

Book Review

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The Third Reich in the Unconscious: Transgenerational transmission and its consequences. By Vamik D. Volkan, Gabriele Ast and William F. Greer. (2002). New York, NY: Brunner-Routledge. 211 pp.

Vamik Volkan, the senior author of this book, is a Turkish Cypriot professor of psychiatry at the University of Virginia, an emeritus training and supervising analyst at the Washington Psychoanalytic Institute, and founding director of the Center for Study of the Mind and Human Interaction at the University of Virginia. He has led interdisciplinary teams to trouble spots around the world to generate dialogue between “enemy” representatives at a high level: in Israel, Palestine, Egypt, Cyprus, Turkey, South Ossetia and Georgia, Rwanda, Armenia and Azerbaijan, Latvia, Estonia, Russia, Albania, Kurdistan, and Waco, Texas. He continues to make a seminal contribution to inter-ethnic peace and reconciliation in our times.

Doctor Volkan is the author or editor of 50 books, in English, German, Turkish and Finnish, as well as numerous papers. The present book under review, *The Third Reich in the Unconscious*, grew out of this extensive body of work, and forms a link between psychoanalytic understandings of large group processes and dynamics, politics, and the study of individual identity and its formation. His co-authors are Dr Gabriele Ast, a German psychoanalyst and physician based in Munich, Germany, and Dr William F. Greer, a psychoanalyst in Hampton, Virginia; both have worked closely with Volkan for many years.

I (the reviewer) am an English Jew who has experienced anti-Semitism at first hand; and my experience of changing my “English” name back to our original Jewish family name adds to my gratitude for this book as it helped me to understand more deeply the large group psychic forces that had motivated me to do this two years before the book was published. My name change, in Volkan’s terms, can be seen to represent a psychic reversal of the damage to my large group identity by asserting that it—and I—will no longer be hidden because of trauma-based shame, or fear of persecution.

In 1990 Volkan and Ast initiated a project to study the intra-psychic ramifications of the reunification of Germany. Initially they found reunification stimulated the appearance of many images and feelings about the Third Reich. It seemed that each side, East and West, had in general denied its own involvement in and culpability for the Nazi past, and had placed the blame for this on the other. During their work, Volkan, Ast and Greer “became aware of a significant “silence” blanketing Third Reich related images in Germany” (Volkan, Ast, & Greer, 2002, p. ix). That uncompleted work led to the present book.

The first four chapters of the book outline the psychological mechanisms of intergenerational transmission in very large groups such as nations or ethnicities of the emotional and psychological consequences of being affected by massive traumas such as conflict or genocide. The focus is on people living in post-reunification Germany. The authors discuss generational transmission of

ideas, self-concepts, fantasies and images of the Nazi era in both victims and perpetrators, and also in their children and grandchildren. As Volkan has commented elsewhere:

Real-world issues are contaminated with shared perceptions, thoughts, fantasies, and emotions (conscious and unconscious) pertaining to past glories and traumas: losses, humiliations, mourning difficulties, feelings of entitlement to revenge, and resistance to accepting changed realities. (Volkan, 1997, p. 117)

In his view we inhabit a political world that is, on the one hand, “objectively” real, comprising a network of economic, social, military, and historic relationships; on the other hand, real-world issues also exist within a psychological realm, shaped by fantasies and emotions. Thus Volkan traces both the behaviour and the self-representations of very large groups.

In other writings Volkan has described the way that large group identities are maintained by psychological representations of “chosen traumas”, for example the Serbian defeat (in 1389) by the Turks in Kosovo. Slobodan Milosevic exploited this when he paraded from village to village the mummified remains of Prince Lazar, killed in the 14th-century battle of Kosovo. This, in effect, “collapsed time” (Volkan, 2010a, p. 30), and mobilized paranoia and inter-ethnic hostility. In a sense, Serbs were then living in two worlds: that of the present, and that of “past traumatic events visited upon the large group to which they belong” (Volkan, Ast, & Greer, 2002, p. 4).

A “chosen trauma”, according to Volkan (2010a, p. 25), “describes the mental representation of a calamity at the hands of the “others” that once befell a large group’s ancestors” and “reflects the traumatised past generation’s incapacity or difficulty with mourning as well as its failure to reverse the injury of the large group’s self-esteem” (Volkan, 2010b, slide 18). Because of parents’ difficulty in mourning, the descendants receive the unconscious contents of the previous generations, and are then recruited to live out the trauma, and to reverse damage to the large-group identity.

Other examples of “chosen traumas” identified by Volkan include the fall of Greek Constantinople to the Turks in 1453; the Scots’ defeat at Culloden in 1746; and the decimation of the Dakota Indians at Wounded Knee in 1890. Volkan has noted that the Holocaust cannot yet be classed as a “chosen trauma”, because it is still too recent and “hot” (2010a, p. 25).

In chapters 5–10 of *The Third Reich in the Unconscious* the authors describe psychoanalytic case studies of second- and third-generation descendants of both victims and perpetrators. The authors maintain their focus on the large group phenomenology of intergenerational transmission; they include insights from work with other traumatised groups: Greeks and Turks, Serbs and Muslim Bosnians, and others. The cases include Jewish men, a Gypsy woman, and a self-analysis by a German psychoanalyst born in 1950, who realised that her previous analysis had not touched on Holocaust psychic derivatives. The book describes ongoing meetings of a psychotherapeutic study group of people affected by the holocaust, in a move towards ending the “silence” in Germany; and one chapter describes the use of Third Reich symbols by Americans unaffected by the Holocaust.

This book helped me to deepen my psychotherapeutic work with a Jewish patient whose parents had escaped from Nazi Germany; the parents refused or were unable to talk about their experiences, or about family members who had died in Germany, yet my client lived as if in a camp surrounded by hostile “guards”. Volkan, Ast and Greer (2002) writes of “the fluidity of psychic borders between parent/caregiver and child” (p. 27), and notes that

“parents” and caregivers’ anxiety, depression, and other affects, but also their unconscious fantasies, perceptions, and expectations of the external world . . . can pass into the child’s developing sense of self” (p. 27). My patient has worked towards continuing the inter-generational task of mourning that had been deposited in her.

REFERENCES

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