A Soldier’s Matrix: A Group Analytic View of Societies in War

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In this article I will discuss the question of violence in (large) groups and the relationship between the mass and the individual selves. This will be done through the concept of the ‘soldier’s matrix’. I refer to a matrix dominating a whole society, which participates in organized aggression and suffers its emotional consequences. Everybody in the matrix becomes a soldier, and the identity or the ‘Habitus’ (Elias, 1989) of the society is influenced by soldiership. This applies not only to Iraq and Afghanistan, and to the dark days in Germany, but also to two, three or more decades after the Second World War, and for most other societies in war. The advantage as well as the disadvantage of using the term soldier’s matrix in Germany is the fact that for the new generation, the attitude towards the army has undergone a great change. For many people, soldiers represent almost a taboo or a kind of sickness. Finally I would like to contribute to the understanding of pathological relationships, with particular reference to relation disorders, which are connected to violence.

Key words: soldiers matrix, group analysis, large group, conflict-dialogue, relation disorders

My Soldier’s Matrix

In my early childhood I was confronted with violence. I often found myself between two frontlines, each of them affected by violence. On
the one side I was surrounded by the ‘attackers’: the German frontlin-
ers who in spite of having to flee Germany, were still the German
soldiers of the First World War, whom I perceived as somehow cold,
irritated and ambivalent, near and far at the same time.

There was my Prussian grandfather, who used to show me his
many war wounds. There was also my grand-uncle, also multiple
wounded, who told me of his disappointment at how the Berlin ary-
ans did not only not appreciate his performance as one of the first
German tank commanders on the Russian frontline—but also
expelled him from his work at the stock exchange and drove him out
of Germany. I thought that they mourned their lost homeland and
their lost culture more than their numerous lost family members
whom they never mentioned.

On the other side were the victims of the Shoah—the survivors of
my family—sharing their pain. With my aunts, uncles and cousins,
recently arrived from the camps and a shattered Europe, I felt much
more warmth. I felt loved, and I was told that they lived only for my
cousins and me. However, I overheard their whispers, full of hatred
and shame; they, too, were entangled in an inner war, and still felt
responsible for the awful things they did or experienced in the camps.
They were full of vengeance too, in particular towards Kapos. For
me, the victims’ and soldiers’ injuries were incompatible. When, as a
child, I tried to cope with war, playing cowboys and Indians or Hitler
against Churchill, my grandfather was easily angered. Like many
post-traumatized people, he could not stand playfulness, and accused
me of enacting my aggression. Could it be that already back then, I
was unconsciously positioning myself in the soldier’s matrix? I
started to ask myself: are soldiers sick?

During the preparation of this article it was inevitable for me to
confront my own experiences in war. Thus I had endless thoughts on
the question of the soldier’s pathology: for example: while going
from an ambush over to an attack, do all comrades react uniformly in
having to run into a hail of bullets? Of course not: soldiers do not fol-
low commands uniformly. Although you would hope for all of them
to get up immediately and run with you, there is usually only a little
group of a few soldiers running with you on the front line. A so-called
‘second row’ of comrades, getting up more slowly, will run behind
you whilst you hope that they do not use their guns on you. There is
also a third line, the group of soldiers who seem to have had a hard
time getting up—they follow at a distance. I often asked myself:
which of these are the healthier?
The Matrix
According to S.H Foulkes, the matrix is the hypothetical web of relationships on four levels of communication.

The individual participates in its formation and creation and at the same time re-establishes the conditions of his own primary network as experienced . . . The matrix is the common shared ground which ultimately determines the meaning and significance of all events. (Foulkes, 1964: 292)

Subgroups vary in their identification levels with the matrix, which influences their emotional relations to outside enemies. The matrix’s high permeability renders it also extremely exposed to the inter- and transpersonal flow of communication and emotions, and also makes for a strong environment’s influence. The latent and manifest flow of information between matrix members applies also to the family, which, like a group, may lead to the matrix’s best but possibly also worst destructiveness.

