

# **Reflections on the Psychological and Psychohistorical Causes of the War in Ukraine and of Wars in General**

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## **Part I: The war in Ukraine has its background in the extreme traumatisations in the history of the Russian population and in the family of Putin**

The question "Why do wars occur?" is usually discussed from the point of view of power politics. However, psychological and psychohistorical aspects obviously play a role as well. This is particularly clear in the case of the current war in Ukraine, which, according to Putin's statements, is intended to prevent a genocide of the Russian population planned by the Nazis in Ukraine (Bloomberg Quick Take, March 2, 2022, [www.bloomberg.com](http://www.bloomberg.com)). With regard to fear of genocide, Putin is speaking here from the experience of his parents. The city of Leningrad did experience a nearly genocide during Hitler's attempt to conquer the Soviet Union. The means to this aim was the starvation of the population by encircling the city cutting it off from all supplies. In reality, this meant an extremely traumatic burden for Putin's parents - his mother barely escaped starvation, one of Putin's older brothers starved to death, his father lost five older brothers in the war and suffered a serious war injury himself defending Leningrad (Fuchs 2022). The father of Putin allegedly forced the pregnancy against the mother's will, as she is said to have testified to a friend. After the war, both parents had to work in a factory and could hardly take care of the boy, who therefore grew up on the streets in the milieu of violent youth gangs. He had difficulties at school (Sadovnikova 2017). According to credible testimony, he was in a sense "saved" by a female teacher who took care of the disadvantaged boy and systematically encouraged him (Fuchs 2022). Putin was born seven years after the end of the war, but nevertheless experienced the effects of the traumatization of his parents and the Leningrad population, half of whom starved to death during the siege. This background of traumatization for Putin's family has its counterpart in the extreme traumatization of Russian society as a whole: the oppressive structures of the violent tsarist rule with its devastating effects on the situation of children (Lincoln 1981, Ihanus 2001a, 2001b, 2016) were followed by the Stalinist tyranny with about 750,000 executions in the show trials during the "Great Terror" at the end of the 1930s, a Gulag

system with 17 million prisoners under predominantly inhumane conditions (Baberwoski 2003) as well as the German army's 'war of extermination' with the deaths of 20 million Russian soldiers and 7 million civilians. Today, we know from research about the effects of psychotraumatic stress in the form of anxiety, depression, and insecurities on the one hand, and the disposition to commit violent acts on the other (Scheinost et al. 2017, Van den Berg et. al. 2017, Mareckova et al. 2018, Van der Kolk 2021, et al.).

However, these insights were gained in the treatment of victims of violent experiences at the individual level. I believe, that these insights can also be applied to the traumatization of large groups and societies. So far, however, people have shied away from such a transfer because they do not want to stigmatize a society as "sick". Avoiding findings about the mental devastation caused by wars and acts of violence leads to the truth being obscured. The journalist and historian Sebastian Hafner once said in a conversation that it was agreed to "forget" the tremendous atrocities committed during a war after it was over. However, this kind of forgetting prevents a real understanding of the dynamic background of violent behaviour in wars. The war may be over on the outside, but the traumas are stored in emotional and bodily memory, as research on post-traumatic stress syndrome or PTSD has shown (Fischer, Riedesser 1989, Hermann 2018, Van der Kolk 2021, a.o.). Such traumas influence the experience to live in danger, to be threatened and that is necessary to defend against these threats as it is the case in the experience of Putin. This leads to the broader background of wars.

## **Part II: The Causes of Wars**

It is an unfortunate interplay of different factors which have been studied separately in the fields of evolutionary biology, developmental psychology, cultural psychology, social psychology and psychohistory, but which can be brought together today, that account for the origins of war. Only such a transdisciplinary approach can do justice to the complexity of understanding war.

**A first basic cause:** We, as humans, are primates whose behavior is oriented for life in small groups. The invention of agriculture and animal husbandry and the resulting enormous increase in population led to the development of large groups which, in the context of patriarchal cultural development since about 3500 BC, could only be held together by male violence (Lerner 1995). This had the consequence that male rivalries, which could be mediated in a small primate group, led to the dysfunctional warfare between competing male-dominated large groups.

