

THE MIND AT WAR

Paolo Fonda

I will speak about some vicissitudes of human mind in relation with war. Wars are extremely complex phenomena, caused by many factors. I don't give to psychic factors a special role in comparison with political, social, economic, historical elements. I wish just to focus our attention on the fact that they too exist and play a role in determining events and their consequences.

Humans are not only individuals, but also members of groups and besides the individual mind there is also a group psychism with as well its unconscious. Sometimes the group unconscious is a medium for the transgenerational transfer of common contents as well as of not worked-through traumas.

Common founding historical myths, as well as group traumas, are often remembered in ceremonies and commemorations, where the group fosters its cohesion.

Traumas, that cannot yet be worked-through, may heavily hinder the activity of the individual and group psychology, provoking - besides pain - deformations of thinking and feeling as well as of perception of reality, what may provoke or intensify political turmoil.

In large groups we may sometimes observe strong unconscious streams that drag individuals who identify with shared ideals, myths, religion, language, social class, fears.

Wars are group phenomena, which provoke a sort of a psychic *tsunami*, that messes up many reference points, which are of basic importance for survival and psychic life. In wars individuals are permeated and overwhelmed by psychic dynamics of groups that are tragically locked in a life or death struggle. It is extremely difficult to preserve the capacity to think and evaluate reality – as well as consequences of one's actions - under such an enormous burden of emotions.

The war mindset

I consider useful to use two concepts introduced by Melanie Klein (between 1935 and 1946), which are largely used in psychoanalysis. Namely, the *Paranoid-Schizoid position* (PS) and the *Depressive position* (D), two basic mind-sets between which human psyche oscillates. Their basic features are the following.

In the more mature **Depressive position (D)** one may realistically recognize *in himself* good and bad features, recognizing similar characteristics *in his opponent* as well, therefore it is possible to feel him more similar, a *human* with whom it is possible to identify with. Empathy helps to protect the other, though being a rival. If the subject damages somebody, he feels guilt and need for reparation. Feelings of guilt are powerful restraints, that hinder also the capacity to kill.

In the group context, the D position is also characterized by a higher awareness of one's own individual uniqueness, as well as of the other's life value. This makes it more difficult to take risks or to sacrifice one's or other's life.

When the prospect of war looms, the group can no longer contain and mitigate the anxieties in its members. Under the strain of such an excessive emotional burden, the group can **regress from the Depressive to the Paranoid-Schizoid position**.

The more primitive **Paranoid-Schizoid position (PS)** could be roughly related to the *black and white* thinking: "What is good is connected to me – what is bad is connected to the enemy. Nothing bad in me – nothing good in the enemy."

The massive projection of one's own negativity into the enemy and the denial of any good feature in him, create an image of the adversary as much as possible evil.

The enemy, so evil, is less and less felt as a human counterpart. Empathy is not anymore possible and so dehumanized he is not safeguarded by the taboo against killing. In fact, killing enemies becomes socially approved and praiseworthy. This is how paranoid anxiety subverts the scales of values.

The concern for one's own survival predominates, while the possibility to feel concern for the other-enemy disappears. The urge to *act* is reinforced at the detriment of *thought*. Destructiveness takes on a dignity that it never would in times of peace, and the fading away of the sense of guilt opens the door to increasingly heinous crimes.

In the PS position the psychic boundaries of individuals are weakened and this helps the **group's thought to penetrate the group members' minds**. They assimilate with the dominant group psychic contents, though these are not screened or verified enough by the Ego. This joins individuals together and still more increases merging with the group dominated by black-white PS feelings: we so good, they so bad. The group comes together in a way that seems almost a primordial biological reaction.

The loss of a significant level of mental autonomy on the part of the individual seems compensated by a greater participation in the identity of the group. A stronger *We* compensates for a weakened *I*. A fatal attraction is created between the individual and the group. In the end, fighting for the group or fighting for oneself largely coincide. Identified with the group many become eager to sacrifice themselves to save the group.

Military training is carried out in this PS mind-set, because the capacity to engage in combat tends to dissolve in the D position.