By the term ‘soldier’ I mean more than just the delegated man in uniform. It includes the humans’ mental and physical experiences at war, and the influence on all members of the matrix. Terror subgroups may be defined as a soldier matrix; a female suicide bomber is like a soldier, but her whole human environment—women, children, the old—must probably also be that of a ‘soldier’ of a war matrix. All it needs is anxiety, hatred and most likely a ‘truth’ which may further condense feelings. A soldier’s matrix does not need a state as Norbert Elias (1989) thought it to be. The state seems to have lost its monopoly for violence a long time ago, and it can be seen more as a reciprocal influence between individuals and masses, as well as weapons and identities, all creating emotions which result in warring activities. Soldiers, freedom fighters or terrorists only execute the delegated violence of the matrix.

The relationship between the individual and its matrix can also be represented by Foulkes’ category of personification, which means that individuals can stand in for subconscious processes, and voice or act them (out). Personification or delegation is a very complex phenomenon; identification and projective identification processes may be responsible for the many shades of the different soldier’s matrices, being part of the same process of mutual influence (Rafaelsen, 1996). Of course, the bigger the existential threat and the closer the danger of a conflict, the stronger the influence of the matrix on all members and subgroups. We can also witness this process in school classes,
Facebook and many social organizations where monolithic thinking and massification phenomena (Hopper, 2013) may in many cases dominate the group’s Mind.

The implicit and often partly subconscious target of the group is its efficiency: in addition to needing others—a group or an organization—to perform wherever one cannot achieve an aim alone, it should be as able, competent and successful as possible. Being part of the best group increases the possibility to survive, to win a game or to play the most wonderful music. The efficiency function interplays with the individual’s dependency on the group subordinating his personal motivations to social influences. Tom Ormay’s concept of Nos for the so-called group instinct is a useful conceptualization of this side: ‘One is none’ (Ormay, 2013).

Given this natural tendency to belong to the best group implies that groups undertake significant efforts of selection, hoping to insure and develop its efficiency. Such a selection process may lead to the group’s better functioning, but it may also result in destructive processes which may harm individuals or subgroups that are perceived as superfluous or even dangerous in the face of an existential threat to the matrix. Individuals or subgroups do marginalize, exclude or even eliminate others. There seems to be a qualitative distinction between marginalization, which means exclusion, and rejection, which depicts expulsion and destruction. In our collective unconscious, being rejected from a significant group emotionally still means death by expulsion to the desert or coldness.

The example of the sluggish soldiers delaying their charge also raises the question of the influence in the matrix. The continuum between the total dominance of the group on the individual to a possible individual ‘free choice’ has often been addressed. Here I talk about a semi-conscious process, which includes not only the relationship between soldiers and a dominating soldier’s matrix, but also all other matrix members who take part in any identification and efficiency process of the large group (Volkan, 2013). Is it possible at all for the average human being to make a personal choice, even under the threat of being marginalized in the matrix, let alone destroyed? Would it be a development, a return to a different balance between the horizontal and the vertical, which is better and more precisely defined in group therapy than in social dynamics and the large group?

The important theoretical discussion on the relationship between the (soldier’s) matrix and the ‘social unconscious’ (Hopper and Weinberg, 2012) and the ‘collective unconscious’ (Mies, 2007;
Scholz, 2014) cannot be dealt with in this article. I also will not discuss soldier’s trauma or the traumas of societies in and after war. Instead, I would rather try to get an understanding of the ‘normal’ relationship between the soldier and his society, which may all be ‘enlisted’ in their matrix struggle.

The Group Analytic Emotional Attitude to the Group

S.H. Foulkes started his group analytic patient groups out of clinical curiosity; he intuited a curative influence of relationships. Interestingly enough, he was surprised how simply his group method could be translated to the soldier’s matrix in Northfield, and then also to other matrices. This seemed to have strengthened his ‘trust in the group’, and the result was a more open and less anxious Foulkesian attitude to the group.

While ‘trust the group’ is a complicated statement, this attitude is fundamentally different in group analysis than the subliminal fear of the group we can see with other approaches. The friendlier group analytic approach of the conductors to the matrix helps to reduce the anxieties of the members in small and large groups. Foulkes (1995) even went further to say that some of the extreme dramatic movements in large groups are ‘conductor-made’: ‘It is in the hands of the conductor to make this more or less dramatic, not to say traumatic’ (Foulkes, 1995: 265).

For a long time, the difference between individual, small and large group therapy was not well understood. The Northfield experience has proven that, while the social web, i.e. the (soldier’s) matrix, can be treated, the large group still terrifies individuals. Could this be the reason that small group therapy maintained a monopoly in the group analytic practice?