**A second cause:** because of the helplessness of human babies they needed a protective parental relationship. But not until the second half of last century the adults had no knowledge on the cognitive level of the emotional and relational needs of the children. Under good conditions they had only readiness to care for the outer needs of the children. This meant, that early development of children was associated with massive traumatization and the associated dispositions to violence (DeMause 1979, 2002, Fuchs 2019). This is another background for the destructive violence in war enactments. I will now summarize the causes of wars in eight theses on the psychological and psychohistorical theories about the causes of wars.

**Thesis 1. *A first evolutionary background:*** A significant aspect of life in a primate group is the rivalry struggles of the males; who is on top of the hierarchy, who is threatening whom? (de Waal 2009, a.o.). These effects from the instinctual program play a role in human societies at various levels, just as they do in the relationship between nations led by men. For example, the German Empire at the beginning of the last century felt too little seen and recognized as a great power, and similarly Russia today feels too little seen and recognized as a world power. This is one background, for the topic of the so-called "power aspects", but they are usually discussed without this instinctive background (Tinbergen 1966). In addition, these power aspects are rooted in developmental psychology, which I discuss below.

**Thesis 2. *A second evolutionary background:*** another aspect of life in a primate group is that in case of attacks from outside, the male members of the group stick together in fighting and defending the group, or even attacking another group. This is the instinctive urge to follow the leader in a threatening situation and to fight against an attacker (de Waal 2009, for the biology of instincts (see Tinbergen 1966). This can unleash unimagined forces, as was the case in the so-called "Great Patriotic War" of the Russians in World War II, where a German army that thought itself militarily superior failed because of the elementary determination of the Russian soldiers to defend their homeland or "fatherland." We observe the same now in the resistance of Ukrainians against the Russian invasion.

**Thesis 3. *A psychological background:*** For evolutionary reasons, human birth has the peculiarity that pregnancy in the course of evolution is shortened by about twelve months because of the fixed pelvic ring required by the upright gait and the growth of the brain, so that the children are born in an immature and unfinished state (Portmann 1969, Gould 1992, Haeusler et al. 2021). In particular, the prefrontal cortex is not yet functional, so that

newborns and infants experience themselves and their environment in a dreamlike manner at a sensory and affective functional level determined by the brain stem and midbrain (Portmann 1969). This is why the care of the parents is so important in the first year, because it must replace the lack of neurological maturity so that the child can develop. Because of this elementary dependence of the child, deficiencies in this care often have a traumatic effect on the child, more than is often realized.

These connections are not yet sufficiently represented in the political and social sciences, nor in the public consciousness. This has the consequence that parents cannot reflect on their own early childhood traumatization; therefore, in earlier times they passed it on by letting the babies cry and beating them, whereas today it is the over-early leaving them alone that is the problem. Under the earlier working and living conditions parents were overburdened by work and therefore was not enough time and capacity for the children, while today the parents are often so stressed by the complexity of life's demands that there is too little time left for the children.

**Thesis 4. *A cultural background:*** because of the unfinishedness at birth, humans are not adapted to their environment by their instincts, as other mammals are, but have from this unfinishedness the constant impulse to reshape the world in such a way that it feels or even is to some extent like the womb world lost too early (Janus 2018a, 2021a). This was initially done through the magical and mythical worldviews that provided protection by higher beings. One tried by incantations, sacrifices, and rites to induce the higher beings to help. Because these magical and mythical attempts to compensate were helpful on the emotional level but failed on the real level, people developed their own world of nourishment and protection through the use of fire, the invention of clothing and shelters and later of agriculture and animal husbandry. Urban settlements happened only in the last 12,500 years, first in the Neolithic matrifocal cultures (Gimbutas 1996, Göttner-Abendroth 2019), and then from 3500 BC in patriarchal cultures (Meier-Seethaler 1993, Lerner 1995).

