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## PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

### Freud on war and violence: From disillusionment to hope, back and forth

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#### ABSTRACT

This article analyses Sigmund Freud's reflections on war and violence, especially in his two main works on this issue: *Thoughts for the Time of War and Death* (1915) and *Why War?* (1932). After presenting these two essays and placing them in their historical contexts, I briefly review what authors have written about them in recent years. I then attempt to contribute something new to the discussion by examining four of Freud's propositions: his justification for disillusionment caused by war; his suspicion about peoples and states; his denunciation of the primitivism and hypocrisy of human beings; and his determination to maintain hope in culture and history. I consider these key points of Freud's essays separately, showing their importance for Freud's social theory and for his critique of modernity and civilisation in general.

**KEYWORDS:** psychoanalysis; war; violence; culture; history

## FREUD, HIS HISTORICAL CONTEXT, AND HIS REFLECTIONS ON WAR AND VIOLENCE

Sigmund Freud witnessed the devastating violence of war in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. He lived through the First World War (WWI) and died just after the Second World War began. The two conflicts greatly affected his life: two of his sons fought in the first, and the events preceding the second forced him to flee Vienna and take refuge in London.

The war had important consequences for Freud's work, leading him to study war neuroses, influencing his reflections on culture, and highlighting human aggressiveness, prompting his conceptualisation of the death drive. Additionally, as posited in this article, Freud directly approached the issue of war and violence in two works: *Thoughts for the Time of War and Death*, written in 1915 during WWI (1915/1998a), and *Why War?*, which was a response to Albert Einstein in 1932, a year before the Nazis took power in Germany (1932/1998b).

Freud's two essays on war can be read as two aspects of the same reflective theme. The first, more pessimistic than the second, outlines a social psychological view of war as the truth underlying an illusion and as an expression of the violence of human beings and their hypocrisy in times of peace. The second essay, although somewhat optimistic about culture and human history, nevertheless introduces the death drive and offers a sharp critique of morality and law.

The 1915 and 1932 essays reveal as much as they conceal Freud's feelings and the historical context in which they were conceived. The pessimism of the 1915 essay, written between March and April, discloses Freud's horror at WWI beginning a mere few months before, but hides his 'warlike enthusiasm' and his 'complete sympathy' for one of the warring sides—that of Austria and Germany (Jones, 1953/1985, pp. 368–371). The optimism of the 1932 essay obliquely reveals something with its emphasis on the death drive and its critique of morality and law: what had happened and was happening at the time it was written, in September of that year—the rise of Fascism and Nazism, the failed coup led by José Sanjurjo in Spain, Pope Pius XI's ostentatious reception of Mussolini in Italy, the political leadership of Hitler in Germany, and the *Heimwehr* conspiracies to seize power in Austria and force the country's annexation to Germany.

Several scholars have recently analysed and discussed the 1915 and 1932 essays, as well as Freud's overall relationship with war. Some studies have examined the broad scope of Freud's reflections (Belilos, 2018), finding a limitation of the absolute knowledge that underlies war (Rose, 1993), a unique approach to human cruelty (Derrida, 2000), and an unparalleled analysis of a topic as current as the technological hyper-sophistication of archaic violence (Dana, 2012). Other works have emphasised the validity of Freud's reflections on war, either extrinsically, on the horizon of a possible nuclear conflict (Botstein, 1984), or in terms of their intrinsic theoretical and conceptual aspects (Sampson, 2005).

Freud's essays on war have been placed in their historical context (Ruthrof, 2020) and in the context of Freudian thought (Benhaïm, 2007). They have also been examined through the lenses of other authors, including the French poststructuralists Michel Foucault (Sampson, 2005), Jacques Derrida (Dana, 2012), and Jacques Lacan (Ansermet, 2018). A number of works have also gone beyond the 1915 and 1932 essays to connect them with Freud's contradictory attitude towards WWI (Koteska, 2020), the roles of psychoanalysts as actors in and spectators of the war (Castro, 2003), and the importance of the war for the development of psychoanalysis (Koteska, 2019).

