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The *War of Vladimir*. Nationalism, Narcissism, and Childhood Battles

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Abstract

The war in Ukraine has had enormous media coverage in the West, generating a wide-ranging debate concerning its origins, responsibilities, and consequences. The debate in the media raises an interesting question seldom explored in the study of nations and nationalism, specifically, the scarce incidence or penetration by expert knowledge into the theories of common sense and profane knowledge. In fact, despite the current consolidation in the scientific literature of the constructionist and modernist paradigm – of a sociological nature – other visions and interpretations of the past continue to be widely accepted and popularized beyond academia. This article analyzes the weight and influence of psychology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis in the social representation of nationalism. The persistence of psychopathological language in the profane interpretation of the conflict is explored using the discourse of the press and, in particular, the opinion columns published in various Western countries during the first weeks of the war. The article shows that the criticism and denunciation of nationalism are still being formulated nowadays with the voices of psychology and psychiatry, the psychodynamic vision of the authoritarian, and the vulgarized portrayal of Adolf Hitler.

Keywords

Nationalism; War; Psychoanalysis; Ukraine; Social representation

Introduction

On February 24th, 2022, the Russian army entered the territory of Ukraine, triggering the greatest conventional military conflict in Europe since the war in Yugoslavia and the greatest refugee crisis since WWII. The war in Ukraine immediately started a widespread debate in third-party countries that focused on responsibility for the conflict, the memory of past wars, and the possibility of a nuclear catastrophe. Suddenly, the COVID-19 pandemic was no longer news, swept away by Ukraine, which took over news broadcasts and captured the full attention of the media. Thus, during the first weeks of the war, the media rushed to find out the opinions of politicians, journalists, war correspondents, diplomats, political experts, military strategists, intellectuals,

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philosophers, historians, essayists, writers, artists, and celebrities. In the Western *media*, generous coverage was also given to an ample group of psychologists, psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, and neuroscientists, who were called upon to make a precise diagnosis of the mental state of the Russian president, Vladimir Putin. Much more discreet, however, was the presence of expert, authoritative voices concerning the study of nations and nationalism, an area of knowledge that has seen a great academic expansion since the 1980s. As the historian Alexander Maxwell stated, the theoreticians of nationalism have not always influenced policymakers or persuaded public opinion at large (Maxwell 2022b, 152-171). In fact, it is worth asking ourselves whether the ample academic renovation in the research regarding nationalism has managed, over the last few decades, to penetrate the profane understanding and knowledge of the matter. What impact do the new paradigms have on the approach to and resolution of problems? What impression has expert literature left outside of academic circles? Who knows who Benedict Anderson and Michael Billig are? Who is Ernest Gellner?

The debate on the war raises concerns that have not had sufficient attention paid to them, such as the permeability of our theories and the incidence and diffusion of our research. The French social psychologist Serge Moscovici proposed the concept of *social representation* to describe the process of the production, circulation, and transformation of knowledge that happens in contemporary societies: a process according to which the language of science and academia would eventually filter through to the common knowledge, becoming a profane theory concerning nature and/or history. "In the long run," Moscovici stated, "what is imposed as immediate data upon our senses, upon our understanding… is a second, reworked product of the scientific research… the social representations… taking over scientific or philosophical notions and language everywhere, extracting conclusions" (1961/1979, 30). Moscovici illustrated the concept of *social representation* with the diffusion and popularization in the mid-twentieth century of the categories of psychoanalysis that, to his mind, had passed from the clinical environment to "the life, the thoughts, the behaviour, the customs and the world of the conversations of many individuals" (1961/1979, 11-12). Curiously, the penetration of Freud's ideas was even more evident in the political sphere and in that of denouncing extreme nationalism, fascism, and war (Pick 2012; Ffychte & Pick 2016). According to the American historian Louis Snyder, "[N]ationalism is neither wholly logical nor rational"; paraphrasing the popularized categories of psychoanalysis, "[I]ts roots lie in the illogical, irrational, and fantastic world of the unconscious" (1954, 101).

This article analyzes the weight and influence of psychology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis in the social representation of nationalism. Using the discourse of the press, particularly the opinion columns printed in various Western countries during the first weeks of the war, the article explores the persistence of psychopathological language in the popular interpretation of the conflict. In fact, the denunciation and criticism of nationalism are still being formulated at the start of the twenty-first century with the voices of psychology and psychiatry through the memory of fascism, the Holocaust, and the vulgarized representation of Adolf Hitler. In this sense, as we shall see, the Western critics of the illegal invasion of Ukraine have once more narrowed down the explanation of the conflict in the mind of the nationalist, in their infancy and/or their sexuality, appealing to the old interpretative ideas of Sigmund Freud, Erich Fromm, or Theodor Adorno. The article is organized as follows. Section one examines in detail the main hypothesis of the work: despite the academic renewal of current research into nationalism and the relative consolidation of the constructionist and modernist paradigm, other visions and interpretations of nationalism are still widely accepted and popularized beyond academic circles; in particular, those that have been termed *historicist* and *psychologist*. The following section focuses on the way in which the second representation came into being through the clinical language of Le Bon-Freud, the denunciation of the war and the Holocaust, and the portrait of Adolf Hitler, the personification of infamy and absolute evil. Section three returns to the present, to attempt to determine the weight that this psychological language has in the current narrative of the war and the media representation of the nationalism of Vladimir Putin.