The complex relations to violence in the foundation matrix are intriguing. For example: ‘Thou shalt not kill’ does not seem to be applied in reality to the ‘foundation matrix’, which is the ‘basic common ground (of communication and interaction and understanding) and is based on what was called foundation matrix’ (Foulkes, 1975: 291). Close and known humans should not be killed (like the prohibition to repeat Cain and Abel’s murder); but political enemies and for the sake of one’s own survival, i.e. in a situation where the soldier’s matrix appears, a matrix influenced by war and schizoid–paranoid situations, you are obliged to kill the opponent group members. Murderous violence is not only legitimized, it also arouses collective
unconscious strong defences against feelings of guilt, shame or empathy for the enemy’s suffering. This is the essence of the film *The Act of Killing* (Oppenheimer, 2012), or, like Voltaire said, ‘It is forbidden to kill; therefore murderers are punished, unless they kill in large numbers and to the sound of trumpets!’

**The Soldier’s Matrix in Israel**

While writing this article it became increasingly clear to me, that in Israel we live in a soldier’s matrix. Israel runs the risk of being attacked time and again. Men and women spend years as soldiers, the army’s operations are well known, and an open and unspoken knowledge of the war is everywhere. Information as well as the emotional aspects of living under threat are shared not only by uniformed units but by the whole population. Thus, at the time of writing this article, the local experience provides for many of the understandings gained here (July–August 2014). One of many examples would be the collective identification with stigmatizing the enemy: the absolute security that there is no possibility to negotiate with those who attacked one’s own cities before; the denial of shame and guilt about the army’s wrong-doing, and the diminishing of non- ‘politically correct’ empathy.

**Aggression in the Large Group and Regression**

Serge Moscovici writes in his book *The Age of the Crowd: a Historical Treatise on Mass Psychology* (1985) that mass communication influences the regression of the individual. Freud thought that, by feeling part of a mass, we regress as individuals. The mass turns us into neurotics. Moscovici believed that modern communication instantaneously produces a mass on the base of a common fantasy of the identification with a great number of individuals, which are in relation to each other⁵. Volkan (2013) writes about his concept of the ‘large group Identity’ in a similar way.

Kernberg (2003) points out that regression shows several characteristics: for example, the difficulty to think or a tendency of the mass to hate and envy the individual and individuality. Like Bion, he thinks that the large group can choose only one of two regressive paths: 1) the ‘dependent basic assumption group’, which he describes as a narcissistic–regressive group; and 2) the ‘flight–fight basic
assumption group’, where he observes a paranoid regression (Bion, 1962; Kernberg, 2003).

My question is: can we really talk about regression in respect of the encounter of the individual with the large group, where actually the chronologic and the situational/characteristic conditions of regression do not exist? Do we have definitions of subgroup regressions? Does the whole large group or its relations regress? Could it be that the encounter with large groups and the influence of the mass cause totally different modes of interaction, which become manifest? Is it possible that the relationship with a large group results in a qualitative difference, which is not more or less regressive or progressive, but like water, which behaves completely differently as one drop than as part of a cloud or fog, just 10 minutes before? How fast can ‘a very rapid regression of the ego to these early stages, to its very genesis’ (Foulkes, 1975: 267) happen? I think change, which many have called regression, is not a regression, as it happens in seconds, it is not a ‘dissociation’ and should be defined as a different state of mind. The different understanding has a bearing on its possible transformation.

If we deal with regression, we have to treat it therapeutically—an approach I would challenge. Could we heal for example an Adolf Eichmann, who could neither be diagnosed as regressive or unthinking or only ‘narcissistic’ or ‘totally dependent’? If we rather understand it as a different state of mind, we might use a more practice based approach, like ‘ego training in action’ (Foulkes, 1968: 181).

Kernberg (2003) explains social violence with a pathologic leadership showing signs of malign narcissism or paranoia. Unstructured groups and masses exposed to massive propaganda will regress, split into subgroups, and by merging again into a large group, are able to bear physical extermination of de-humanized subgroups. By blaming only the leadership, we may be using defence mechanisms as a denial of the collective responsibility for violence.

