992, Mohammed Nabi Azimi, the general in charge of Kabul's military garrison asked Massoud to enter Kabul and assume the role of head of state. Though he was the most popular Northern Alliance figure and had an organized Mujahideen force under his direct command, Massoud refused. Instead, he contacted the resistance's external leadership in Pakistan and waited three days for the interim government to arrive from Peshawar before entering the city.²⁷ Massoud's

decision to await the external leadership with whom he had become increasingly disillusioned, rather than exploit the power vacuum to create an indigenously controlled government, would come to haunt him. As former Northern Alliance resistance member Neamatollah Nojumi writes, "The personal charisma of a nationally and internationally recognized mujahideen leader like Ahmed Shah Massoud could have played a significant role in the establishment of a wider influence of the NCS in Afghanistan.... In this case, the external leaders would not have had any other choice but to cooperate with the NCS."²⁸

The transitional government that assumed power was headed by Burhanuddin Rabbani, Massoud's longtime friend and head of the Pakistan-based Jamaat-e-Islami party (JIA). Massoud was appointed Defense Minister.²⁹ From the outset, however, the situation in Kabul did not allow for any rational-legal or routine institutions to take hold. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of the Pakistani-based Hezb-i-Islami party (HIH) and longtime nemesis of Massoud, refused to recognize the new JIA-controlled government and attacked Kabul with the backing of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Essentially, Massoud and his Northern Alliance forces had gone from resistance movement to acting government to government under siege. This nearly 180-degree reversal of their previous position and strategic thinking occurred in only eight months. The switch from guerilla resistance to embattled government confounded any chance for Massoud to progress from the mastery to the representational phase of charismatic leadership.

A period of calm that allows re-adjustment is therefore a necessary first condition for the routinization process to occur. This is not merely a period of adjustment to the bureaucratic trappings of the state government system, but a time for a deeper psychological shift away from guerilla philosophy wherein not losing and living to fight another day is winning. Such an environment did not exist for Massoud in Kabul during his brief term as Defense Minister, and, as a result, routinization never happened. However, to understand the events that occurred after the fall of Kabul better, we need to look further back

to Massoud's emergence as a charismatic leader and to charisma's Islamic roots.

Charisma in Islam

When King Zahir Shah was overthrown in 1973 by his cousin, the Soviet-backed Mohammed Daud, the CIA and the ISI began to channel arms to resistance movements via radical Islamic parties located in Pakistan. Ahmad Shah Massoud and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar were both upper-middle class engineering students at the University of Kabul when they crossed into

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Pakistan to found and lead two of the most militant Islamic parties: the JIA and HIIH respectively. Their immediate goals included the expulsion of communists from Afghanistan, and both parties were inspired by the *Ikhwan ul Musilmeen*

or Muslim Brotherhood. Founded in 1928, The Brotherhood sought the creation of an Islamic state through revolution.³⁰

As it relates to a study of charismatic leadership, it is important to note the emphasis that the Muslim Brotherhood's model of political Islam places on a single charismatic leader. As Taliban scholar Ahmed Rashid explained, "The obsession of radical Islam is not the creation of institutions, but the character and purity of its leader, his virtues and qualifications and whether his personality can emulate the personality of the Prophet Mohammed."³¹ The notion that a pure leader, or "guided one," imbued with *baraka* (the Sufi term roughly translated as charisma) will arrive to save the Islamic world is central to the popular Sunni belief system.³²

In the Islamic tradition, therefore, charismatic leadership is defined by essentially what is believed to be a supernatural calling. The Islamic tradition differs from the Greek and Christian traditions in that those who receive the call are vital only in founding communities and not in leading or administering them.³³

Thus, in the Islamic tradition, the early charismatic leaders were valued primarily for

their prophetic nature, their spiritual qualities, and their knowledge of, and ability to communicate with, God. Ahmad Shah Massoud, however, like many modern Muslim charismatics, is not easily categorized as supernatural or secular. Supernatural charismatics claim to speak on behalf of God, or to be agents of the divine, and often espouse millenarian goals. Secular leaders rely less on divinity and more on a combination of strategy, mastery and popular appeal. Though possessing a devoted following, they may have no real organization skills or desire to lead in the traditional sense. Revolutionary leaders, be they Islamic or Marxist are usually of a secular character in their reliance on strategy, organization, military prowess, and rhetoric. Thus, we can identify secular charismatics—be they religiously affiliated or not—as leaders who are more prepared to make the transition to traditional forms of government. The secular charismatic can be a devout Muslim (such as Massoud) fighting to expel what were considered Soviet infidels and godless communists from Afghan soil.

It is also important to remember that during the twenty years Massoud spent at war, his attitude and strategy changed. He essentially moved from the strict ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood to the pragmatism of a nationalism based upon the theory of an Afghanistan for Afghans. This shift was driven, in part, by his frustration at the continued involvement of the ISI in Afghan politics in the years following the Soviet withdrawal. Massoud's devotion to Islam remained consistent, but the necessity of adaptation, the cornerstone of guerilla warfare, forced him to change. Though the praise heaped upon The Lion of Panjshir at every official Afghan State gathering would have us believe otherwise, Massoud was far from the righteous idealist; he was a realist caught in a geopolitical game he was not prepared to fight.