Based on an analysis of the 1915 and 1932 essays, in this article I concentrate on four of Freud's propositions, the importance of which is insufficiently appreciated: his justification for disillusionment caused by war; his suspicion about peoples and states; his denunciation of the primitivism and hypocrisy of human beings; and his determination to maintain hope in culture and history. I examine these key points in Freud's essays separately, showing their importance for Freud's social theory and his critique of modernity and civilization in general.

## JUSTIFICATION FOR DISILLUSIONMENT

The word 'disillusionment' (*Enttäuschung* in German) appears eight times in Freud's 1915 essay *Thoughts for the Time of War and Death*. In fact, the title of the first part of this essay, which is generally forgotten, is 'The disillusionment of war' (*Die Enttäuschung des Krieges*). The meaning is clear, and Freud confirms it on the first pages: there is disillusionment caused by war in general and specifically by WWI.

The word 'disillusionment' best summarises what the war meant to Freud in 1915. The conflagration that had broken out in 1914 offered a disappointing image of human beings, constituting a war—in Freud's (1915/1998a) terms—'at least as cruel, as fierce and as merciless' as the previous ones, 'transgressing all the restrictions' of international law, and ignoring both the 'prerogatives' of doctors and the wounded and the 'distinction between the combatants and the peaceful population' (p. 280). All this meant disappointment for those who trusted in an illusory progressive process of appeasement, reconciliation, unification, and improvement of humanity through the development of culture.

Dispelling the illusion of cultural progress, WWI divided the human community, alienated its 'world', fragmented its 'great homeland', ruined its 'common heritage', and alienated and debased its 'citizens' (Freud, 1915/1998a, p. 282). Freud, far from seeing it as something negative and deplorable, positively appreciated this disillusionment. He dialectically justified and defended disillusionment as something good, favourable, and even liberating because it meant the 'destruction of an illusion' (*Zerstörung einer Illusion*), an 'illusion of which we were prisoners', the illusion of cultural progress that only served to avoid 'displeasure' (pp. 282, 286). It is clear that Freud preferred the displeasure of truth to the pleasure of illusion.

The German term that Freud used in 1915 for illusion (*Illusion*) is the same term he reused in 1927 in *The Future of an Illusion* (*Die Zukunft einer Illusion*). The illusion of cultural progress resembles a religious illusion; it is something that ‘always derives from human desires’ (Freud, 1927/1998c, p. 31). Just as religion expresses desires related to parenthood, so too does excessive reliance on culture manifest in desires associated with life, love, and the human community unified by Eros. They are the same desires that underlie the illusion Freud (1932/1998b) attributed to the Bolsheviks in his 1932 essay: the illusion that the ‘satisfaction of material needs’ would ensure peace in the world (p. 195). These illusions must be overcome to access the truth that Freud linked with disillusionment.

In Freud’s political thinking, his defence of disillusionment complemented his critique of illusion. Both demonstrate Freud’s commitment to what he interpreted, pessimistically, as the truth of humanity and human culture, revealed by war as much as by dreams, symptoms, and failed acts. War violence parallels the formations of the unconscious. This parallelism is at the foundation of what Freud exposed in his 1915 and 1932 reflections, especially in 1915, both by denouncing the primitivism and hypocrisy of human beings and by suspecting peoples and states.

## SUSPICION ABOUT PEOPLES AND STATES

Reflecting on war, Freud (1915/1998a) conceived of peoples and states as the ‘great individuals of humanity’ (*Großindividuen der Menschheit*) (p. 280). This conception, which insisted on the unitary and indivisible aspect of peoples and states, shows how far the Freudian perspective had gone beyond psychological individualism, which systematically reduced society and politics to small individuals and their interindividual relationships. For Freud, in reality, the individual and the social were not sharply distinguished since they are constituted and manifest in each other. In Freud’s terms (1921/1998d), ‘from the very beginning individual psychology is simultaneously social psychology’ (p. 67). The social and political *Großindividuen* are inseparable from the small individuals or individuals proper.

