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Revenge for Humiliation as A Possible Cause of WWI

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The causes of WWI: a problem that most historians have found difficult or even impossible to solve. My review of a book, *The Sleepwalkers* (2012), by the historian C. Clark, illustrates this problem (Scheff 2018). It is a best seller, and has been highly praised by reviewers. One example: "For a century the question of the origins of World War I has bedeviled historians. But no one who examines the question will be able to ignore "The Sleepwalkers". (David M. Shribman, March 23, 2013. Boston Globe.) However, like most attempts, Clark's book doesn't solve the puzzle. His solution is not clear, but it seems to be that both Germany and France were more or less equally at fault. However, the majority of attempts by other investigators seem to place Germany at fault, but with little or no systematic evidence. In particular they do not propose a clear and obvious MOTIVE for starting the war. It seems to me, however, that it was France that had such a motive:

There is a hidden aspect of Clark's book that neither the author nor any of the reviewers' mention: humiliation as a possible cause of the war. When I searched Clark's text, there were 18 mentions of humiliation, the first on page 51, the last on page 558. A large part of this usage occurs when the author quotes the major players in WWI: they use it to explain motives. For example, Edward Gray, Prime Minister in England during WWI is quoted as saying "If Britain were forced to choose between peace and the surrender of her international pre-eminence ... peace at that price would be a humiliation intolerable ...to endure." (pp. 210). He seems to be saying that avoiding humiliation is a motive that would cause England to go to war.

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The philosopher Bertrand Russell, as a young man in England during WWI, went to jail rather than fight, as he explained at the time: "Men...fear the sense of humiliation they would have in yielding to the demands of another nation. Rather...than endure the humiliation, they are willing to inflict upon the world all those disasters which it is now (in 1915) suffering and all that exhaustion and impoverishment which it must long continue to suffer." (Russell 1917/2010, 88-99). After the war ended, Russell rejected his earlier statement.

Marx (1975, p. 200) was in his twenties when he wrote something similar in one of his letters to Ruge: "...if a whole nation were to feel ashamed it would be like a lion recoiling in order to spring." Later he became a "historical materialist" and never again voiced his youthful idea: could a war be caused not only by material concerns like land and resources, but also by non-material ones, like a whole nation feeling ashamed, as Marx put it? Perhaps as he grew older, he joined the trend in modern societies toward ignoring emotions as not as real as material things, actions and thoughts.

There are by now many, many studies of war and violence. Some, however, do not propose a theory of causation, but merely record the facts. Those that do propose a cause usually offer a material one, even though most do not name Marx or historical materialism. For example, theft, as in colonialism, is an example of material things causing violence: one nation steals the land of another nation by brute force.

The spreading of a religion is a non-material cause that has also been proposed. The Crusades to conquer Palestine are one example. In addition to material causes and beliefs, there is also a miscellany of causes that have been suggested. Marx's and Russell's early idea of shame as a cause of war is one of that miscellany.

Collective Violence

Multiple killings occur at the collective level also, in the form of gratuitous assaults, genocides and

wars. The individual and interpersonal emotion spirals would be the same, but there would also be a recursive process between media and people, as suggested below.

The origins of World War I can serve as an example. The differences that divided the countries that fought this extraordinarily destructive war might have been negotiated, had there been last-minute negotiations to avoid war. But there were not. There was merely an exchange of single letters from the rulers, a formality. Historians have so far been unable to satisfactorily explain the causes of this war.

My book on the politics of revenge (1994) proposed that social scientists have been looking in the wrong places. The basic cause of the war, I argued, was not economic or *real politic*, but social/emotional. The German and French people seem to have been caught up in alienation and shame spirals. The French defeat by the Germans in 1871 led to national desire for vengeance. The French leaders plotted a war for over 40 years, including a secret understanding with Russia for the purpose of defeating the Germans (For a more recent and broader discussion of emotions, revenge, and conflict, see Frijda 2007, Ch. 7).

Perhaps humiliation could be established as the clear MOTIVE of France: they might have started WWI as revenge for their defeat by a group of smaller German-speaking countries in the war of 1870. For 41 years French politics and media were dominated by the cry for revenge (Scheff 1994). One example: the press never used the actual name of one of the highest-ranking generals in the French army: he was referred to only as "Générale Revanche" because he constantly proposed revenge against Germany." (The German-speaking states during the earlier time had formed into the single country of Germany) But there is no comparable cry for revenge in Germany comparable to the French one during the period 1870-1914.

