Psychology of the nuclear threat—2019

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1 | WHAT IS THE FUNDAMENTAL NATURE OF MANKIND?

Freud “struggled to understand and explain the fundamental nature of humankind, the biological bases for aggression and war and the psychological roots of destructive and self-destructive behavior and intent in both the individual and the group.” (Levine & Simon, 1988, p. 2) In his attempts to do so, he was no doubt deeply influenced by his experience of and reaction to the First World War. The devastation and the number of casualties and deaths produced by that war were exponentially greater than any war that had preceded it. (For a very gripping first-hand account of what that war was like at the front lines and in the trenches, see W.R. Bion’s [1997] War Diaries).

Freud’s thoughts about the inherent destructiveness of mankind and the inevitability of war are reflected in his writings on the Death Instinct (e.g., Beyond the Pleasure Principle (Freud, 1920), his Thoughts for the Times on War and Death (Freud, 1915), and his correspondence with Einstein (Freud, 1933). He did not live long enough to see the firebombing of Dresden or Tokyo or the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He did not experience the nuclear arms race with its balance of power resting on a policy called mutually assured destruction or hear warnings that the stockpiles of nuclear weapons in the cold war confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union had grown so large and the possibility of command and control of those weapons had become so fragile and uncertain that any outbreak of hostilities between the two super powers was likely to produce an exchange of nuclear missiles that would produce a condition called “nuclear winter,” and effectively annihilate all of mankind and eliminate life on earth as we know it.

We can only imagine his response, but what of ours? It is striking to note the relative weakness, even absence, of our recognition and response—as citizens and as psychoanalysts—in the face of increasingly overwhelming evidence that the nuclear arms race, which our current president threatens to resume by withdrawing from arms limitation agreements, antiballistic missile treaties and “modernizing” our nuclear arsenal, places us on the brink of world, and self-annihilation. It is hard not to conclude that the failure to confront the enormity of the dangers involved in the nuclear arms race constitutes a very serious example of collective, cultural denial that, in so far as it involves all of us, analysts and patients, spills over into questions of analytic listening stance and technique.

The statesman and political scientist George Kennan (1981) said of the arms race: “We have gone on piling up weapon upon weapon, missile upon missile... like men in a dream [until] today we and the Russians [have attained] levels of redundancy such as to defy rational understanding.” (p. 1). Dreams and the irrational are surely the very things that psychoanalysts ought to have some thoughts of or at least conjectures about. They fall squarely within what we claim to be our area of expertise. And yet, with few exceptions, we have been and continue to be relatively silent about the subject.
In the 1980s, in Boston, the Medical Committee for Human Rights and Physicians for Social Responsibility began to sound the alarm in regard to the dangers of nuclear arms proliferation. Bernard Lown, who was a Harvard Professor of Cardiology and a colleague of Leonid Brezhnev’s Russian cardiologist, began to speak out about the urgency of reducing the nuclear arms race. He would later win a Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts.

Among psychoanalysts, Sybille Escalona, a child analyst in New York, and John Mack, a child and adult analyst, who was then a Harvard Professor and Chair of the Psychiatry Department at Cambridge Hospital, tried to mobilize the analytic and mental health communities by pointing out that the very threat of nuclear war or disaster was already producing negative developmental effects in children and adolescents. Martin Wangh, a German born training analyst at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute, who had barely escaped the Holocaust, suggested that the student rebellion of the 60s was partly a response to and being fueled by uncontrollable anxiety about world destruction that was a direct response to the nuclear threat. In London, Hanna Segal created an organization called the International Psychoanalysts for the Prevention of Nuclear War. (I was its North American Representative). The writings of these four prominent psychoanalysts offer ample examples, clinical and developmental, of the anxiety and attendant disturbances produced in children and adolescents by the arms race, surface nuclear testing, fruitless “duck and cover” drills, and the prospects of world annihilation due to nuclear war.

Influenced by John Mack, Hanna Segal and Physicians for Social Responsibility, I attempted to do my part in addressing the collective denial that existed by consciousness raising within the psychoanalytic community. I formed a discussion group at the BPSI and at the American Psychoanalytic Association meetings on The Psychology of the Nuclear Threat, convened and chaired an international conference in Boston on the subject and along with two colleagues, edited the book, *The Psychology of the Nuclear Threat*, (Levine et al., 1988) from which I will quote extensively in this presentation.