Like small individuals, *Großindividuen* act irrationally by obeying the drives studied by Freud. His 1915 essay gave the lie to those who misunderstood him by supposing that he set up an opposition between individuals who obey their drives and the society and government that proceed to rationally repress individuals or encourage them to sublimate their drives. The truth, as revealed by war, is that both peoples and states, as well as individuals, act irrationally and are compelled by drives.

In WWI, Freud (1915/1998a) desolately observed that belligerent states give in to their greed and their ‘lust for power’, making use of injustice, censorship, violence, ‘conscious lies’, and ‘deliberate fraud’ (p. 281). The behaviour of people in times of war was no less shameful for the founder of psychoanalysis. Freud, as early as 1915, put forward the idea that he would

develop six years later in his *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*: it was as if, in the masses, 'the ethical acquisitions of individuals vanished and only the most primitive, archaic and brutal attitudes remained' (p. 289). These attitudes, he claimed, manifest during times of war in the barbarism of soldiers and in hatred between the citizens of warring nations.

Freud's reflections on war and violence demean both peoples and states. Here, we can see a reaction to the terror that the revolutionary crowds provoked in bourgeois intellectuals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Reicher, 2012). However, we can also observe a precise critique directed at the nationalist, warmongering, Nazi-fascist masses (Reich, 1934/1970), who do not encompass all the possible social mobilisations of modern times (see Pavón-Cuéllar, 2021a, 2021b).

### **DENUNCIATION OF PRIMITIVISM AND HYPOCRISY**

What is certain is that Freud's suspicion about peoples and states reflected his pessimism about humanity. In each human being, Freud (1915/1998a) glimpsed a core of radical 'evil', of 'primitivism', that manifests itself flagrantly in war, is composed of egoistic drives, and cannot be totally 'uprooted' by education (p. 283). The most that culture can do is 'reform' each subject in two ways: internally, by stimulating erotic or loving forces that allow 'egoistic drives to be transmuted into social drives', and externally, through educational coercion that impels subjects to 'renounce drive satisfaction' (Freud, 1915/1998a, p. 284). This renunciation and eroticisation of egoistic drives are at the core of Freud's ideas about society, culture, and history.

In Freudian social theory, the renunciation of drive satisfaction constitutes the economic-sexual basis of culture (see Freud, 1927/1998c, 1929/1998e), and the eroticisation of drives allows society to maintain cohesion and preserve hope in historical and cultural development towards more peaceful inter-human relations (1932/1998b). One of the reasons why there is no peace among human beings is precisely, according to Freud (1915/1998a), because of erotic insufficiency, which, in turn, results from cultural and educational methods guided not only by love but by 'rewards and punishments' (p. 285). These methods generate selfish, hypocritical individuals who only behave well for their own convenience and are 'many more' than 'really cultured man' (pp. 285–286). Those who support culture because they believe in it are, from the pessimistic Freudian perspective, an insignificant minority compared to the majority who support it solely for the benefits they receive from it and who do not hesitate to turn against it when it suits them, as happens in times of crisis and war.

Freud (1915/1998a) even went as far as to state that culture 'is built on that hypocrisy' of those who only act well in a logic of punishment and reward (p. 286). By pointing this out, Freud's critique makes it possible to question the ethics of not only behavioural and cognitive-behavioural methods but also the whole of the disciplinary, coercive, and meritocratic

bourgeois society in which we still live today. Freud directed his critique at the entire human cultural superstructure, which, resting on an economic base of renunciation (not only on the eroticisation of drives), also rests on a bio/psycho-political base of punishments and rewards, discipline, control, subjection, seduction, selfishness, and hypocrisy.

Freud's denunciation of hypocrisy in his 1915 essay continued in his 1932 essay, which questioned a human community unified by the 'compulsion of violence' rather than by 'identifications' and 'ties of feeling' (Freud, 1932/1998b, p. 191). The problem is that cultural unity derives not only from love and life drives, but also from violence and death drives, which was undoubtedly evident to Freud as Fascism and Nazism arose. It is highly likely that this context favoured Freudian social theory by revealing a structural opposition between life and death drives rather than a contingent contradiction between social and egoistic drives.