The quick transformations in the large group’s matrix violence are not necessarily regressive; they often seem to be evidence of unconscious fears and identification with authorities, a ‘healthy’ primary tendency to survive and a natural understanding of the large group matrix, and the need to collectively adapt to conflictual situations. Although it seems that these are not clear-cut processes, it seems important to better understand and investigate the underlying process. The term ‘change of identity’, conceptualized by the sociologist Reicher (1987), corresponds more with my understanding of large
group dynamics than ‘regression’. Most probably, the emotional pressure of the mass on the individual, which in group analytic settings can be seen particularly in the early phases of the large group, immediately push the individual to give up parts of his personal identity in favour of fundamental identifications and counter-identifications with the large group. Even small children seem to be aware of how to behave in such a large group.

Another significant underlying mechanism of this dynamic is the ‘two step’ development of belonging: Humans long for inclusion (Schlapobersky, 2015), and in a first step they find it existentially important to belong to a group. In a second step they seem unconsciously anxious about being expelled from it and cling or submit to the matrix aims. In a split moment those fundamental human positions, states of mind are turned on like a mode rather than experiencing a ‘regression’ in the large group.

According to Moscovici, the medieval drummer transformed the villagers immediately into a large group by announcing the latest news. Though the modes of transferring information change, the impact of simultaneous information to a mass is tremendous. Radio, newspapers, Television, Facebook and Twitter transform the large group culture in seconds.

In a soldier’s matrix, the psychoanalytic approach would say that men’s ‘regressed self’ is sometimes the target of psychoanalytic treatment, intervening at a level of personal childhood internalizations. It is common to see these remain intact in a private setting but completely change as a reaction to the large group situation and the mass. ‘Ego-training in action’ (Foulkes, 1964: 82) was already mentioned as another approach, and can also be applied to group analytic large groups to practise movement on the continuum between Self and Nos. The participation in the large group setting facilitates subgroups’ and individuals’ reflection and habituation in their relations to the mass, the community and even the nation. Group analysis has in its hands a unique instrument, where the reciprocal influence in the matrix, including the conductors, can be ‘played’ with. It is our clinical experience that habituated participants in the large group are not only more aware of the social aspects of identity, but have a greater choice of dialogue with others and the mass.

Matrix and Pathology of Aggression in Relations
Foulkes thought that the ‘location’ of all psychological diseases is not found inside individuals but in the space between related people.
Friedman: Soldier’s Matrix

Foulkes’ opinion, that pathology is an interpersonal issue, makes sense to many clinicians, even if we are scared by the shared responsibility for the disorders of others. Two such interpersonal pathologies, which I call Relation Disorders, directly related to interpersonal violence, will be discussed. The first one happens when a matrix disinhibits aggression, the second is a disorder of relations marked by extreme violence both towards others and oneself, in the form of self-sacrifice, when behaving aggressively towards enemies. The ‘Rejection Relation Disorder’, shares many of the soldier’s matrix characteristics, especially the reduced feelings of guilt, shame and empathy. While these emotions inhibit violence, their lack promotes the occurrence of murderous impulses, sadism and other forms of violence. In the second disorder, where the Self is disturbed, the matrix promotes the renunciation of one’s own Self up to the justification of its sacrifice—usually in a sea of violence. The soldier’s matrix is characterized by both these group phenomena: reduced violence inhibiting mechanisms and the promotion of selfless relations. Fundamental and partly unconscious pathogenic emotions, e.g. feeling the danger of being rejected as well as the subsequent existential threats have an elementary impact on our behaviour. The price for the use of defences against annihilation anxieties is often a loss of one’s individuality, together with the loss of other social emotions like compassion, becoming ‘over-identified’ with a social cause and ‘identification with the aggressor’ (Freud, 1936), which are also easily detected in the soldier’s matrix.

Only if the whole matrix as the ‘location’ of interpersonal aggression undergoes change—will individuals and subgroups have a greater choice for the use of force and greater possibility to take responsibility against violence. Under such conditions, soldiers, their relatives and even the whole societal culture may slowly feel that they may be able to move away from the soldier’s matrix towards more free relations. This may involve a distancing process, which is crucial in order to regain the lost capacity for guilt and shame about committed crimes, and the return of empathy for the victims. An example of this is Germany’s post-war generation’s enduring difficulty to contain painful late mourning and impotence processes from their recent history.