If it can be shown that France, rather than Germany, started WWI, we might be able to better

understand the rise of Hitler in Germany in the 1920s, His power may have been because he alone responded loudly, clearly, and repeatedly to what virtually all Germans believed erroneous: attributing Germany to be the cause of WWI. It seems that this is the main avenue for his rise to power.

It may be that we will never know which country fired the first shot; we only know that both countries massed armies facing each other on the borders of France and Germany. In the meantime, without that knowledge, it seems from the data dealt with here concerning a motive, it might have been France, not Germany that was guilty. Recognizing that France had a clear motive for starting a war with Germany, while important in itself, does not establish that France actually fired the first shot, but it does make it plausible.

It should also be noted that humiliation as a cause for wars of revenge has begun to be studied by historians (Hall (2017), Hall and Ross (2015), Lacey (2009), Löwenheim & Heimann, G. (2008), Saurette (2006). There is also a closely related literature on protecting male "honor" as a cause of war (Offer 1995, Frevert, 2014). Frevert dared to actually use the word shame in his title. Perhaps there is movement toward the study of emotions such as shame as causes of war.

Media and Masses

During this period, the role of mass media in both generating and reflecting collective humiliation and anger is quite blatant. The French public and its leaders experienced their defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71), and the Treaty of Frankfurt, which ended the war, as humiliating (Kennan, 1984, Sontag, 1933, Weber, 1954). Going against Bismarck's warnings (he feared revenge), the Germans had annexed two French provinces (Alsace and Lorraine).

Revenge brought about through the return of the two lost provinces, *revanchisme*, became the central issue in French media and politics of the whole era.

Leading political figures such as Gambetta and General Boulanger talked about revenge openly in their campaigns (Boulanger was known in the popular press as "General Revenge.") Vengeance against Germany was a popular theme in newspapers, magazines, poetry and fiction. Revenge themes were common in the popular literature of the time. The poetry and novels of that era serve as examples. The war poems of Deroulede, *Chants du Soldat* (Songs of a Soldier, 1872) were wildly popular. Here is a sample stanza (quoted in Rutkoff, 1981, p. 161): Revenge will come, perhaps slowly perhaps with fragility, yet a strength that is sure for bitterness is already born and force will follow and cowards only the battle will ignore. Note that this poem not only appeals to the French to seek revenge, but also contains a coercive element. In the last line, anyone who might disagree with the poet's sentiments is labeled a coward. There are many other instances of appeals to vengeance, honor, and glory in the other poems: these are the main themes. By 1890 this little book had gone through an unprecedented 83 editions, which suggests that it had a vast audience.

The extraordinary acclaim that greeted *Chants du Soldat* (Soldiers' Songs) prompted Déroulède to publish further books of similar thrust, most of them devoted to military glory, triumph and revenge. For example, in 1896 his *Poesies Militaires* (Military Poetry) continued in the same vein. The following is a representative stanza: French blood! — a treasure so august and hoarded with such jealous care, to crush oppression's strength unjust, with all the force of right robust, and buy us back our honor fair... (déroulède, 1896, p. 172)

Also indicative of open *revanchisme* was the rash of novels about the plight of Alsace and Lorraine under German occupation, which became popular in the 15 years preceding WWI. The best-known author of this genre, Maurice Barres, published two: *In the Service of Germany* (1905) and *Collette Baudoche* (1909). These books, like many others of their ilk, were

not works of art, but “works of war,” to use the phrase of Barres’ biographer (Boisdeffre, 1962). Websdale’s idea of a type of multiple killer who, not acting in a fit of rage, but carefully and with considerable planning, seems to be applicable to wars like WWI. The ruling emotional spiral is not shame-anger, but shame-shame. A person or a nation can become so lost in a spiral of being ashamed of being ashamed that it becomes the dominant force in their existence, as it seems to have been in the French nation 1871-1914. The violence that results is not because of a loss of control, but submerging the inhibitions that prevent killing.