In extreme PS position the image of the enemy is so deformed that he could not either be felt as a human being, but is just felt a “negro”, an “enemy of the working class”, a “communist”, a “fascist”, a “Jew”, a “piece” and may be killed, even tortured and raped, like a puppet without any mercy.

Actually, the PS position seems particularly suited toward the survival of the species, groups or individuals in situations of danger, as well as of war. Evolution seems to have endowed human beings with a **war mind-set**, which to some extent, coincides with the Paranoid-Schizoid position (PS).

So, in the face of danger, the D position fades and people slip to a defensive “liberating” narcissistic immersion within a group in the PS position, where an intense sense of cohesion and strength provides a feeling of safety.

As an example, I quote what the historian Peter Gay (1988, 347) wrote about the start of the WWI in August 1914: "The most extraordinary thing about these calamitous events was less that they happened than how they were received. Europeans of all stripes joined in greeting the advent of war with a fervor bordering on a religious experience. Aristocrats, bourgeois, workers and farmers; reactionaries, liberals, and radicals; cosmopolitans, chauvinists and particularists; fierce soldiers, preoccupied scholars, and gentle theologians - all linked arms in their bellicose delight".

The strength with which a group in the PS position imposes its own position on individuals would explain why so many honest and sane people (many more than later we would like to admit) were drawn into, or at least allow themselves to be neutralized and dulled, by the formidable magnetic pull created during the last century by extreme Paranoid-Schizoid positions like Communism, Fascism, Nazism were, but also by fanatic nationalistic or religious groups. Very few managed to resist the incredible influence on thought and feeling of the mentioned ideologies.

One extreme degree of paranoid regression can be seen today in certain forms of fundamentalism, such as the Islamic suicide bomber. This may be seen as a desperate and futile attempt to preserve an archaic culture (and therefore the group within it) that is inevitably destined to fade away if it is unable to find renewal and to adapt to modern

time. In the framework of the *all or nothing*, self-destruction seems to state: "In today's world the culture of our group cannot survive. Everything, therefore, must be destroyed, because there is no acceptable future".

A similar scenario is found in the final years of World War II, when the defeat of Nazism was written on the wall, and Hitler prolonged the war with the express purpose of destroying Germany itself. The Wehrmacht forces, especially on the eastern front, were transformed into kamikazes without hope. The end of the war saw the suicides of entire German families, and a similar situation occurred in Japan.

Naturally, the degree and pervasiveness of this regression varies depending on the type of wars, their different periods and from individual to individual. In speaking of group regression, I am, in fact, referring to the average level in which a group primarily functions and within which environment these regressions of different levels in individuals are located.

War within the winding canyons of the mind

Eric Hobsbawm (1994, 34) considering *the short century*, beginning in 1914 and ending in 1991, he refers to it as the bloodiest century in recorded history. It produced **189 million deaths** from wars, revolutions, genocides and violent repressions, alongside the millions of wounded, crippled, orphaned, widowed and displaced.

World War I, counted 10 million deaths upon its conclusion in 1918. World War II claimed the lives of 56 million human beings. For its third act, the nuclear war, the world braced for its *megadeath*, with calculations of human casualties in the millions. Fortunately, this danger was avoided – for now—and humanity lived to see the end of this *short century* and the beginning of another.

Let us imagine some fragments of what took place in the minds of those who took part in war.

A. Individuals and psychic trauma

The two world wars produced an enormous amount of psychic trauma. Think only to what passed through the mind of a soldier as he leapt from the trench and exposed himself to almost certain death. Imagine the burden his psyche withstood in those endless minutes, deafened by gunfire and explosions as he ran towards the enemy's machine-gun fire, trampling over the wounded and dead comrades. And he likely did so less with a specific aim in mind than with the feeling of being part of a horde thrown into the furnace only to fill it up for others to trample over.

