

Psychiatric Aspects of Nuclear War¹

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INTRODUCTION

The motives behind the nuclear arms race seem so irrational that they virtually cry out for satirical portrayal. A few years ago, therefore, I wrote a book with the following satirical storyline: At some time in the distant future, intelligent creatures from another star land on our planet earth, which is still contaminated by radioactivity. They find no human beings. By archeological exertions, however, they do succeed, after some little time, in reconstructing more or less how the extinct human race once lived. In the course of their investigations, though, they run up against a perplexing puzzle: Apparently these human earth-creatures had at one time developed highly sophisticated cultures. They had invented astonishing devices to make their lives easier. They had taken the most elaborate steps to avoid accidents and natural disasters. And thanks to magnificent medical knowledge, they had eradicated many diseases, thus continually extending their life spans. Admittedly, the luxuries of life and medical care clearly had been distributed very unevenly over the earth's surface. But, in precisely those areas that were especially advanced economically, technologically, and medically—in precisely those areas, human beings had meticulously and over several generations made preparations for their own destruction and, at the same time, for the annihilation of all other living creatures around them.

I allowed the alien creatures to discover quite early on that the peoples of the East and West were enemies in the final period of life on earth. Each side had developed a particular politicoeconomic system which was despised by the other side. The peoples had trained themselves to see in their own system only the good points and in the other system only the faults. But each side seemed to be certain of one thing—that the opposing system was inherently unstable and incapable of lasting long. Accordingly, it would have been sensible to wait patiently for these processes of internal decay which each expected in the other or, alternatively, to wait for constructive social change. Had there not even been a partial approximation of the two systems in the final period of life on earth? Each side had subscribed to the principle of growth, the cultivation of which automatically led to structural similarities between them.

So why on earth should they have set upon one another, in the full knowledge that they were thus inevitably conjuring up their own nuclear destruction? In the

end, the extraterrestrials become resigned and agree that the human race, now lost and gone, must have had a mental apparatus different from their own, an apparatus that allowed them, admittedly, to think in logical sequences and to make astonishing technological inventions, but which—inexplicably—did not prevent them from destroying themselves along with all other life on earth.

You have had no difficulty in recognizing that this macabre satirical story is not, unlike other fictions, intended to make an oppressive reality less burdensome: On the contrary, it is intended to make this reality even more painfully clear. Its intention is only to underscore what leading peace researchers, scientists, computer experts, and sociologists are continually telling us—that nuclear militarization, with prospects of extending even into outer space, is consciously producing risks that go beyond the bounds of human control.

It may well be that in the near future, the leaders of the superpowers will agree, in a series of spectacular treaties, to the limitation of individual nuclear potentials. At the same time, however, we are even now being prepared by calculated propaganda to accept the notion that a new arms race in space is inevitable. The government of the United States is saying that its Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) program is not a subject for negotiation. It justifies the program, it is true, by pointing to its purely defensive intentions. The system is supposed to intercept hostile missiles early on, thus allegedly putting an end to the age of nuclear threat. But why does the same government then commission the construction of so-called strategic stealth bombers? These, as we are told by reliable sources, are bomber planes that can hardly be picked up by enemy defense systems—or at least cannot be picked up in time—because of their reduced radar, heat, electronic, and acoustic radiation. There is, therefore, no serious attempt to put an end to the age of nuclear threat: Instead, these practically invisible strategic bombers are creating a new dimension of menace. Since up to now, the one side has always caught up any lead the other side might have had in weapons technology—or has even taken the lead itself in turn—we are most probably heading for a new dimension of the arms race, both in the militarization of outer space and in the production of modern, less-vulnerable, offensive systems.

PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Now, we physicians who are part of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), together with groups of natural scientists, church people, and other forces within the peace movement, have been trying for years to expose the deadly absurdity of this megalomaniac nuclear policy to our fellows. Various surveys confirm that large areas of the population agree with our assertion that a nuclear war could only mean the end of humankind altogether and that no medical or other civil defense measures could do anything to change the picture. There is no logical argument to refute our thesis that the continual intensification of a threat one cannot carry out is inherent nonsense—all the more so because the secure prevention of a disaster due to technical error is becoming more and more questionable. Nevertheless, there is no overlooking the fact, which so perplexed those fictitious extraterrestrial beings, that the majority of

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peoples still permit actions in their name that logically they should be united in resisting.