Hitler’s Rise to Power in Germany

With only a few exceptions, the idea of emotional origins of war not been well received by most experts in history and political science. It seems that they are caught up in the denial of the importance of the social-emotional world, assuming that causes lie in the material world, like the grown-up Marx, and/or in thoughts and beliefs. They share this denial with most of the members of modern societies, lay and expert alike, as discussed above (see also Scheff, 1990; 1994; 1997; 2006; Scheff & Retzinger, 1991).

It might be that hiding shame was the basic underlying reason that Hitler took power in 1934 and was able to steer Germany on his murderous course. It is possible that although the Germans’ contempt for the Weimar Republic arose for many reasons, the most powerful one might have been because it had signed a treaty that affirmed the accusation that Germany had not only lost WWI, but was also solely responsible for starting it. If it was actually France that started the war, as the Germans correctly thought, the crucial reason that Hitler was able to take and keep power in Germany was because he promised to remove that stain from their honor by revenge not only against France, but the whole world.

Another factor that should be taken into consideration in this discussion of shame is Hitler’s evolving anti-Semitism and the prevailing

obsession with an international Jewish conspiracy. Before Hitler came to power, there had been a long history of anti-Semitism in Germany and elsewhere propagated by prominent thinkers, including Adolf Stöcker, Heinrich von Treitschke, Count de Gobineau, etc., and even further back to Martin Luther and medieval Christianity (Richards, 2013). Moreover, there was a developing belief in a Jewish conspiracy aimed at global domination. The growing respectability of this paranoid line of reasoning can be attributed in part to *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (1905), a document which purported to represent the ideas of a secret society of Jewish elders about a Jewish plot to take over the world. The dissemination of this document depended on already existing belief that made it almost invulnerable to evidence indicating it was a fabrication and forgery (McMillan, 2014; Mosse, 1978).

Yet this thinking enjoyed a new surge in acceptance in Germany after World War I, in part because of Germany’s surrender. Indeed, Hitler and many others did not believe that Germany had ever lost the war. Rather, many Germans harbored feelings of shame that were rooted in anger at the so-called November criminals—those who had signed the Armistice and were involved in the negotiations over the Treaty of Versailles. These criminals had allegedly betrayed Germany by unjustly abandoning the war effort, a shameful action that Hitler believed had been engineered by inimical Jewish forces (Aviram, 2008; Hitler, 1925; Yland, Boduszek & Kielkiewicz, 2011; Mosse, 1978).

During the 1920s, the *Treaty of Versailles* was regarded by Germans of all political persuasions as a “treaty of shame” (Krumeich, 2006, p. 162; Scheff, 2000, p. 108) or “dictate of shame” (Mommson, 1998, p. 535), and the blame for the war as unjust. On June 28, 1919, one nationalist newspaper *Deutsche Zeitung* railed, “Today German honour is dragged to the grave.

Never forget it! The German people will advance again to regain their pride. We will have our revenge for the shame of 1919!" (Trueland, 2004, p. 88). Similarly, in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler states:

...[E]very one of these points [in the Treaty] could have been burned into the brain and feeling of this nation until, finally, in the heads of sixty million men and women the same sense of shame and the same hate would have become a single fiery sea of flames, out of whose glow a steely will would have risen and a cry forced itself: 'We want arms once more!' (Hitler 1925/1941, p. 920).

Hitler thus found his ready-made political platform of revenge and vindication for Germany's shame: the denunciation of the Treaty of Versailles, the annihilation of international Jewry, the rebuilding of German military power, the recapturing of the lost eastern territories, and most important, the restoration of Germany's lost sense of community, as well as national pride. In essence, Hitler was motivated by his individual-level shame, and was able to deploy shame to enlist the German people into supporting his plan (Kershaw, 1998; 2010; Scheff 1990; Scheff, 2000; Scheff & Retzinger, 1991).

Many studies attribute Germany's motives during World War II primarily to conventional notions of war objectives based on territorial conquest, wealth, and power acquisition. Notwithstanding the importance of those factors, the shame, as well as loss of a sense of national pride Germany incurred for accepting full responsibility for World War I was a significant contributing factor (Scheff, 2000). These emotions were carried forward, intensified, and became the centerpiece of Hitler's and the Nazi Party's anti-Semitic logics leading to the Holocaust wherein the Jewish "race" had to be removed from Germany (Herf, 2006).

