

WHEN WAR OVERWHELMS US

Paolo Fonda¹

I believe that in considering war one must take into appropriate account two things: the group psychological dimension and that war traumas are mainly elaborated in a transgenerational dimension. Therefore, I will speak about:

- a. The relationship between individual and group psychology.
- b. War as a group phenomenon, which involves the mental activity of individuals.
- c. The aftermath: the traumas of war and their transgenerational dimension.

a. The relationship between individual and group psychology

In **Freud's** (1921, p. 123) "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego" he states that: "We must conclude that *the psychology of groups is the oldest human psychology*; what we have isolated as individual psychology, by neglecting all traces of the group, has only since come into prominence out of the old group psychology, by a gradual process which may *still, perhaps, be described as incomplete.*" (my emphasis)

And **Freud** again (p. 129): "Each individual is a component part of numerous groups, he is bound by ties of identification in many directions, and he has built up his ego ideal upon the most various models. Each individual therefore has *a share in numerous group minds*—those of his race, of his class, of his creed, of his nationality etc.—and he can also raise himself above them to the extent of having *a scrap of independence and originality.*" (my emphasis) **Bion** also expressed himself in the same way.

Group-analysis goes on to describe how human beings are inextricably linked to each other in groups throughout life. **Kaes** uses the metaphor of the mycelium to represent how individuals are - similarly to mushrooms - the partial expression of an underground part that connects them and makes them part of a whole. The groups would be endowed, according to some authors, with their own psychism or even with their own unconscious.

Psychologically, therefore, we could imagine ourselves as amphibians. We cannot ignore that we are also immersed also in the waters of the groups. We influence them and are influenced by, through unique permeability.

¹ Paolo Fonda (Trieste) Full Member Italian Psychoanalytical Society, Centro Veneto di Psicoanalisi, Fondazione Polojaz.

The vital links with the group dimension provide us with stability and security. We must belong to a group and identify with it, to ensure our survival, a territory in which to live, access to linguistic codes and cultural acquisitions accumulated throughout human history, and so on.

Group-state entities build an identity that, besides psychological elements, also includes territories, people and the goods, that they believe belong to them, - partly this belief is completely subjective. These elements of identity also connect to their own founding myths. To this end, they use the most varied, often bizarre, criteria to justify their claims of possession. Thus, against the identity-cultural background of many nations, an image of itself as an empire has formed, with a determination to support or increase this ambition at any cost, even thru warfare, fighting everything that opposes it.

When peoples, who - not by their own choice - find themselves part of an empire that is not theirs, rebel and break away, the dominants - the "imperials" - experience this as a mutilation, an irreparable narcissistic loss, which arouses catastrophic anxieties. The dismemberment threatens to bring the nation-empire group crashing down, its identity and its members risk losing the niche they live in.

The reaction we observe, when catastrophic anxieties loom, is the hypertrophy of projections and persecution feelings, and finally the war on who is identified as an enemy. It involves the settling into a rigid *PS position*, which compresses the group with incredible strength and releases destructiveness. Persecutory anxieties function as extreme defenses in the face of impending catastrophic anxieties.

However, this compactness is at risk. In the event of defeat, to continue to exist, it is necessary to process the loss to then reorganize into a more limited and more adequate identity.

Just think of Austria and Germany at the end of the First World War and the state of confusion and disorientation that reigned. Then in 1945, thousands of Germans, as well as Japanese, committed suicide because they could not bear the catastrophe experienced in a Germany - or in a Japan - defeated and pulverized without reference points or prospects.

We also know other tragic events caused by the difficulty of mourning the loss of territories and strength.

For example, France, though exhausted from the Second World War, before leaving Indochina and Algeria, engaged in bloody, ferocious, and useless wars, which cost hundreds of thousands of lives. The United Kingdom, although its empire has now dissolved, has never stopped fighting, even with the Irish.

At the same time, other European empires, such as Holland, Belgium, Spain and Portugal, have tried in vain to oppose decolonization thru bloody wars.

Just 30 years ago, Serbia was unable or unwilling to give up what it imagined as its "possessions" in the former Yugoslavia, and the cost was a war with 140,000 deaths.

We cannot but marvel at this collection of massacres and defeats, with similar psychological configurations in the background. The groups concerned - and thus their members - still have their mental spaces partially cluttered and conditioned by these traumatic experiences.