**5. *A sociological background:*** On the level of animistic tribal cultures, the whole world was still experienced as a magically animated womb, as for example in the "Dreamtime" of the Aborigines in Australia. The world was on the one hand real reality and was at the same time a kind of continuation of the prenatal environment. In urban cultures, these two dimensions of existence were more clearly separated as a magical-mythical otherworld and an earthly thisworld. The otherworld was located on Olympus or in heaven and its denizens experienced

happiness, while the thisworld was characterized by the hardship, powerlessness, and helplessness. This dichotomy of world experience was reflected in the contrast between the splendor of temples and palaces on the one hand, and the misery of the earthly living world on the other; along with the differences between priests and believers and masters and servants. These social enactments emotionally bridged the gap between the prenatal afterworld and the postnatal thisworld. Because of the new inventions in all areas of life, the equilibrium of these cultural designs was endangered again and again, so that conflicts could turn into acts of violence. The change into violence reproduced the early traumatic developmental conditions, which were not represented on a linguistic level and therefore could only be reflected inwardly. The problem for society arises from the fact that external reality is perceived to a greater or lesser extent as a mirror of internal contents experienced in a trance-like manner; and that action is taken on the basis of this perception. For example, the consequences of violent upbringing in Germany before the First World War (Ende 1997, DeMause 1979) was reflected in German society's collective fantasy of being existentially threatened from all sides. The collective experience of parental violent behavior colored and shaped adult's perception of the world. It is the same situation we have currently in Russia (Ihanus 2001a, 2001b, 2016). We know from psychotherapeutic experience the extent to which early childhood experiences shape adult experience and perception. This is equally true, as psychohistorical research has shown, of collective childhood experiences. Another example would be the trance-like fantasies with their echo of Putin's parents' experience of an impending genocide by the Nazis imagined as coming from the present day Ukraine. These fantasies, in turn, interact with the similar traumatic experiences of much of the older Russian population (Ihanus 2016, Janus 2021b). Additional there are many observations from treatment with victims of violence that show that the experiences of grandparents and parents can be passed on transgenerationally (Drexler 2020, Hoover, Metz 2021). Only inner awareness and reflection on the experiences can enable successful processing. It seems only logical to me to use these insights for understanding the collective behavior of societies.

**Thesis 6.** *A psycho-historical background:* Because of the constant expansion of the space of action through ever new inventions in the course of history, a constant change of living conditions and social relations is taking place. A general line of historical development consists of an expansion of the introspective space in order to be able to represent and handle the more complex living conditions (Obrist 1988, 2013, Janus 2013). At the neurological level, this meant an increase in the importance of the prefrontal cortex as the organ of this

internal representation. This led, first, to the revolutionary inventions of agriculture and animal husbandry that made possible the great urban settlements. Then, in Greek philosophy, in a first attempt, and then again in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, in a second attempt, there was an increased orientation toward reason. As a result, especially in the last century, the development of science and technology led to rapid progress in weaponry, which resulted in the industrialized killings of modern warfare. Usually, these events are described as external. However, this ignores the fact that in the course of history people not only reshaped the external world, but also reshaped themselves (Dinzelbacher 1993, Jaynes 1993, Österdieckhoff 2013, Janus 2013, 2019, 2020, Gilchrist 2019). This happened in intimate interaction with the transformation of the world. By inventing the handling of fire, clothing, dwellings, etc., people gained a whole new agency and also experienced themselves in a whole new way. For the understanding of wars, the emergence of patriarchal social structures and their corresponding mentalities is a particularly striking event, as will be explained in the following section.

**Thesis 7.** *The background of the patriarchal social structures:* In the middle of the fourth millennium B.C., due to the success of cattle breeding and agriculture, there was a great increase in population. These groups could only be held together by male hierarchies and violence (Lerner 1995, Meier-Seethaler 1993, et al.). This resulted in a deformation of man-woman relationships with a massive devaluation of the female and maternal sphere and also in a disastrous deterioration of the primary mother-child relationship, which in turn resulted in an increase in aggression in society, as exemplified by the Homeric epic of the Iliad.