Relation Disorders
Following Agazarian’s research on the dynamics of group development (1994), with particular reference to four ‘containing-roles’,
which carry mismanaged emotions in every stage, I made an attempt to describe four Relation Disorders. Rather than concentrating on the ‘container’s’ pathology I considered the creation of a whole ‘figuration’ (Foulkes, 1948), a set of (disordered) relations involved in a group dynamic. We may also view these Relation Disorders as condensed phenomenae, found almost exclusively in group interactions. They seem to require group therapy as their optimal treatment (Friedman, 2013). From the four I will concentrate here on two relevant Relation Disorders: the Rejection Disorder and the Disorders of the Self.

a) Rejection Disorder
The ‘Scapegoating Position’ can be understood as a special group ‘figuration’, of interpersonal relations in groups that fail to contain violence. The relations between the scapegoats, who are afraid of being rejected try everything to be able to belong to the group, and the ‘scapegoaters’, who develop partly unconscious dynamics of violence towards a (hated) group member or subgroup can become uncontained. As a result, the scapegoat may be rejected and eliminated. The dynamics of this pathological relation cannot occur without the existential need of the scapegoat for inclusion in the group, and his increasing willingness to accept violence against himself in order to avoid rejection. In this cyclic process, the scapegoater’s motivation of selecting group members for rejection and expulsion—colludes with the scapegoat’s unconscious need for belonging and an ever growing fear of annihilation.

Dicks (1972) investigated German KZ-guards who were prisoners in England. Their main characteristics were twofold: their submission to the SS-authority with whom they identified on the one hand. They could execute their control over the prisoners in the camps, who were totally exposed to annihilation—cruelly and without any doubt or guilt. On the other hand this guiltless, shameless and ‘empathy-less’ psychopathic attitude of the scapegoaters happened only in a certain matrix. Dicks could prove that these people, who in their ‘social system’, which we could consider as the ‘scapegoater–matrix’ (or Rejection Disorder, Friedman, 2013), showed many signs of a severe personality disorder, were neither dangerous nor violent men elsewhere. Perhaps you do not need pathology in order to become a psychopath, because the disorder depends on the matrix and the relations in the group. This may partly answer the question: how do soldiers get sick?
As a matter of fact, we all witness and even follow more hatred and violence in rejection matrices than we would like to admit. Harm Stehr (2013) described in a conference in Bonn an example of a typical classroom configuration, which could be called ‘scapegoating position’. As a boy, he witnessed the rejection of a classmate. The group expelled a seemingly inferior and ‘inappropriate’ member, probably as the result of an efficiency process (as described earlier), which determines the selection process in the group. Again, groups tend to become elite troops, and as in sport, there are main players, bench players and those who were rejected from the team. In Stehr’s recount, at that time, not one classmate identified with the victim and intervened. In fact, all of us feel relief not to become the scapegoat ourselves. In group analytic therapy, we try to treat Disorders by working with all sides who are reciprocally involved in the Relation Disorder. We must address the interaction between unspoken rejection anxieties with the linked hatred and violence.

The ‘Scapegoating Position’ goes beyond classic meanings of what was described in the decades after the Second World War as scapegoats, who are supposedly subjects of projections and even envy (Garland, Jones and Kolodny, 1973). Scapegoating includes not only hatred and destruction fantasies towards the weak and strong, but also rejection, extermination and death for the enemy, and a tendency to act the emotions out violently. It also includes an unconscious relation with the scapegoat, who is unable to separate from the wish to belong to the perpetrator’s group. The scapegoating position can produce a veritable ‘hatred-training in action’ (Foulkes, 1975, ‘ego-training in action’). Examples of destructive processes in large groups are numerous: the German matrix before and after the Nuremberg discrimination laws and the expulsion of Hagar and Ismail to the desert are just a couple of them. The threat of rejecting all those Israeli ‘traitors’ who were critical in the last Gaza war, or even those who were not identified enough is another example of the ‘scapegoating position’.

b) Relation Disorders of the Self
The second relation disorder discussed here describes pathological developments of the Self. When members over identify with the matrix, men and women will subordinate their own interests and motivations to a need or will of the group. The symptoms of this loss of the self are gendered very differently: while women selflessly serve others, men sacrifice themselves, their lives, as ‘heroes’
(Agazarian, 1994) in conflicts. Selfless protagonists, men and women, are being educated or seduced to sacrifice the Self and enjoy significant support by ‘selfish’ fans.

