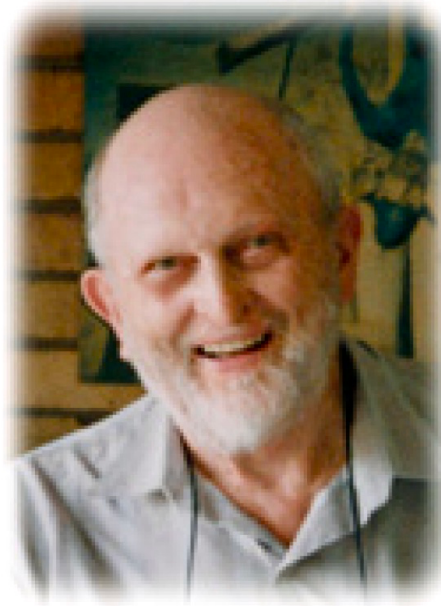


THINKING ABOUT WAR AND ITS IMPACTS

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Synopsis

The tragedy of war is a product of human conflicts, unable to be metabolised. A gang-like mentality (Meltzer & Rosenfeld) perpetuates perverse propaganda. Some ideas from the recent IPA webinar “Why War- finding Peace” will be explored.

Thanks to the Scientific committee for inviting me to share some thoughts on this very timely and troubling topic. Since the invitation was to share both personal and psychoanalytic perspectives, I will take the opportunity also to pay a brief tribute to my father, Bill Blomfield.

Bill Blomfield died shortly after a stroke in June 2000, aged 87, and up to his death having shown his dedication to the profession by still working clinically and writing papers! That month the Scientific Committee proposed naming the yearly local Melbourne Bill Blomfield Conference in his honour, in recognition of his many contributions over decades. As a former APAS President, amongst many other office-bearing positions in his long career, his legacy to our Society and Branch was significant: a wealth of rich Scientific presentations and papers, and a committed analyst, supervisor, teacher and mentor.

Though being born in the post-war era myself, like many of the Baby-boomers generation, we have lived the repercussions of our parents' war experiences.

For Bill Blomfield, this included serving in the RAF for 15 years, posted in Britain, Malta and India. Ironically, after serving in active service in the war years from 1939 onwards, and being promoted to a Wing Commander in the RAF, on his return to Victoria, he suffered

severe burns in a near-fatal solo flying accident at Laverton in 1944. His plane landed on the under-carriage fuel tank and burst into flames. He spent 6 months recovering from severe burns to his face and hands in the Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital, enduring many skin grafts.

His recovery there, and subsequent personal analysis, however inspired him to change professions from Electrical Engineering to Medicine, Psychiatry, Group Psychotherapy and then Psychoanalysis. He benefitted from the post-war Government retraining schemes, and I remember going to his Graduation from Melbourne University, when I was 6.

Always an inspiration, with his kind, generous and encouraging nature, he no doubt forged my path and similar change of professions from Speech Pathologist to Group Psychotherapist and then Psychoanalyst. I feel a great sense of gratitude and pride to have had him as a father.

As a testament to his personality, a long-time psychiatry colleague and academic wrote recently “Bill was one of the finest people I ever met...encountering him was always an uplifting experience”.

Another tribute, from Shahid Najeeb in private correspondence recently read “I am so glad we are commemorating his presence amongst us with this conference. This is just another way of keeping his memory alive. He was greatly admired and loved by many of us and all of us that knew him would appreciate such a tribute. Amongst our inevitable interminable internecine psychoanalytical conflicts, he remained true to his psychoanalytical reflections and was a reminder to all of us, where our preoccupations should be.”

A man of poetry, even before the war, one of Bill Blomfield’s favourite poets was Wilfred Owen.

He often recited poems by heart to us as children. I don’t recall him reciting the following, probably because of its sheer brutality, but I will quote the second stanza of this harrowing poem about PTSD here, in light of our topic on “War”.

‘Mental Cases’ by Wilfred Owen

— These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished.
Memory fingers in their hair.. of murders,
Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.
Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,
Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter.
Always they must see these things and hear them,
Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,
Carnage incomparable and human squander
Rucked too thick for these men’s extrication

This poem with its chilling imagery, truly encapsulates the horrors of war and lasting effects on servicemen.