The Split of the Afghan Resistance Movement

Most studies on the politics of the Afghan resistance movement describe the conflict between mujahideen rebel groups in terms of religion, essentially reducing everything to differences between fundamentalist Islamic

parties like Hekmatyar's HIIH and the more moderate, but often no less militant, parties like Rabbani and Massoud's JIA. "This simple dichotomy," explains Shah M. Tarzai in his study of cleavages within the Afghan resistance movement, "is misleading because there are few ideological differences (with respect to Islam) between the warring factions."³⁴ In fact, as Tarzai explains, the principle split in the resistance occurred along an internal-external axis. Taking a page out of the colonial playbook, the ISI was able to use aid and favor to keep the Afghan resistance divided in order to control whichever movement eventually won the battle for Kabul.³⁵ To this end, Islamabad channeled CIA arms to the various mujahideen factions based upon the factions' willingness to toe the Pakistani line, not according to need.

How does this internal-external split relate to an analysis of charismatic leadership? A key feature of the internal resistance was the emergence of a new military leadership. These internal commanders were preoccupied with the practical problems of waging guerilla war against an asymmetrical enemy while simultaneously maintaining, repairing, or building "economic and administration infrastructures."³⁶ Despite attempts by the external leadership to control their counterparts inside Afghanistan, the need for the latter to make and carry out decisions and form or break alliances on a daily basis gave birth to a new, practical leadership type. This type of leader was sustained not by funding or status, but by successful battle plans, inspiring rhetoric, and a strategic unifying vision. In short, these were leaders who could bring order to the chaotic life of the average Afghan during the war years.

Though Massoud was a founding member of JIA and a close confidant of Rabbani, the party's external head, he was first and foremost a military leader of this new order. To quote Tarzai again, "Massoud is a good example of the modernizing counterelite within the Internal Resistance ... [H]e not only defended the liberated territory of the Panjshir Valley but also provided education and literacy programs, medical care, and agricultural development for the civilian population in the liberated territories."³⁷ That Massoud's popularity (and power) created a

schism in the external and internal resistance should come as no surprise.

When a charismatic leader emerges after a revolutionary movement has begun, the movement (in this case the Afghan resistance) may divide into those who reject and those who accept the charismatic leader. The people of Afghanistan gradually began to accept Massoud's unifying vision, and various other mujahideen leaders were forced to either accept (Dostum) or reject (Hekmatyar) Massoud's charismatic hold over the people of Afghanistan. So why, with this overwhelming support of the people of Afghanistan and the grudging respect (or fear) of various mujahideen leaders, did Massoud hesitate to take control? Why, when presented the keys to Kabul, did Massoud hesitate?

Afghanistan's Charismatic Lineage

In Afghan society, religion and government have historically remained separate.³⁸ Within this societal structure a mujahideen's first loyalty is to his commander, who is usually a relative or a tribal leader. This mirrors the general hierarchy of loyalties within Afghan society: family, clan, tribe, ethnicity, and religion. Though religion is the least powerful according to this breakdown, Islam is often considered the one commonality shared by all Afghans; it has therefore been used as an ideological rallying cry to unite disparate tribes against a common enemy. Yet, in a culture in which the people generally follow leaders rather than causes, ideology will only take you so far. As a war hero, ethnic unifier, and visionary, Massoud seemed to be a logical candidate to head a new Afghan state.

In Afghanistan, however, there exists a substantial obstacle to even the most charismatic of leaders. From the founding of the modern Afghan state in 1747 until the Taliban took control of the country in 1996, the country was a monarchy in which ethnic Pashtuns from the Durrani tribe ruled continuously. The Taliban movement, though often characterized as a return to traditional Islamic ways of governing, was thus an anomaly. In the end, neither the communists,

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the resistance parties that battled for power following the Soviet withdrawal, nor the Taliban could create an alternative source of legitimacy comparable to the monarchy (Tarzai 1991, 481).

Interestingly, this continuous Durrani-led government is, itself, a form of charisma known as “transferred” or “hereditary” charisma.³⁹ As Spencer notes, “Charisma can pass into offices or along blood lines to kinship groups.”⁴⁰ This idea of hereditary charisma is not unique to Afghanistan. Within the Islamic context it is believed that charisma could be inherited within the family and clan of Muhammad. As Watt explains, “Most ... regarded Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law Ali as his charismatic successor, from whom the charismata were transmitted to certain of his descendants. The party who held these beliefs was known as the Shi’ites”.⁴¹ Being a Tajik, Massoud was well aware of the tribal glass ceiling. Though this barrier could likely not have prevented him from grabbing the reigns of power, Afghan history instructs that, he had done so, his term of conventional leadership would have been short-lived. There is reason to believe that Massoud understood this and that he was contemplating this very fact during those three long days that Kabul sat vacant. These concepts of ingrained tribal prejudices and transferred charisma are difficult for the western mind—that thrives on the idea of upward mobility—to accept.

Conclusion

However, the irony of the charismatic leader ultimately undone by a charismatic institution is a tempting, though ultimately simplistic, way of concluding this study of the charisma of Ahmad Shah Massoud. In the end, this is just one of myriad factors that contribute to his charismatic profile. As we have seen, these factors include innate mental capacity, an unflagging conviction in the rightness of one’s actions, and the ability to order a chaotic world. However, chief among these explanations is the relationship between the leader and his followers. It is because of this basic relationship that all charismatic frameworks must be sufficiently value-free to allow comparison between charismatic individuals as diverse as Hitler and Gandhi. Yet, to attempt to compare the magnetism of a despot and a symbol of peace

using only a value-free leader/follower dynamic would result in a partial assessment, and an incomplete framework. A useable framework requires context, history, motives, and belief. It is only through a careful analysis of modern context, historical precedent, and overarching cultural behaviors that we can truly begin to evaluate whether a revolutionary labeled a charismatic in today’s world can successfully transition into the world of traditional government.

The views and opinions expressed in articles are strictly the author’s own, and do not necessarily represent those of Al Nakhlah, its Advisory and Editorial Boards, or the Program for Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization (SWAIC) at The Fletcher School.

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- ¹⁷ Junger, 212
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