Many of our patients, feeling depressed or living in omnipotent fantasies, suffer from this very Relation Disorder. Self-abandonment engenders violence by abuse of many subgroups of the matrix. Even survival in the group within such a matrix is conceived to be a selfless, suicidal soldier’s devotion, which may be generalized to all men. In unconscious fantasies about father figures—the selfless soldier’s devotion in order to defend their child and its perception, contributes to the child’s development. A healthy ‘primary paternal preoccupation’, the equivalent to the ‘primary maternal preoccupation’ (Winnicott, 1956; Doron, 2014) can have significant supportive functions for the individual and his feeling of confidence in this world. Thus, social situations of Selflessness may have complex functions, which partly can be considered as ‘normal’.

A dream may contain an example of ‘typical’ aggressive and suicidal tendencies in the ‘Selfless Relation Disorder’:

During a conference organized by the IIGA (Israel Institute of Group Analysis) in the Kibbutz Eyn Gedi I pleaded, as a member of the large group, for a stronger feeling of security for our (Israeli) existence. I pointed out that only a feeling of security enables dialogue with the enemy. I said a sentence that hit me: ‘We should stop living as if we are still at the gates of Auschwitz’. There were many reactions, but I myself felt great sadness: I had tackled a painful taboo.

The same night I had a vivid dream: The Arabs conquered Israel, we had lost the war and the enemy was all around us. I fled with my family into a wadi, a gorge. My children were small again, the same age as my grandchildren today. Everything was green, like the reality of the current winter. Other families were hiding with us. The situation became more dangerous, because the Syrian army was approaching, and I knew that there would be a ‘bad end’. In order to protect my family, I decided to blow myself up on military installations, which looked like gas tanks, believing that this would stop the occupation. A Druze officer was willing to assist me. I remember the sad look in the eyes of my wife when I left. Luckily a twist of fate brought a rescuing army (I think they were Russians, like at the gates of Auschwitz).

It goes without saying that such a dream has many possible meanings. I would like to emphasize here the tendency to self-sacrifice, which—for men does not seem pathological—but rather natural.
Questions of sacrifice, which can be included under the Self Relation Disorders, are all over this article. From my grandfather’s and uncle heroic sacrifices in the First World War, to women who find it crucially important to mother the next generation of soldiers. Sacrifice in dreams and reality is a central aspect of the soldier’s matrix. Are soldiers sick? Kamikaze pilots wearing hats in their suicidal flight and other ambivalences toward Selflessness, make it clear that while renouncing on one’s Self easily immerses soldiers and the whole population into an ocean of violence it may still be a natural aspect of the family’s and the community’s life.

_The Relation between Germany and the Soldier’s Matrix—or: What Happened to Early Identifications?_. Let me share with you, very carefully, some thoughts about the German matrix today and the post-war years of the soldier’s matrix. Sometimes an outsider, who is nevertheless related to a matrix, may bring some different elements into the discussion.

In Israel, the ‘Nakbah’, the Palestinian tragedy of the refugees, is an example of being part of our soldier’s matrix, and influences it. This influence contains an often pre-conscious wish to prohibit its existence. While it is very easy to accept oneself as a victim, one of the most difficult psychological processes is to accept the fact that we all are also perpetrators. We may live in Haifa or Tel-Aviv, but we unconsciously share something with refugees in camps in Amman and Beirut, to which we are connected. No one in this land is really exempted, because the matrix contains everything: the evil, the less evil and the good. But being in a soldier’s matrix actually means that these influences are fought and split off. The results of these splitting processes are panic or avoiding responses to any attempt of mature coping with the refugee problem. Similarly, most analysts of the last elections in Israel agree that they were won by the Likud through arising the annihilation fears awakened by the ‘threatening masses of Arab voters driven in by the left’⁹. Annihilation anxiety is a driving motor in any soldier’s matrix.

Until quite recently, the German matrix could be considered as a soldier’s matrix. If we believe in unconscious inter-personal communication, it is clear that the entire soldier’s matrix knew about the perpetrators as well as the victims, both about those involved in the making of the Shoah, as well those suffering from the bombardment of German cities. Frontline and home may be distant geographically, but as could be observed in the German debate about
the ‘Wehrmacht–Exposition’ from the year 2001, there was no clear separation line in the war between civilians and the army, including army units like the SS—they were all part of the same matrix. But even after the war, the lack of distance and enmeshment in the soldier’s matrix was omnipresent—even the identification with the Nazi system lasted for at least another 20 years. The soldier’s matrix survived the ‘purification’ and other efforts to separate from the caused horror. Having said this, I certainly do not think the soldier’s matrix alone can explain all the atrocities of the Holocaust. Many other societies in war and stress lived in soldiers’ matrices that did not produce this extreme destructiveness.