The problem that we face is this:

> What were once fantasies of world destruction and mass annihilation, relegated to the domain of wishes, dreams, and hallucinations, have now become all too plausible.” (Levine & Simon, 1988, p. 1).

> “Confronted with the man-made threat of global destruction, we must ask if we are not, as a species, self-destructive at our core. Over and over again, history teaches the sobering lesson of our capacity for cruelty, self-deception, and irrational behavior. Whether this question is formulated in terms of the death instinct, the need to have enemies, an omnipotent paranoid process, a faith in rebirth after destruction or the possibility of unobstructed reunion with the mother’s womb, the essential question remains: "What are we?" and "How does what we are influence our chances of survival? (Levine et al., 1988a, p. 273).

What follows are a number of hypotheses and conjectures drawn by various authors from clinical material, research interviews and analytic, developmental thinking. They are a starting point for further reflection, consideration, and study. But more pointedly, a starting point in facing the reality of actual, possible world destruction, and overcoming the tendency to react to such horror with splitting, denial and “turning a blind eye” is an urgent and vital necessity.

## 2 | HAS THE PROSPECT OF NUCLEAR WAR CREATED A FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE IN HUMAN PSYCHOLOGY?

In reflecting upon the Holocaust, Theodore Adorno, the German Philosopher, suggested that in the face of such unprecedented cruelty, destruction, and evil, art was perhaps no longer possible. Can we say something analogous in relation to certain previously assumed elements of human psychology after our entrance into the age of the threat of nuclear war?

Hanna Segal (1988) wrote:
The existence of nuclear weapons and the prospect of nuclear war makes impossible either acceptance of death or symbolic survival [as through one's children and subsequent generations]. The prospect of death in atomic warfare leaves an unimaginable void and produces terror of a different kind. (p. 43).

In her view, it places each of us in an internal world akin to that of the schizophrenic:

...the existence of atomic weapons mobilizes and actualizes this world of the schizophrenic. The obliteration of the boundaries between reality and phantasy ... characterizes psychosis. Omnipotence has become real, but only omnipotent destruction. We can, at the push of a button, annihilate the world. In this world of primitive omnipotence, the problem is not of death wishes and a fear of death, which pertain to the depressive and Oedipal world, it is of wishes for annihilation of the self and the world and the terrors associated with them. (Segal, 1988, p. 43).

Segal goes on to note that in addition to the manic excitement of imagined triumph and power over and destruction of one's enemies, there is also apt to be a primitive phantasy of an ideal state that is imagined to follow.

"We are often less aware of the dangers of the nirvana aspect of the death instinct.... [Thus, the appeal of apocalyptic movements] is not only to our destructiveness, but to our longing for eternal peace. First we project our destructiveness into others; then we wish to annihilate them without guilt because they contain all the evil and destructiveness; following that, we shall attain nirvana, eternal peace, union with God. It is the idealization of destruction and death that is so appealing." (Segal, 1988, p. 53).

Does Segal's hypothesis tell us something about the rise and appeal of apocalyptic religious fundamentalism in recent years?

In 1981, Wangh suggested that failure of the parental generation to offer solid reassurance that life on earth would continue produced an anxiety so great and unquenchable in their children that it produced a violent reaction against parental authority and protection/omnipotence and it was that reaction that helped precipitate and fuel the student unrest of the late 1960s and early 70s.

Based on interview studies of school aged children, Sybille Escalona (1963) wrote: "I believe that a consciousness of nuclear danger necessarily weakens and impedes the most useful and constructive processes of identification in school-age children and that it tends to distort normal processes of identity formation in adolescents" (p. 309 in Wangh, 1981).

Wangh (1988) later formulated the change in the psyche produced by the threat of nuclear destruction as follows: "The prospect of world destruction threatens severe damage to a fundamental level of psychological object-bonding, whereby the analyst in the transference represents the significant primary protective parental object." (p. 218). (See also Joseph Sandler's (1960) “background of safety”). Earlier, Wangh (1981) had asserted that the denial of death is a necessary concomitant to bearing ordinary existence and its inherent threats to life. "We must believe that we will exist in the next moment in order not to succumb to total anxiety at the present moment." (p. 321). The threat of total annihilation by nuclear war challenges our belief in continuity of one's family, one's culture, and indeed of the human species itself and makes this temporary and necessary denial of one's own personal mortality impossible. In place of the latter, which we might describe as an adaptive defensive denial, we find the manic, collective denial of the clear and present danger of a much greater magnitude: that of actual world destruction in a nuclear holocaust.