It is a small wonder, therefore, that in recent years a good number of psychiatrists and psychologists have concerned themselves with this problem. In most cases, they try to explain to us how it is that human beings do not want to see that which lies in store for them—or at least unconsciously suppress it. For this phenomenon the psychologists have a series of logical interpretations at the ready. For example, they argue that we clearly are not equipped to confront for any length of time a fear that goes beyond our physiological powers of imagination. They contend that the nuclear danger is too abstract for us to grasp with our senses. Or again they say that many people are calmed down by the belief that a nuclear war is too irrational to be seriously intended by anyone. And, if nobody understands it, then it won't take place, however many nuclear weapons are stockpiled. These and other forms of playing down, suppressing, or denying the nuclear danger are described to make more comprehensible the mass phenomenon of indifference and insensibility.

Such work, however, is not fully satisfying insofar as it always inquires into only one side of the issue—into our secondary reactions to the nuclear threat—the threat itself were a given fact and cannot be included in the research into motives. If the fear of nuclear armament is unable to put an effective brake on the development of armament, then the reason for this is that, in many of us, a counterforce is at work, a counterforce that affirms and says “yes” to armament. It is, however, an unpleasant business for anyone—psychologists and psychiatrists included—to make this counterforce an explicit subject of discussion. So, it is considered an honorable and even legally slanderous insult to say of a person that he or she does not want peace. It is a profound contradiction of the conventional image we have of ourselves if we concede that we have a latent tendency which I should like to term *psychological militarism*. And yet, it is clear to one and all that the nuclear arms race is not forced upon humankind by an all-powerful gang of conspirators, but is consciously aided and supported by the peoples themselves.

In both the East and the West a vast number of human beings decide to carry out activities by which, directly or indirectly, they are assisting and furthering the nuclear arms race. They are the people who invent the weapons, who manufacture them, who decide to finance them. According to fairly reliable estimates, at least one-third of U.S. and Soviet scientists and engineers are indirectly or directly concerned with military research. In the United States, we know that 46% of the total value that the entire manufacturing industry currently spends on research and development is directed to the military sector, and that military expenditure in the Soviet Union represents a disproportionate burden on their budget is also well known. Science, technology, and military machines owe their structures, their goals, and their existence not to any fateful forces coming from without, but to the mass will of human beings. None of our self-deceptions is as perfect in its functioning and as self-laden in its effects as the notion that the gigantic militarization of society is justified and carried out over the heads of the nations or even against their will.

What are the human impulses that sustain this process? Not so long ago,

the nation of which I am a citizen gave the world, in fearful and extreme form, a graphic example of psychological militarism which can be interpreted as a model case. Understandable though it is to hope that the phenomenon of Hitler's fascism with its attendant crimes can never repeat itself, we should beware of dismissing it as a bizarre special case made possible only by the pathological exceptions that were Hitler and the particular historical and sociopsychological circumstances in Germany at the time. Certainly, there were special conditions then which made the Germans especially susceptible to Hitler: the unsuccessful attempts to establish a democracy, the resentment arising from the blow inflicted on national pride by the defeat in war and by Versailles, a bleak economic crisis, and, not least, a national tradition of militarism. Yet, these external conditions, together with the particular sociopsychological factors, merely provided a particularly fertile breeding ground for explosive aggressive energies which are continually present in all of us and which have their part to play if we are to understand the current affirmation of nuclear armament policy.

Let me now use the model of national socialism to make clear two motifs characteristic of an irrational psychological militarism. First, there is the readiness of individuals, as parts of a collective whole, to allow themselves to be persuaded that it is just and right to ruthlessly enact desires for grandeur and power. What occurs in this process is something like an externalization of the superego, an unconscious abandonment of personal responsibility; it is an abandonment for which the individual is compensated by the hope of participating, as part of the collective, in magnificent communal triumphs, the like of which he grievously misses in his individual day-to-day life. This process, which I have called an “abandonment of rights,” weakens or eliminates personal scruples of the conscience when it comes to affirming participation in the aggressive expansion of the collective. The process can go to the extent of moral perversion, as Hannah Arendt has shown in the case of Nazi criminals: For them, not to murder becomes an immoral temptation if the murdering has been declared to be a collective duty (1).

The other motive is closely connected with the myth of heroism. The enactment of aggression is given a moral afterglow by the sanctifying of its end. Participation in the aggressive expansion of the collective becomes a noble struggle for good and against evil. The highest virtue is now to commit oneself in this struggle by placing one's own life at stake, by being prepared, at any moment, to sacrifice oneself. The myth of heroism states that if you cannot be victorious, you must at least go down fighting with courage. Eventually this idea of sacrifice can become the guiding motive for a large collective itself: In such cases, it is no longer the individual who sacrifices himself to ensure the victory of the whole, but all the members of the whole who accept communal destruction so as not to capitulate to the forces of evil.