The Anti-Soldier Matrix?
The taboo of uniformed men, that seems to exist in Germany, questions the results of the processing of violence in the present matrix. A whole generation, after the 1960s, seems to have gone through a strong emotional movement from the soldier’s matrix to an anti-soldier’s matrix—probably a necessary process to cause a rupture with former identifications. Similarly to other societies, de-identification opens the gates to a different matrix, where shame and guilt feelings, fundamentally inter-generationally inherited, are allowed and elaborated. It is the next generation who suffers for the generations before them: ‘The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge’ (Ezekiel, 18,2.). The moving away from former identifications may be achieved through a de-idealizing of the relationship to German soldiers, which functions as a damaged container of prohibited libidinous desires. Transforming every former identification, once felt in the soldier’s matrix, into objects of de-identification probably has educational and socializing functions. This hypothesis about the change in identifications may be further understood through group analytic groups.

The soldiers who fought in a matrix that legitimized violence up to 1945 were not able to handle their own destructivity in the post war period. Holdger Plata said, ‘The life of many children of war was contaminated twice. It was determined by the experiences of the war-and post-war-time as well as from the first two decades of the German Federal Republic’ (2004: 220). I interpret this statement as: the first 20 years after the Second World War were still determined by the matrix of the returned soldiers and the German war Habitus (Elias, 1989). The society continued to deny shame and guilt. It was only
during the 1960s that a development of empathy could begin. Only then could the next generation start, consciously and unconsciously, to feel guilty for crimes done and stop hiding from the world because of a ‘collective shame’. Only then could people start to distance themselves from the ‘nation’, from their parents, their neighborhoods, the army and the education system—changing their own matrix. Summarising many conversations that I have had over the last few years with Germans, (individually and in group sessions) about this distancing process from the soldier’s matrix, I would say:

The denial of army and war seems more often a schizoid-paranoid (and not a depressive) attempt to escape the former soldier’s matrix. It also includes thoughts of patricide, the taking revenge on the parents and sometimes the rage of defilement. But also, the contrary can be observed with many German children of perpetrators: the (often unconscious) identification with the parent’s anxiety of being accused of war crimes leads to a suppression of the whole history by the taboo of the soldier’s matrix. Generally splits and distancing from parents as an effort of ‘purification’ (Volkan, 2013) is a basic defence against shame and guilt. Finally, de-identification can also be a more or less unconscious attempt to stop the soldier’s matrix of aggression pathology of countless previous generations. Dreams told in group analysis often teach us about these complex processes. Dreaming and dream-telling open opportunities to try, simultaneously, two approaches to the exciting and the threatening: distancing from evil by purification processes, together with an effort to bridge splits and open up to difficult feelings.

Processes of de-identification are one of the most important promoters of societal development. De-identification has a similar significant function of separation as in the mother–child dyad. The more cohesive the matrix, the more complicated is the separation from the soldier’s matrix. The betrayal of the former (post-traumatic) generation and a possible loss of ‘primal paternal concern’ are discussed. Fathers (and often mothers), who were part of soldiers’ groups, who shared the terror of war experiences, expected solidarity from the next generation.

Thus we can understand what an enormous psychic achievement the generation born after the war accomplished by the de-identification of the German soldier’s matrix. Shame, guilt and empathy could only be re-introduced by the younger generation.

In Germany, de-identification led to the fact that ‘non-provocative’ civil employees kept watch on military barracks. This transformed
uniformed soldiers in a ‘provocation’, and thus a real threat to the new German identity. These issues may be optimally reflected upon in groups, where these often violent emotions originate, and where denied feelings may be worked through.