In researching material for this paper, I was struck by this opening paragraph in Karl Menninger's "Love against Hate", published in 1942.

"Science is a slave. It is commandeered by war to kill men and by medicine to save them. It fires guns and it allays fevers. It builds bridges and it blows them up. In science man found a slave to minister to his comfort and safety, but one which could take away both. The slave may even destroy his master, a possibility some now feel to be imminent. But the slave can also save his master, if the master will give the command."

Menninger goes on to implore us that "with the world set on fire, it is time we reordered our slave. War is a disease, a world sickness, for which we know no ready cure." With the daily news reports from the Ukraine-Russia war, we are reminded how devastatingly true this is today.

I'll now turn to some ideas and discussion from the IPA webinar, with the timely heading "Why War-Finding Peace"

Ricardo Read, a Chilean psychoanalyst who is co-chair of PACE (the Psychoanalytical Assistance in World Crises and Emergencies), who also works with groups, reminds us that in Freud's *Journey from Totem and Taboo to Civilization and its Discontents*, the development of law was highlighted. It was noted that with its enforcement of law and rules of Society, the individual has to submit to the power of the group. The implementation of law can still be an expression of violence however (as in capital punishment)..

In "Civilization and its Discontents" the emphasis is on how the death drive with its expression in aggression is administered within the community. Discontent can be expressed in relation to restrictions, especially as they relate to the Death Drive. We've seen this recently also in the protests around the world about the restrictions placed on communities and individuals, due to the pandemic. When the Death drive is directed inwards, it fuels the severity of the super-ego. Freud proposes a need to restrict aggression to strengthen a kind of community superego organization. This touches on the concept of ethical responsibility and making as equal as possible the influences of the structure of this external organization. However, with corruption comes the link with the gang-like mentality, described by Meltzer and Rosenfeld. That is, when there is a failure in equality, the corrupted organizations serve some kind of individual interests and pervert the altruistic aims, which would benefit the community or Society. We can see this in Putin's war with Ukraine, where his narcissistic aim apparently is to go down in history as some kind of Stalin-like hero.

In dialogue with Einstein, in the essay "Why War?" Freud reminded Einstein that in human nature there is innate biological aggression, in that humans will attack others to avoid being killed themselves. Freud however also felt aggression to others is a way to avoid self-destruction.

In the global sense however the corrupted organization, just like within an individual can be quite against the global welfare as individually the corruption is ultimately against the

individuals' well-being. In other words, there are the parallels between an external war and an inner war where the mafia-like organization sets out to control the whole personality.

Another speaker on the IPA panel was Sverre Varvin, who is the IPA chair of the China committee. He is also known for his decades-long work with refugees. He quoted Freud's Antidotes to war, which included identification between people and the strengthening of the capacity to think. This refers also to the ethical position referred to previously.

The rise of propaganda, as referred to by both Meltzer and Rosenfeld, in the internal sphere weakens the intellect and aggression is then directed outwards towards others. This includes dehumanization of the victims, denying their human characteristics so that they can be referred to as vermin, scum, or Nazis. The latter was reportedly used in Putin's propaganda about the Ukrainians.

Propaganda of course is often used by both sides in a war, to stir up hatred towards the opponents and justify brutality on the basis of de-humanisation. An important and tragic consequence of this dehumanizing is that one generation can carry an enormous burden of guilt and trauma, which can fall on the next generation.

In summary, this paper for the Bill Blomfield annual Conference, in Melbourne in July 2022, pays tribute to the contributions of Bill Blomfield to our Branch and Society. It addresses the tragedy and horror of war as a product of human conflicts, which if left un-metabolised psychically, are enacted throughout history. Karl Menninger's timeless words are quoted, about war as a world sickness, for which we know no cure.

Meltzer & Rosenfeld both wrote of a gang-like mentality which perpetuates perverse propaganda. These authors aid our understanding of the psychopathology of perverse personality, possibly shaping some world leaders who become warmongers.

Some ideas from the recent IPA webinar "Why War- finding Peace" are also explored, with a direction of hope amidst the doom and gloom of war. This includes reference to Freud's "Antidotes to war".

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