At the clinical level, Wangh (1981, 1988) described an analytic case in which a patient's dream had references to nuclear disaster and associations to memories of bomb drills in school. It was followed by a session in which the patient could neither lie down nor speak but sat up and stared at him the whole hour. In reconsidering what seemed to have been going on, Wangh (1988) writes:

"I might have interpreted: "you feel so isolated recalling your psychical experience during the terrible events to which the dream relates, the disastrous days of your sibling's birth, and the frightening times of the
nuclear bomb drills in kindergarten that you had to pause in your routine psychoanalytic pursuit and reassure yourself, by facing me and staring at me, that I am still present and tangible.” (p. 220).

Wangh’s interpretation, which weaves together the conflicts of past intra-familial trauma (around the birth of a sibling) with the real traumatic threat to personal and world survival in the face of the nuclear threat, and their implications for the here and now of the analytic transference, illustrates the complexities of dealing analytically with these matters. It also leads us to the next topic of whether or how elements of the nuclear threat may appear in the clinical hour and how they might be interpreted.

3 | DENIAL, TURNING A BLIND EYE, AND ANALYTIC TECHNIQUE

The question we must consider is this:

“Are the anxiety and anguish that we and our patients may, at times, feel about the actual events of our historical epoch to be considered merely a day residue and compromise formation, or do they possess a potentially pathogenic and character shaping impact in their own right?” (Levine et al., 1988a, p. 273).

In discussing the inability of Germany in its cultural and intellectual discourse—including analytic discourse—to begin to come to terms with its role in the Holocaust, Alexander Mitscherlisch, the German psychoanalyst, suggested that typically there is a 20- to 25-year latency period before one can begin to overcome the denial of a traumatic event of that magnitude. As unimaginable as it might now seem, I was once told by Anna Ornstein that her training analyst did not ask a single question or make a comment to her about her experience in Auschwitz! Similarly, another colleague told me that during her candidacy that took place in the 70s or early 80s, a respected senior supervisor once told her that any reference to real life, current, or historical world traumatic situations, such as the nuclear threat, should always be assumed to be screens for internal conflicts and taken up for what they symbolized and not in their own right, in ways that we would treat the manifest content of a dream. (I would challenge that assertion of “always” on both counts, but general issues of dream analysis and how manifest content is best treated are topics that extend beyond the scope of this paper).

In the interviews that Wangh (1981) conducted, he described that his subjects demonstrated fear, anxiety, tearfulness, denial, and so on when discussing the prospects of nuclear war. However, despite these obvious signs of emotional engagement and distress, they all reported that in their individual therapies or analysis, “these matters which in our present interchange aroused in them so much has found no place in the course of their individual treatments.” (p. 314). Could this failure be ascribed to the cultural collective denial that affects analysts as well as patients?

Ultimately, Wangh (1981) suggested that although the news reporting related to the nuclear arms race and nuclear threat can operate as a day residue for repressed infantile conflicts, the derivatives and residues of repressed infantile conflicts and traumatic memories can also surface and act as a screen memory behind which the terrors of world destruction and total annihilation remain hidden. Vamik Volkan (1988) came to a similar conclusion when he argued: "There is a twofold reason for defensive avoidance of the actual danger. One is its own inherent traumatic potential; the other is its symbolic equivalence to the inner danger that it has come to represent." (p. 127). And John Mack (1988) offered further assent when he noted that references to the nuclear threat may be seen both as the reflection of a menacing reality with psychological impact and clinical and developmental implications in its own right and as the expression of underlying intrapsychic conflicts, notably those around separation, autonomy, aggression, personal vulnerability (trauma), and the wish for protection.

Looking at the subsequent and current analytic literature and noting the relative absence of references to and studies concerning the nuclear threat and its deleterious consequences, it is difficult not to conclude that collective denial of the danger is still a very real and present problem. There seems to be an inability—or refusal—to recognize and address the emotional implications of the nuclear threat.
Hanna Segal (1988) characterized this failure or refusal to see as “turning a blind eye,” a form of splitting in which “we retain intellectual knowledge of the reality but divest it of emotional meaning.” (p. 38). In her view, in the analytic situation, it is the analyst’s job to confront this turning a blind eye, like any other form of denial. “To be acquainted with facts and recognize psychic facts, which we, of all people know something about, and to have the courage to try to state them clearly, is in fact the psychoanalytic stand. We must face our fears and mobilize our forces against destruction. And we must be heard.” (Segal, 1988, p. 49).