Of course, there was no scientific basis to identify Jewish people as a race in terms of

biology or genetics. Yet in the early part of the 20th century, and especially in the 1930s and 1940s, particularly in Germany, anti-Semitism was buttressed by Social Darwinian thought, mainly those influenced by British thinker Herbert Spencer, including the phrase "survival of the fittest." Social Darwinists further developed Darwinian ideas surrounding race and argued aggressively that certain "inferior races" were less evolved than "superior races" (Mosse, 1978; Richards, 2013; Snyder, 2015; Weikart, 1993).

According to this line of reasoning some races or nations had progressed further than others, who were less fortunate in the genetic endowments for intellectual accomplishments. The writers of popularized science, as well as many biologists and anthropologists, carefully ranked races and nationalities from lowest to highest in value. Whites of European descent, particularly the Nordic (or Aryan) races, were always at the top of the hierarchy, and Blacks always at the bottom, with numerous gradations among various people who we now consider White. Many Social Darwinists extended this belief to include the idea that superior peoples had every right to conquer, exploit, and even exterminate inferior ones. All of these notions were declared to be proven scientific fact (McMillan, 2014; Richards, 2013; Snyder, 2015; Weikart, 1993).

Hitler's obsession with and belief in these ideas was spelled out in no uncertain terms in *Mein Kampf* (1925). Yet, they had been germinating in his consciousness since his time in Vienna, where he lived between 1906 and 1913. While there, he developed his deepening anti-Semitism. His various political ideas were influenced by Vienna's politicians, its journalists, its many racist cranks, and even by socio-economic factors such as inflation, the chronic housing shortage, and its soaring unemployment rate. Yet anti-Semitism was the key contemporary social and political issue. Indeed, anti-Semitism was debated at length in Parliament, in Vienna's many

cafés, as well as in its wide variety of daily and weekly newspapers (Hamann, 1999; Jones, 2002; Victor, 2007).

When Hitler first arrived in Vienna, the Austrian capital was a vibrant metropolis that served as something of a magnet for artists, composers, writers, and other “Modernist” intellectuals. There Hitler developed his passion for drama, theatre design, and the operas of Richard Wagner. But it was also in Vienna where Hitler’s childhood ambition of becoming an artist was dashed. He was twice denied admission to the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts, once in 1907 and again in 1908 (Kershaw, 2010; McMillan, 2014) because his sketches and paintings were considered “unsatisfactory” (Kershaw, 1998, p. 24). The issue appears to be that Hitler’s drawings did not display much interest in or consideration of the human form. Landscapes, and particularly drawings of buildings, appeared to be of greater interest to him (Spotts, 2003). Given that Hitler considered himself to be exceptionally talented, rejection by the academy was therefore the source of considerable shame (Brenner, 2016).

Vienna was also awash with Modern Art (meaning abstract and non-representative art), which was an avant-garde trend counter to the academy’s conventional style and genre of nineteenth-century representational painting (e.g., neoclassical, realist, impressionistic, etc.) (Colotti & Mariani, 1984; Hamann, 1999; Kershaw, 1998). As someone whose paintings were still stylistically wedded to the latter (Kershaw, 1998), Hitler disdained Modern Art. He came to view it not only as “degenerate art” but also part of the great Jewish Bolshevik cultural conspiracy (Hamann, 1999; Lauder, 2014; Peters, 2014; Price, 2014; Victor, 2007).

Also in Vienna, Hitler, a provincial from Linz, developed the mindset of an uncertain, frustrated, sexually insecure, socially awkward, emotionally volatile outsider who felt alienated and rejected. By Christmas 1909, Hitler was without even enough money to feed himself, and ended up living on the streets. This obliged him

to seek shelter in a privately-run men’s home before eventually finding a more permanent dwelling in a new, ultra-modern men’s hostel. During his stay in the hostel Hitler began selling his watercolor and postcard paintings to tourists and picture frame manufacturers to try to earn a living (Hamann, 1999).