We Germans find it extremely difficult, even now, to face up to the psychological background of our Nazi past, because it seems almost unbearable to explain the crimes committed under the Nazi regime and finally even Auschwitz as the ultimate product of an ideology which, at the time, dominated not only a small

group of leaders but broad sections of the population. Even now, many still resolutely refuse to recognize themselves or their fathers and mothers as the people who made possible everything that happened in Hitler's Reich. If they had their way, they would treat this episode as an inexplicable deviation, like a bout of illness, or would distance it from themselves as the isolated deeds of an unscrupulous gang of criminals. I, too, having lived under Hitler as a boy and later as a soldier, would at one time have gladly taken refuge in some such exonerating theory. Together with a growing number of my fellow countrymen, however, and especially with my fellow countrymen in the IPPNW, I now believe that it is, on the contrary, only by making a thorough and unsparing analysis of the German Nazi past that we can and should make a substantial contribution to the preventive unmasking and combatting of new varieties of psychological militarism. We believe a meaningful way of coming to terms with our guilt and our shame is to get out from our national past those driving forces that would have made the crimes then committed far, far worse had the development of technology allowed.

In any event, this work of remembrance teaches one to look with concern and anxiety at countries where political concepts are again involved in an uncritical idealization of their own nation, social structure, ideology, race, or religion and are deriving from this a justification for claims to absolute power. And one feels an unease when it is declared that a credible deterrent involves, if need be, carrying out the nuclear threat, to protect the values that one's own side stands for—that is, risks wiping out the culture and the values that one is allegedly intending to defend. Anyone who does not keep his hands over his ears is in point of fact continually receiving evidence of the virulence of these two elements of psychological militarism. Who cannot call to mind those political propaganda speeches in which it is again and again asserted that one's own idealized side must arm itself with new nuclear weapons to preserve its superior stature and strength? And, on the other hand, there are echoes of the pseudoheroic myth of sacrifice when the conscious risk involved in a credible nuclear deterrent is idealized as a virtue—as if the choice here were between courage and cowardice instead of between homicidal or suicidal madness on the one hand and prudent reason on the other. This is the deception that is propagated by the customary attempt to portray a modern war of annihilation as merely a large-scale version of an historical pitched battle or even as a Rambo scenario. There are nations of whom Mark Gerzon (2) rightly states in his book, "A Choice of Heroes": "They refuse to allow the mechanized, technological reality of a modern war to destroy the illusion of men that war is an heroic affair. This brutal reality must be suppressed."

It is downright embarrassing to see how much enthusiasm leading politicians can sometimes stir up with speeches in which they address their populations as if they were nothing more than a mass of adolescent would-be heroes who want to bolster their uncertain potency and their uncertain identity in the intoxication of patriotic megalomania—and this at a moment of world history in which what is called for is not such adolescent adventuring, but the utmost mature, social responsibility and reason. In the long run, however, it is perhaps not in this crude,

primitive variant but in another form that modern psychological militarism is more dangerous. What I have in mind is militarism in technological disguise.

I spoke earlier of Germans abandoning their personal responsibility under Hitler. By delegating their own responsibility to their Führer, a vast number of Germans were able to "launder" their own aggression, just as today we speak of the "laundering" of dirty money. In the meantime, however, an even more refined "laundry for aggression" has come to the fore: high-level technological armament itself. This anonymous process, in which millions of workers, scientists, technicians, and bureaucrats participate, and which leads year by year to the development and mass production of even more brutal weapons of destruction, absorbs psychological aggression invisibly. Thus, each tiny part of these giant modern machines of destruction contains—however invisible it may be—a component of destructive human energy. And, in a paradoxical kind of way, it is normal if the immense numbers of helpers, who somewhere in industry or in the bureaucracy assist in one minute partial step in the production of these monsters of destruction, should lose sight during their work of the abominable suffering to which the endproduct of their actions is destined. This behavior, admittedly, is normal only in the sense that circumstances made it all too easy for the individual to aid and abet the process of which his inconspicuous personal act is ultimately a part.