**Transformation**

Soldiers are neither sicker nor healthier than the matrix they live in. The power delegated to them by the matrix exists by a kind of consensus, especially when fighting external enemies. The split between a civil society and a soldier’s matrix does not exist, and the stronger the democracy in war-stricken zones, the greater are the possibilities of a dialogue between the civil and militarized components of the soldier’s matrix. Continuing splits, like in Northern Ireland for example, need conflict dialogue, in which ‘enemies’ meet for the purpose of getting to know the other side and speak with it. Acknowledge hardships in the presence of both sides renews a place for empathy. Political agreements and laws will not stop the soldier’s matrix from dominating the culture of people nor prevent its return.

In 2013 I worked with Northern Irish rivaling parties, who called the situation ‘unfinished business’. They had invited the IDI to organize a meeting between political and civil society representatives of all colours, as well as police and paramilitaries. The title emphasizes that the soldier’s matrix does not cede just because there is political agreement. It may take generations to stop social conflicts, and it may not really ever stop without interventions in which dialogue is introduced and structured. Direct encounters make this more possible, while distance reinforces splits and de-humanization. In different areas of conflict I have learned that a combination between personal encounters, integrated in small and large group work, may cause dramatic transformations. Personal encounters alone are rarely enough, and have to be supported by conflict dialogue in small groups, complemented by (not too) large groups to facilitate communication between social identities. Because in the end it is the matrix which dominates the individual’s emotional modes of thought, the dialogue process has to be supported by participating in large groups that are more able to change the matrix culture through separating it from the soldier’s matrix.

The group analytic large group provides the space where we can learn to deal with identifications and the social fundamental fear of being rejected by society. Thus the large group provides us with the
possibility to learn and to practise separation from authority. Maybe the best remedy for a democratic education is the mentioned ‘Ego-Training-in action’ in large groups; it could cause a move on the continuum between merging with the large group identity and total separation, isolation and rejection anxieties. In every soldier’s matrix there is always a strong demand for identification. Practising in group analytic large groups though could strengthen the courage to self-expression, which would sometimes make de-identification possible. In the short term it leads to paranoid confrontations between group members and authorities. In the long term it may allow the freedom to provocation and rebellion, which may also inhibit institutional violence. Transformation can also be achieved by civil and political leaders, who potentially serve as models for collective tolerance of institutionalized violence. A hand shake, like Rabin’s with Arafat, can change a lot. Unfortunately, politicians can also be models for hatred, revenge and distancing. For that reason it may be wiser to encourage long-term investment in complex group analytic group work.

Notes

1. After a lecture given at the 10th Anniversary of IGA Berlin (BIG) 2013 entitled: Are Soldiers Sick?
2. Th. Mies proposed ‘militarized’ matrix instead of soldier matrix. A personal note: it is possible to call the involved subgroups ‘war matrix’. However, I still believe the term soldier matrix indicates the total involvement of individuals and their society—which means everyone becomes a soldier.
3. Volkan’s ‘large group’ implies often a nation, or entities on the base of identification. In this article I will differentiate it from the large group, which is a setting of many dozens up to hundreds of participants who meet for a session with one or more conductors (Wilke, 2014; Friedman, 2012).
4. Was this the reason why Elias was forgotten for so long and de Maré (1991) marginalized? For example, the group analytic attitude towards mental illness is still dominated by the individual, and marginalizes social and relation disorders.
5. Hopper (2011) thinks, the mass influences into two directions: massification and aggregation, merging and fragmenting.
6. All of them did not suffer from any family trauma, but were people who grew up with a then ‘normal’ education, like most of us.
7. A personal note: as a child, I could unconsciously identify with my mother’s scapegoat side. A few years ago we went back with her to Zerbst (a small town about 60 km south of Berlin) where she grew up, where this
trait became understandable. She was born in 1923. At the age of 12 she was expelled from school, experiencing this probably as a rejection like in Harm Stehr’s class. Later she was also banned from the houses of her two last German girlfriends with whom she would meet after school, and in which their socialist fathers had returned broken from concentration camps. ‘Rita’chen, you cannot come anymore’ they would say—probably out of fear from the scapegoaters, not because of hatred. After 1936 the social situation got even worse with the decrees of ‘Aryan sports’. My mother told us how she was banned from every sport; at the very end she was only allowed to play ping-pong, until this Asian sport became Aryan. Social rejection is a scar in the scapegoat for life, and in the rejecter, e.g. in soldiers, it can produce lifelong hatred.

10. IDI, International Dialogue Initiative, see www.internationaldialogueinitiative.com

References


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