### HOPE IN CULTURE AND HISTORY

The 1932 essay presented a precise critique of law and morality as examples of what lies at the violent and deadly base of culture. Freud (1932/1998b) conceived of law as something that originates in 'brute violence' and that represents the 'violence of the community' against the 'violence of the individual' (pp. 188–192). Regarding morality, Freud conceived it critically as an introjection and a return of the death drive 'inwards' towards individuals themselves (p. 194). This double critique of morality and law did not exclude, for Freud, another ethical–legal horizon: precisely one that allowed him to place his 'non-utopian hope' in a cultural-historical development towards peace and a relative overcoming of the logic of war, violence, punishments, and the death drive (p. 198).

In his 1932 essay, Freud no longer explained war and violence according to egoistic drives but in terms of a death drive that tends towards 'decomposition', leading life back to the 'state of inanimate matter' that manifests in the selfishness of those who 'destroy the lives of others to preserve their own' (1932/1998b, p. 194). This conceptualisation of the death drive, which seeks the disintegration and dissolution of the living, allows us to retroactively read the passages in the 1915 essay in which Freud (1915/1998a) lamented that war divides people and thus fragments humanity and its 'great homeland' (pp. 280–281). Against the death drives that separate human beings by urging them to 'destroy and kill', Freud (1932/1998b) bet on love, on Eros, on the life drives that tend to 'preserve and reunite' and that also underpin the building of culture and its historical development (p. 192). It is these impulses that can ensure peace and provide a hopeful aspect of Freud's 1932 vision.

As early as 1915, Freud maintained some hope by accepting the 'temporary' character of the psychic phenomena associated with war, such as the 'involution' of drives and the intellectual weakening evidenced by 'the stubbornness, the lack of penetration and uncritical credulity' of peoples and governments (Freud, 1915/1998a, p. 289). Freud also relied in 1915

on the historical development of culture leading from 'external compulsion' to 'internal compulsion' that could pacify society (p. 285). This confidence remained in 1932, when Freud counted on the pacifying effects of the 'internalization of aggression' through cultural and historical development (1932/1998b, p. 197). However, Freud maintained hope mainly because he recognised, in cultural and historical development, an erotic-pacifist component that manifests itself in identifications and 'bonds of feeling' (p. 195). The life drive, more than the superego's moral return to the death drive against the individual, is what led Freud to place his hope in culture and history.

## CONCLUSION

Freud's hope did not last long. One year after his 1932 essay, the Nazis seized power in Germany and began to burn books, persecute Jews, and prepare for World War II, which was even more extensive than the first. Human beings once again revealed their primitivism and hypocrisy; peoples and states again deserved Freud's suspicion, and it was again a time of disillusionment.

Freud's books were among the first to be burned in 1933 in Berlin and other German cities. Five years later, after the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany, Freud had to take refuge in London. His sisters were arrested and died in concentration camps.

Shortly before his death, Freud (1939/1998f) observed that 'progress had sealed a pact with barbarism' in Soviet Stalinism, Italian Fascism, and German Nazism (p. 52). This pact caused the death drive to sweep across Europe and other parts of the world, supported by the full force of technological advances. The modern historical development of culture served not the peace and cohesion of humanity but war, division, violence, and death.

The triumph of the death drive once more disillusioned Freud towards the end of his life, reinforcing his disillusionment of 1915. This disillusionment has been justified, after his death, by the Shoah and by the successive wars in Indochina and Algeria, in Korea and Guatemala, in Vietnam and Cambodia, in El Salvador and Nicaragua, in Rwanda and the Congo, in Iraq and Syria, in Palestine and Ukraine. What happened in these places and in many others have confirmed the primitivism and hypocrisy of humanity, as well as the other observations on which Freud based his suspicion about peoples and states.

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