Now it is the turn of the Russian empire, which feels that it risks crumbling if it does not continue to dominate-possess Ukraine, as well as Georgia, Belarus, Chechnya and other nations.

As I mentioned earlier, **these dynamics are inevitably, and significantly accompanied by intense suffering, including in terms of the mental activity of the individual. However, these elements rarely appear in the reports of clinical material in analysts, which should raise in us some important questions.**

b. War as a group phenomenon, which heavily involves the mental activity of individuals.

War has accompanied us since the Stone Age and it is unclear how we could free ourselves from this evil. It has always taken place with an increase in the mental functioning of the group in a *PS position*. And this occurs since the conflict is stirring or feared, until it reaches its peak during the actual warfare. It then persists for decades after the conflict, fostered by unprocessed trauma. The *PS position* therefore seems to be a primordial mental scheme, indispensable to both those who must defend themselves, and those who attack.

In the group in the *PS position* there is an impressive increase in projective and introjective identifications that penetrate single individuals, who are forced to assimilate to common thinking. It is incredibly difficult to resist and will then involve long and painful effort to be rid of it. In this position propaganda finds that the road for its diffusion has already been prepared

Thomas Ogden can be of great help here. He considers that Kleinian positions do not alternate, but are always present at the same time, albeit in different proportions. A partial split would allow the coexistence and dialectical interaction of the experiences relating to the positions, which gives meaning to each of them.

In war, the *D position* is inevitably weakened. We can hope that this does not happen excessively, as only this position allows for an empathic relationship with one's fellow person, helping to mitigate destructiveness, which is triggered and runs free in the *PS position*.

In relation to this, I would summarize the touching declaration of an Ukrainian soldier, reported by **Igor Romanov** (2022): "I understand that in Russia there are lots of people, maybe millions of them, who experience this war as their personal moral drama... I understand that they can be tormented morally, that they can lose their jobs... But now I am simply not ready... You know, there is no need to play God. There is no need to make an appearance that a person has enough compassion, sympathy, and understanding for everyone. It's not enough. Each corpuscle, each photon, each atom of your compassion that you allocate to a person in Russia, the one who is tormented morally because his country did what it did, you do that at the expense of those people who are bereaved at the loss of the loved ones, whose homes have burnt down, those who are hiding in basements of Mariupol at the moment..." **For now**, this soldier is claiming his right and duty to stay at the front in the *PS position*, to be able to shoot, not to have his hands and rifle bound by empathic feelings towards those who, in this moment, come at him with a tank. But he also says "**now** ... I'm not ready", which means that there is also a certain functioning in *D position*, which makes him see that the enemy are people with aspects of humanity - which he himself lists - but **for now** he can only wait. However, he lets us understand that one day he could be "ready"! I assume that on both sides there are those to be feared; those, who instead of "for now" say "**never**", who exclude the possibility of putting the brakes on the destructiveness constituted by a *D position*. I hope and believe that they are a minority.

The same considerations can be made for the Ukrainian psychoanalyst (quoted by **Romanov**, 2022) who, in front of a proposed meeting with Russian colleagues, said: "... Give us time to bury our dead and mourn for them." He too says he's not ready now, but leaves a different future, a possible future as implicit.

After all, we have the experience of our patients who at times make us realize that they have the potential for love and reparation that, in this moment, they are unable to use. They ask us to safeguard them, until those precious resources are no longer threatened by their destructive anger. Only when the circumstances have matured, will they be able to take them back and make good use of them.

All of this offers a space to think war more clearly: as we do with our patients, now we can - or must - not ask a nation at war to do something that is premature. We should respect the correct timing. But we must carefully preserve and cultivate the seeds of empathy that at the right moment, maybe after years, or after generations, can germinate. It would be a great harm if we were to lose them.

c. The aftermath: the traumas of war and their transgenerational dimension.

Taking up the metaphor of water, we might imagine that war pours traumas and other contents into the waters of the group psyche. These cannot be processed for the moment, and clog both the mental space of individuals as well as that of groups. This tends to hold them in a *PS position* even after the war.

Given the permeability between the individual and group spheres, **individual** traumas, which affect personal areas, also affect the group. Similarly, **collective traumas** evoke intense pain and participation in individuals, even in group members who were not directly affected by them.

The **traumas** suffered by the victims who belong to the group of **winners** are the first to be recognized and tend to be perpetuated in memory by monuments and celebrations. They can thus find a containment at the level of the group (but often also a manipulation, aimed at prolonging the *PS position* to use the compactness that this gives to the group).