How many of those moments and feelings can possibly be represented, reflected on, described, worked-through and integrated ("digested") by the survivors? And how many of them remain cocooned as if they were **a shapeless stone in the corners of the mind**? In the aftermath of the war, some attempted to tell these stories, to understand and make themselves understood, perhaps by writing a memoirs in the attempt to work-through a part of that horror. Here they may have been helped by the group's solidarity, by the social recognition of shared suffering. But far too much trauma remained in the shadows and silence, confined to the minds of the individuals or to groups' unconscious, with no way of being elaborated.

This was particularly true for "**the defeated**", who "not only fell silent or were silenced, but were virtually expelled from written history and intellectual life if not to be catalogued in the role of enemy." (Hobsbawm, 1994, p.16). We might say they were denied the right to be considered – and therefore perhaps even to think themselves.

In terms of individual and group psychology, during the war the accumulation of trauma freezes parts of the psychism in a functioning in the PS position. This makes the activation of the D position more difficult during and after a war too. Certain areas of the Ego can recover a D position only by relegating unworked-through traumatic contents into split areas. Even if the Ego partially recovers the D position, it is weakened because the split parts of it cannot be used. Only by *working-through* the trauma, functioning in the D position can be restored in these areas.

When we speak of a group or an individual in the PS position, we mean that functioning in PS is prevalent, but that functioning in D is also inevitably present, even if it may be reduced to such a degree that it is no longer evident. Even when we are submerged in PS thoughts and feelings, **there is always a part** of us, however small, that perceives **in the D position** what is happening. Later, especially after the war, this may be regained and make itself felt. It might not be easy, however, to integrate these two "stories" of the same facts. These contents can neither be cancelled nor integrated, but one of these stories is instead repressed and ends up constituting a fragment of what I would call **a secret parallel life**, becoming a source of painful psychic conflicts.

B. "I have killed!"

There is a disquieting question to pose. If during the World Wars in the former century more than 70 million human beings were killed, there must be millions of other human beings who did the killing. But we find barely a trace of this in records and memoirs. In diaries, letters from the front, the stories told at home and the memoirs of the aftermath, hardly anyone mentions having killed the enemy, or describes what he felt as he pushed a bayonet into his enemy's chest, staring into his pleading eyes as they dimmed.

How many millions of violations of the basic taboo to kill and how much need to cleanse, atone, and manage distress and guilt has there been in this century? All of this horror has remained encapsulated like a bullet that is lodged in the brain. It is surely impossible to forget it in a single lifetime. At most, a person may try to repress it, but he can never tell anyone nor can he work-through it. Millions of individuals shall forever remain alone with such terrible burdens transferring it silently to next generations.

This is all the more true for the **perpetrators** of the most atrocious acts, especially if those acts involved civilians. Support is not possible from one's own group, which may have even commissioned those crimes, but is now unwilling to recognize them. This leaves the perpetrators of those atrocities alone.

More often than not, a split space is created, another fragment of the *parallel life*, where such devastating contents are secretly relegated. How much can these fragments, which are so alike, then resonate in the mental space of the group, influence it and perpetuate themselves in the following generations?

C. Transgenerational transfer

But how does this **transgenerational transfer** happen? How do many contents pass unconsciously from one mind to another? This is a very interesting issue that concerns the breadth and richness of the psychic mechanisms, which we still only partially know.

Anyhow, when the speech comes close to split or repressed traumatic issues, there appear factors like consciously unnoticeable pauses or silences, changes in voice tones, mimics, infra and meta-verbal messages. Through years the frequency of mentioning some issues may be less intense or lacking. Let us just think, what intense effect may have when, watching a movie, the background music stops, or just few musical notes may create a thriller tension in an absolutely pleasant scene.

The image we have of a relationship with a significant person, like parents are, is like a puzzle composed by thousands of pieces: some are more or less fixed, while many are perpetually changing. Unnoticed changes may significantly vary the emotional effect of the whole "Gestalt" of this image.

It is not easy for the therapeutic couple (patient and therapist) to discover such hidden paths that may lead to horrific unknown scenes. But what a benefit when these hidden bombs are deactivated!