Hitler left Vienna for Munich in May 1913 just prior to World War I. His subsequent experiences as a soldier in World War I and its disastrous aftermath—the Treaty of Versailles, the Depression, and the economic hardships these events would impose upon Germany, Hitler’s newly adopted homeland—would help transform him into the confirmed anti-Semite and political opportunist whose emerging gifts as a public speaker would help catapult him and the Nazi Party to power in 1933 (Kershaw, 1998). And the quickest path to power was to exploit Germany’s already existing anti-Semitic prejudices (Hamann, 1999; Herf, 2006; Victor, 2007).

Supported by a biologicistic and pseudoscientific notion of Jewish inferiority, Nazi legislators institutionalized what have been referred to as the Nuremberg Laws, which used birth and ancestry (blood) as criteria. Consequently, anyone who had three or four Jewish grandparents, regardless of whether they identified as Jewish or belonged to the Jewish religious community, was defined as Jewish. Tens of thousands of Germans who would not consider themselves to be Jewish were suddenly without citizenship and, thereby, without political rights.

To further complicate matters, individuals who had only one or two Jewish grandparents were labeled *Mischlinge*. This “mixed-race” class was not initially stripped of their rights, but eventually were to have them curtailed (Ludwig, 2015; Whitman, 2017). However, it is important to remember that Nazi Germany’s anti-Semitism was a combination of racial ideology and paranoid conspiracy theory. Notions of racial defilement, contamination, and impurity combined with tales of an international Jewry

striving for global domination by undermining Germany from within its national borders and body politic (McMillan, 2014). The shame Germany experienced as a result of its surrender during World War I—and therefore the loss of territory, resources, and people—was displaced primarily onto Jewish people (Brenner, 2016). This culminated in policies of extermination legitimated by racial pseudoscience (shame via contamination or miscegenation) and the belief in a Jewish international conspiracy (shame about the engineered surrender).

Accordingly, Jewish people were conceived of as all-powerful puppeteers who pulled the strings of both the democratic capitalist West and the totalitarian Communist East (McMillan, 2014; Mosse, 1978). They were the masterminds behind Germany's shameful surrender and thereby caused World War II. Consequently, the war against international Jewry and World War II were one and the same. As such, the Jewish populations in Germany and abroad were the primary enemy; all Jews were considered enemy combatants (Herf, 2006; McMillan, 2014).

By 1941, Hitler and Goebbels were announcing publicly that the threatened extermination of Jewish people was now part of ongoing official Nazi policy. The regime broadcasted these intentions to its own citizens even if it did not go into detail about the death camps and specifics of the actual genocide. Anti-Semitic propaganda newspapers and wall posters flooded into every public space throughout the Reich—from subway stations to kiosks to hotel lobbies. Yet the fact that the Nazi regime was able to keep the empirical facts and gruesome details about the mass exterminations hidden from the German people and the world to the extent they did, was perhaps the greatest propaganda achievement of the Nazi propaganda war against Jewry (Herf, 2006; Johnson & Reuband, 2005).

Conclusion

If the idea of interacting isolation/rejection and shame/anger and shame/shame spirals

turns out to be a step in the right direction, what kinds of remedies might be possible? For the sake of brevity, I will mention only one: the present educational system is usually shaming to all but the A students. A remedy would be to offer classes to children and young adults that encourage them to notice and acknowledge their emotions.

The movement called Cooperative Learning proposes that both grammar and high school teach about the social-emotional world, in addition to traditional education topics. Although promising in many ways, it is weak with respect to the emotion part. So far there has been only the mere mention, if that, of the names of some of the common emotions, such as anger, grief or fear. That is to say it follows the practice of modern societies of dismissing emotions as unimportant, not referring to them at all, or so briefly as to amount to dismissal. The most effective location for emotion education would probably be high schools, a vale of low grades, cliques and rejection for a substantial part of the student body.

The key knowledge to the cause of WWI is still unknown: which nation first attacked the other, France or Germany? In the absence of this knowledge, most studies end in guessing the answer. Lacking the direct knowledge, perhaps knowledge of motives, as outlined in this paper, may be the next best step. The motivation for Germany to attack France seems to be absent, unlike the clear motivation outlined in this paper for France to attack Germany.

In the long run, the study of emotional causes of war and peace, and especially the part played by revenge, should at least be admitted to the existing approaches in history, political science and the other social and psychological studies. This change needs to be done carefully since the systematic study of emotions is still in its infancy. But in the long run, this change might change the world in a positive way.

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