What we have here, therefore, is a *reification* of psychological militarism, a reification that makes it well-nigh unrecognizable. Day in and day out, millions upon millions of people are involved in shifting mankind that little bit nearer to the brink of the inferno without, in the process, thinking of anything other than doing a decent job in a decent way.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Despite everything, there are increasing signs that more and more people are feeling an unease at the politics of the nuclear arms race. They are terrified by the destructive forces which are being stockpiled in their name in insane quantities. They view them as the expression of a disastrous megalomania in which they no longer wish to have any part. And they can see through the perniciousness of a general attitude that is bent only on winning and capturing instead of on the further development of human solidarity and respect for life. It is no coincidence, therefore, that this critical movement is borne above all by those social groupings that have a special concern for charity, for the care and protection of life, or by such groupings as have made these things their concern. As you know, we find here the peace women, political groups with an especially humanist note, diverse groups from the various churches, and not least our own physicians' movement, the IPPNW, founded and led successfully by Drs. Bernard Lown and Evgeni Chazov. But all these groups—the IPPNW included—are of themselves too weak to hold in check the ruling machines of power in our societies and to prevent them from continuing the deadly nuclear competition. For the time being, therefore, we physicians in the IPPNW must see our most important opportunity in acting as a kind of "obstetrician" or "midwife" to promote processes of re-

inking all around us. That is to say, we must help people far and wide to open their eyes and to free themselves from the dubious ideals of psychological militarism.

What up to now has made the task of psychological obstetrics so difficult for the IPPNW and for other groups in the peace movement has been not least the abstractness of the nuclear risk. The tragedy at Chernobyl, however, has brought about a dramatic change here. For the first time, it has been brought home graphically to many millions of people that the nuclear danger is something that does not divide the nations but joins them together. In places far away from the country of origin of the disaster, mothers learned that they should not allow their children to play in the irradiated sand in front of their houses, should not use green vegetables grown in their home country, and should beware of heavy radiation in milk. In addition, there was an international wave of sympathy for the immediately affected parts of the Soviet population. It was shocking to see the powerlessness of medicine. No doctor would be able to protect the thousands of radiation victims from developing, after a latent period of several years, either leukemia or other forms of cancer. It required the international cooperation of top medical specialists to treat just the most acute cases—and even those with doubtful prospects of success. Although, on the one hand, there was a consoling symbolic value in U.S. and Soviet doctors coming together to offer help at the bedside of the severely irradiated victims, one could not help being shocked at seeing, on the other hand, how slight the medical possibilities were, even under optimal institutional conditions and after a nuclear accident of such limited proportions. Everyone could see that there was a need for worldwide meetings and agreements to prevent a further accident of the kind that had only just been averted at Three-Mile Island and was not able to be averted at Chernobyl. One may doubt—as many of us do—whether international agreements and the exchanges of technological know-how, however intensive they may be, can really dispel the dangers of the civil nuclear industry. But, everyone can see that preventive cooperation across the ideological frontiers is a necessity if anything is to be achieved at all. So, is it not a macabre piece of illogic if in our nuclear armaments we contradict precisely that principle of cooperation and mutual aid that we have recognized as vital for the control of the civil nuclear industry? Is it not hell-nigh insane if, at the same time, we are threatening one another with radioactive clouds of our own military making—clouds whose intensity and extent, any thousand times more severe than those of Chernobyl, would ravage the peoples in all parts of the earth?

Hitherto, psychological militarism outweighed the fear of disaster. But now, in numerous countries, Chernobyl has mobilized suppressed fear and has simultaneously brought about an awareness that this fear, or this objective peril, is something the nations have in common. If nuclear energy for civil purposes is itself difficult to hold in check, then how much of a threat are the 50,000 nuclear warheads, which could go off if the policy of deterrence fails or if there is a technical slip?

The notion that nuclear saber-rattling has something heroic and audacious about it is a self-deception: From a psychiatric viewpoint it is a collectively dis-

seminated neurotic pubertal fantasy. Over and above this, it is a form of disavowed resignation. It is the flight of the discouraged away from mighty social tasks, whose solution is far more urgent than the spending of billions of dollars on militarizing outer space as well. Poverty and wretched health in many parts of the world, the suppression of minorities and of basic human rights, and not least, the alarming rate of environmental destruction—all these are problems from which we faintheartedly shy away, by denying them the efforts and resources that we channel into nuclear armament. If we continue down this road, then one day those fictitious extraterrestrial creatures may be right to ascertain that despite all our official statements, we had no desire to go on living. The wrong direction we have taken may be interpreted as tragic, as pitiful, or as psychopathological, according to one's viewpoint. Still, however, we just have time to turn back, to set course resolutely for international political cooperation, for cooperation whose aim no longer is to destroy, but to rescue and to care for endangered life on our planet.

REFERENCES

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