The **traumas suffered by the defeated**, on the other hand, to use the words of Hobsbawm (1994, 16): «not only [are] reduced to silence, but [are] virtually expelled from written history and intellectual life, if not to be cataloged in the role of enemy ».

Then there are the traumas produced in **those who killed in war**, as their self-image is heavily damaged. This is even more pronounced, when it comes to war crimes, which, as we know, happen on both sides. In this case, in addition to the victims, the crime heavily traumatizes also the perpetrators and the whole group to which they belong. This is *not easy to work through*, not least because *they cannot take advantage of the group's containment*. No one erects monuments or organizes celebrations for them.

In addition to the victims, there is a large part of the population made up of informers, torturers, jailers in prison camps, and even members of the firing squads. They are also traumatized by the war. These are traumas that remain encapsulated-split-removed in the minds of the perpetrators, but also in the psyche-culture of the group they belong to. Somehow this is perceived too.

Becoming aware of one's responsibilities and faults on the part of perpetrators and groups is one of the most difficult tasks. For a long time, denial dominates this.

These kind of sewages also propagates in the waters of group psychism, where their action is prolonged over time in a transgenerational dimension.

The slow and difficult processing-purification of this group water, which naturally also contains all the great results of civilization, science and art, must proceed nonetheless, so that it is made less infected, more drinkable for future generations.

After the war there is therefore a great need to create a containing culture in one's group. Alongside this, it is also necessary in the adversarial group, in order to begin to process all kinds of traumas that clog the minds and impede relationships. However, **it takes decades**, so some generations can play a role **only as trauma carriers** and not as solvers, this latter role is postponed to subsequent generations.

We could identify three phases in the transgenerational elaboration of the traumas related to wars.

1. To be able to speak, to experience the pain, of **what one has suffered** and to receive containment from one's group.

2. To be able to remember, think, talk about the **suffering inflicted**, what one has committed, and obtain the containment of one's group. We must go beyond the "paranoid processing of mourning".

3. After clarifying one's responsibilities, being able **to talk about it with "others", with the victims and perpetrators of the other ground**, who are repentant in turn.

Only by this way the group will be able to evolve towards a "structure of peace" (mainly in the *D position*), in order to sustain and contain even heavy feelings of guilt and no longer function solely as an "evacuating muscle" of projections into others.

But this only happens when the ego - whether individual or group - has reached the necessary strength to be able to bear the burdens without collapsing.

Adequate external conditions must also be created, such as fair peace treaties, a delimitation of sufficiently just borders, and the recognition and judicial condemnation of the most heinous crimes. It is necessary that the geopolitical and economic conditions which sustain tensions and manipulations aimed at increasing the *PS position* are reduced. Cultural progress is also needed, to which psychoanalysis can and must make its contribution.

Often successive generations grow and develop in better conditions, take advantage of less toxic and more containing group containers, and can feel sufficiently distant from what has happened and strong enough, to open even the sealed archives - the "cabinets of shame" - to initiate processing their contents.

In the Centro Veneto di Psicoanalisi, discussions have recently begun on the *repressed*, or rather *splitting* that has become repressed over time, concerning the Italian history of the last century. Even the "dirty" pages of history can now become part of the group's cultural identity construct.

And the surprising paradox is that by **revealing them, not only does it not damage the image of the group, but instead it strengthens it, making the group more mature and functioning**. Reparativity can replace hatred and becomes a powerful support for self-esteem, for "healthy" narcissism. True strength occurs when the *D position* prevails. In the *PS position*, might is apparent and is based on destructiveness, requiring a constant expenditure of energy to keep the contents split and the reality disregarded.

Personally, I am experiencing, how this slow, age-old purification-elaboration in the traumatized borderland where I live, is creating conditions of life that are much more fertile, interesting, and beautiful, as the putrid waters of the past become more transparent and clearer. It feels like a waking up from a nightmare.

In 2020 the presidents of the Italian and Slovenian republics, held hands and paid homage to the Italians killed by the Slovenes in the “fojbe” and to the Slovenes executed by the Italian fascists. But it took 75 years!

As analysts we can ask ourselves what role we have or can have in this long healing process of the group and individuals. How much of this reaches our analytic couches? Our patients and us are a part of this process, but how can we be more fully aware of this? And what can we do with it?

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