This is still more important, because what happened decades or even centuries ago and is split or repressed, remains saved as **perpetual present**, emotionally fresh, as if it would have just happened. It is astonishing how apparently extinct volcanos may awake and erupt in destructive ways decades or even centuries later, as we could see, for example, in the recent wars following the disintegration of Yugoslavia or nowadays in the war in Ukraine.

D. Voids

In 1918 only one in three French soldiers returned home safe and sound. A fourth of all enlisted students from Oxford perished in combat. During WWII the main brunt of German aggression was unleashed on the Soviet Union, whose population suffered the most devastating losses of all. 80% of Russian males from the class of 1923 died in conflict. And still, of course, there are the voids left by the Shoah.

What effects do these enormous *voids*, the war created in entire generations, have on the collective and individual psychology? The *non-presence* of the throngs of people exterminated continues long after to silently fill the minds and spaces surrounding the survivors. How does all of this grief influence the group, together with the feelings of guilt held by the survivors in the face of those who perished?

It is as if those voids, too, join with the millions of other contents of death and destruction that lie split and silent in the fragments of *parallel lives*. With their vibrations they form a *mute chorus* that converge into the background soundtrack of the group's mental life.

E. A fiction on splitting, fragmentation and reintegration

Unworked-through war traumas are relegated to the unconscious and to the *known but not*

thought. They are stored in the minds of millions of individuals and possess so many similar and overlapping characteristics that they cannot help but spread throughout the psychism of the group, where *mine, yours, his* all blend into *ours*. This protects the individual, but heavily conditions the group (nation) in its functioning, its culture, and moreover, in terms of its future development and actions.

Allow me to outline **a fiction**, that may perhaps be close to some fragments of truth.

After the WW1, the group's mental fabric was so fully traumatized to be incapable to contain and neutralize such intolerable mental contents, which were so pervasive and present in so many individuals.

Still, the disintegration of secular institutions, like empires, monarchies, social orders, contributed to a further rising of temperatures and spreading of catastrophic anxieties.

The nations as *group-containers* were poisoned and progressively deformed. Massive, non-elaborated parts imposed extreme PS defenses, where individuals could find relief through their common denial and external projection. Many groups had to deeply regress into a Paranoid-Schizoid position, to effectively "psychotize themselves" to give some relieve to traumatized individuals. Is it plausible then to think that something of this kind in the aftermath of the WW I contributed to the coming of the WW2?

If the climate is sufficiently free, as we might find in a democratic group (similar to the D position), then **the incessant interaction among the new, emerging needs and the fragments of the past structures** tend to continuously form more suitable aggregations-integrations. These then evolve, although they might involve recurring crises and tumult. However, these crises tend to be less violent since the ongoing adaptation should protect the group from catastrophic explosions-fragmentations-bloody revolutions.

In a rigid defensive structure (in a fixed PS position), the pressure created by accumulated unsatisfied needs might reach a dangerous and explosive intensity. Here, a single, more or less destructive fragmentation (revolution or war) could retrigger the restructuring mechanism that was previously curbed in the rigid paranoid defense. **In absolute monarchies and dictatorships where the PS dominates**, there does not appear to be sufficient space for development. Instead, the attempt to preserve the present prevails. When too many emerging repressed needs risk bringing about collapse, the PS position intensifies in order to control the growing catastrophic distress. Monarchical or dictatorial regimes seem to contain their own inevitable destruction within themselves from the outset.

During WW I, we **witnessed the breaking up of both group cultures as well as institutions** (empires, monarchies, ideologies). Due to being seriously traumatized and psychotized by the war, these cultures and institutions were unable to use the fragments

of their past to form anything other than '*monstrous integrations*'. In fact, after 1918 we saw as extremely aggressive and cruel totalitarian dictatorships assumed power (Communism, Fascism, Nazism). Although they existed within different ideological contexts, they all shared the common conviction that their planned death of millions would be a fair price to pay for the survivors to reach the promised earthly paradise. European democracies basically vanished, with the last examples found almost only in France and England. That being said, both of these declining empires could still shift a large part of their own aggression to their colonies.