**Thesis 8.** *A mentality-historical background:* The history of the modern world is still marked by the echo of an archaic medieval mentality with its mixture of the inner and outer world. External events could be perceived in the echo of internal affects and feelings, and especially of affects and feelings from unprocessed traumatic experiences from pre-linguistic times. Thus, in earlier times, archaic feelings of annihilation and corresponding impulses of annihilation could be acted out in the form of persecutions of heretics and burnings of witches (DeMause 1996). However, in recent centuries, the increase in technical knowledge and social security has led to a reduction in misery at the family level and thus to a decrease in family violence. This interacted with an increase in reflective possibilities and led to the "mutation of consciousness" (Obrist 1988) in the context of the Enlightenment with its project of an orientation toward reason in relation to the external world, as well as to the internal

world, as reflected in the literature of the 19th and 20th centuries (Janus 2018b). Exemplary here are the developmental novels of Goethe and Gottfried Keller in German literature and likewise the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky in Russian literature. In these novels, inner states of mind and also psychological conditions of development were made accessible to inner reflection, which then became part of the identity of modernity. This whole development was still largely an upper-class phenomenon, so that social and national conflicts were still carried out according to the old instinct-driven mode of rivalry as manifested in the two world wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This still applies to the current war situation in Ukraine, where affective aspects coming from within, and aspects of external reality are mixed up indiscriminately on the Russian side.

### **Summary**

If one brings these different factors together, then it becomes clear that one root of the wars in traditional societies lies in the poor conditions of both mother-child and father-child relationships, and the associated aggression within families and social relationships (Fuchs 2019, Reiß et al. 2021, Janus 2021b). A current example, as mentioned, is the war in Ukraine: the extremely traumatic exposure of Putin's parents to the starvation of Leningrad by the German army in World War II leading to bigger stresses in his childhood, which in turn interact with the collective traumatizations of Russian society by Stalin's state terror and the horrors of Hitler's war. Moreover, all of this must be seen against the backdrop of the extremely violent treatment of children along with the structure of violence in Russian history (Ihanus 2001, 2016).

I would also like to address Vamik Volkan's (1999) concept of the "chosen trauma". The incompleteness of his concept has its reason in the fact that it does not address the possibility that the "chosen trauma" reflects the violent and traumatic childhood conditions, that are projected onto the historical event. With regard to the Serbian defeat in the battle on the "Amselfield" in 1389 which Volkan argues was a chosen trauma used by the Serbs as a justification for the war against Kosovo, I believe that the violent and traumatizing childhood conditions in Serbia (Puhar 2000) were the most important factor in causing the war in Kosovo. And from this background the defeat in 1389 today was experienced as such a horror, but it was a projection of the horror of violent childhood experiences.

Thus, a crucial means of reducing the propensity for violence and the readiness for war is to improve mother-child and father-child relationships. This is why emancipation of the women and all the social changes that go with it are of such fundamental importance for making our

societies more capable of peace. Modern stress and trauma research has shown that violent and traumatizing childhood conditions do not allow for real autonomy. Violence-soaked childhoods lead to criminality on the individual level and, as we can see in the dictatorships of the 20th century, also on the collective level (Janus 2021b). Crucial to improving the situation, then, is real maturity on the part of parents so that they can provide their children with an adequate space in which they can develop to responsible adults (Janus 2010, Grille 2005, Axness 2012, et al.). For this, they need societal support, which is an essential prerequisite for us to continue to be able to live in peace.

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### **Abstract**

The causes of war lie in the interplay between male instincts of rivalry and defense with traumatically conditioned archaic feelings of existential threat and the resulting desire for destruction and power. The example of the current war in Ukraine is understood by examining the interaction of Putin's childhood traumatic history with the traumatic history of Russian society. Then the complex motivational background of warlike behavior in general is explained in eight theses. As a result of the reflections it is argued that the way to promote a more peaceful society is to improve early childhood socialization conditions.

**Keywords:** war, traumatization, psychohistory, prenatal psychology.