Segal no doubt meant for us to be heard on the political and historical stage, as well as within the analytic setting, but the latter prospect raises concerns in the minds of many analysts. What of the time honored principles of neutrality and abstinence? Should we hesitate to speak out in public? And hesitate even more before we bring up the absence of reference to social and political problems in the analytic setting?

“Neutrality” implies that analysts do not intrude into the analytic space. But is the potential of nuclear weapons for destroying the world already intruding into and disrupting the safety of that space? Is the construct of a socially, culturally, and politically neutral analytic setting now a fantasy that no longer applies, one that embodies the wish that the outside world can be ignored, denied, or wished away? (Levine & Simon, 1988, p. 5). These are questions that we must struggle with and try to understand and perhaps try to resolve, as a field and individually each in our own consulting rooms.

4 | LESSONS FOR A PSYCHOANALYTIC POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY

The belief that nuclear strategy and war fighting policy is or will follow rational assumptions and proceed along rational lines has long been discredited. Daniel Ellsberg’s courageous and powerful book, The Doomsday Machine, only underlines this fact. As Wangh noted in 1981, “The actuality of Man’s ability to destroy himself exists right now. Attempts to minimize the threat by deluding oneself that a war can be limited by the production of smaller bombs or neutron bombs, etc. all have their origin in the need to deny the truth of the total self-destructive potential.” (p. 321).

Segal (1988) added that “preparing for war, projective mechanisms, a balance of power based on ‘mutually assured destruction’ and fear of the enemy having a ‘first strike superiority’ all promote the danger on either side of a preemptive strike out of fear. Hatred leads to fear, and fear to hatred, in an ever-widening vicious circle. We are like lemmings, pursuing a path to racial suicide, blind to what we are doing” (p. 37).

The late Blema Steinberg (1988), who was both a political scientist and a psychoanalyst concluded: “The realities of superpower weaponry and politics in the nuclear age are such, ...that the destiny of one side (and its survival) is inevitably bound to the behavior of the other .... True escape from dependence on a hated and feared enemy, made more seemingly dangerous by being the repository of our own projections, is impossible.” (p. 145). She further noted that “in our attempts to cope, we use a combination of denial and wishful fantasy—the blind eye and the exaggerated claims for competing nuclear strategies to protect ourselves from the anxiety of knowing our helplessness.” (Steinberg, 1988, pp. 145–146).

Anticipating the revelations that we find described in detail in Ellsberg’s (2017) book, she also advanced the following three propositions:

1. “We have ample evidence that policy makers are prone to distort reality in accordance with their psychological needs even in situations that appear relatively unambiguous.” (Steinberg, 1988, p. 148).
2. “The evidence is overwhelming that nuclear war could not be kept limited” (Steinberg, 1988, p. 150). This, despite the persistent use to develop and talk about “limited nuclear weapons,” “nuclear field weapons,” “counterforce strategy,” anti-ballistic missile shields, and so on.
3. Despite all the assumptions about nuclear command and control involving “rational actors,” the fact is that “a major war is unlikely to arise from careful calculations, but rather from loss of control, misperceptions, and unintended calculations” (Steinberg, 1988, p. 162). (See Stanley Kubrick’s movie, Dr. Strangelove). We are talking
about a loss of control of subordinates' actions that leaders are unaware of or unable to control. (Steinberg, 1988, p. 163).

5 | (IN) CONCLUSION

An essay such as this on a subject such as this does not easily draw the author or the reading audience toward “conclusions.” It would be naïve—and neglectful of history—to assume that “now that we all know what the problem is, we will go out and do something about it.” Is this subject really any different from the discussions of climate change, racism, fascism, classism, economic imperialism, xenophobia, genocide, and other such topics?

What can discussions such as this possibly do? Will they alert and mobilize the audience and stir some to constructive action? That remains to be seen.

During the Viet Nam war, I joined so many others and actively participated in the anti-war movement. Our actions took place in a larger cultural context that recognized the problem and opposed it out of a wish to create meaningful change. And yet, the movement that we participated in was something that did not exist before someone started it and the rest of us joined. I suppose what I am saying is that it is not so different from the analytic situation: The analyst helps point something out, that can plant a seed and agitate inside the patient for a change and for engagement. What, if anything, happens then is up to the patient. What, if anything will happen next, is up to all of us. We will have to see.

REFERENCES


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