At this point, the paranoid idea that '*war cleanses the nation*' reappeared. Fascism and Nazism immediately set about rearming and militarizing for a new war, while the Soviet communism of the 1930s unleashes an incredibly destructive fury upon its own people. These '*monstrous integrations*' born out of a sea of blood were full of persecutory and catastrophic distress, of uncontrolled destructiveness, and their very (self) destruction was inevitable.

Self-destruction seems to have been incorporated within these ideologies from the beginning: the paranoid "all or nothing" – either total victory or defeat and self-destruction (this was particularly evident in Nazism). No intermediate position (D) was possible. Communism, too, seems to have been raised with a time bomb at its foundations, and after its explosion in 1991 little to nothing was left.

The integration **following World War II** had significantly greater traumas at its roots, and therefore potential for serious psychotic destructiveness, as clearly represented by the prospect of thermonuclear war.

At least apparently, however, a miracle happened: the threat of total destruction reached its climax and then seemed to freeze into the *cold war*. Perhaps no one had been able to suggest a minimally credible hypothesis for a brighter future following '*The Day After*'. Perhaps a healthy fear prevailed. After the catastrophes of the two world wars, did humanity realize its own potential for destruction and put it in check, at least in part? Or maybe decades of destruction had finally led to an attempt for reparation? At any rate, there were no more mobs clambering for war and the elements were different: on one side was the terrifying fear of total destruction, on the other the expansion of democracy (D position), where more self-conscious individuals were more aware of the precious nature of their own existence and were no longer inclined to sacrifice themselves for questionable ideologies.

So, we were gifted with 70 years of relative peace. Considering the increasing speed of our development in this day and age it is a rather long period.

In truth, disintegrations continuously occur with local wars and economic crises in very

tragic, but less catastrophic ways. The need for a significant, new integration seems on the path toward realization. It is an integration based on completely new and extraordinary elements (computers, Internet, globalization, new forms of economy, new powers etc., but also pollution, climate changing, concentration of richness). What will it look like? History carries on, and despite our persistent belief in the omnipotent illusion to have pulled back the veil on how things work, the unexpected twists and turns never cease to surprise us. And those surprises give us our first glimpse of completely new scenarios. Let us hope they are not apocalyptic.

Conclusive remarks

As a metaphor, the group psyche is like a mighty river that incessantly flows dragging its contents through generations. Some contents may be brought on the surface and there transformed in thoughts and words, told and usefully elaborated. Other contents need to remain underwater (unconscious or split) for long periods, before they may emerge and be deactivated and transformed. It may require a **transgenerational** extension.

So happens for many too traumatic contents, that to be worked-through is needed an increase of strength of the psychic structure of the individuals involved in them and also the support of appropriate changes and evolution in the group culture. Sometimes periods of more generations are needed. In this case traumas should be deposited in one or two or more descendants. These “carriers” may suffer from this and their lives may be conditioned by this “mission”, without either knowing what is the matter. In some historical moments these may affect a significant part of the population.

Individuals may be helped by psychotherapists or psychoanalysts, while groups may benefit from an **elaboration done by culture**: writers, poets, painters, movie directors, composers, as well as scientists (and not only humanistic).

I think that it is a task of culture (museums are an important part of this) to be attentive also to what is split or repressed and to propose to the groups appropriate ways of dealing with so painful contents full of anxiety. Such are those connected to wars and traumas of the past. Victims, as well as aggressors from both parts, should be helped to become conscious of what had happened and of what all, also others, feel. The D position should be implemented!

We must have a space in which to save the painful and shameful contents, also if we are not yet prepared to face them to the core. So as we lay down our dear deceased in those split places, like are cemeteries, to be able to continue to live in our homes, so each nation and humankind itself should have memorials and museums where to lay and visit periodically, not only what we have suffered, but **also the horrors, the crimes we have**

committed, to work-through them, as this little by little becomes tolerable, and integrate them in a process of mourning of our image of ourselves.

Memories should not be forgotten, but either not used as weapons against others.

I think that this meeting is a step toward this.

Therefore I express my warm thanks to the organizers of this meeting!