2. Social Representations of Ideology: Between Historicism and Psychologism

"To have a nationality is not an inherent attribute of the human being, yet nowadays it would seem so," stated Ernest Gellner at the start of *Nations and Nationalism* (1983/1988, 19). When the Czech-born British author wrote this in the early 1980s, he was attempting to justify his constructionist and modernist perspective in contrast to two widely held beliefs both within and beyond academia: the first, that the *nation* was a natural and universal form of social and political organization that had existed throughout history; the second, that *nationalism* was an arbitrary and incidental "ideological aberration" created by German philosophers that would lead to Nuremberg and the Holocaust (1983/1988, 53, 159-173). On questioning and examining the popular beliefs and places common to nationalism, Gellner would also be one of the first authors to incorporate a fully sociological perspective into

expert research and literature. In fact, nations were not natural entities, and nationalist doctrine was not an ideological aberration. Both were derived from the specific means of social, political, economic, and educational organization of the modern industrial era:

> "Nationalism -the principle which predicates that the basis of political life resides in the existence of homogeneous cultural units and in which there must be cultural unity between those who govern and the governed- is not something which is natural; it is not in the hearts of men and neither is it listed as one of the prior conditions for social life in general; such assertions are a falsehood that the nationalist doctrine has managed to pass as an obvious fact. Nevertheless, as a phenomenon –and not as a doctrine presented by the nationalists-, nationalism is inherent to a certain set of social conditions; and these conditions are, coincidentally, those of our time" (1983/1988, 162).

A series of social scientists and historians, contemporaries of Gellner, brought about a paradigmatic turnaround in the academic literature on nationalism. For Anthony Smith, Tom Nairn, Benedict Anderson, John Breully, Charles Tilly, and Eric Hobsbawm, as for Ernest Gellner, nationalism was an ideology that was closely linked to the structural forces and institutional developments of modernity: State, market, democracy, school, bureaucracy, or communication technologies. Quite independently of the fact that they may have arisen from pre-existing ethnic communities—as postulated by Smith (1971/1976, 1991)—nations only came into being as such through a territorial state of citizens (or the aspiration of establishing one), a relative level of economic and technological development, the spread of printing, and the literacy of the population. The basic social processes that Marx, Durkheim, and Weber had advanced one century before to explain the workings of modern societies (industrialization, secularization, rationalization, mass schooling, and democratization) came to be considered decisive in explaining the origin and spread of nationalism (Day & Thompson 2004). Thus, the nation was described as a fundamentally sociological reality, a community imagined on the basis of the social and political institutions and interactions of modern life. According to Benedict Anderson, "[t]he idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation" (1991, 26).

Most experts on nations and nationalism today surely share the basic theses of the modernist and constructivist paradigm formulated by Gellner's

generation (1983/1988; see Brubaker 2009, 21-42). For all that, the possibility that the new ideas concerning nationalism may have truly been heard beyond academia would seem to be more unlikely. How have these ideas influenced the language of politics and public opinion, and what is their impact? If, according to Moscovici (1961/1979), the academic and scientific language has filtered through from expert circles to become common knowledge in social representations and profane theories in current societies, how, then, have the theses of sociological modernism affected the daily discourse of the media? Is the *nation* still considered a "natural and universal" entity, as Gellner criticized? Is *nationalism* still considered an "ideological aberration" that can only lead to Nuremberg? Some partial studies carried out on secondary school teachers and college students point out that the constructionist literature would have had, to the present time, only a limited impact beyond academia (Chon 2012, 445-470; Devine 2005, 49-70; Sulíková 2018, 515-537). As a rule, a critical discourse concerning *extreme nationalism* is expected from the citizens, but it is almost always the nationalism of the others. Yet, today, who is willing to renounce the premise that their nation has not always existed?

The article uses this same suspicion as its starting point: the low incidence of the sociological and modernist paradigm in the profane theories of nationalism. In fact, at the start of the twenty-first century, two old visions or "social representations" of the ideology were widely accepted and popularized beyond academia (García-García 2021, e1603). The first representation is based on *History*, in the epic of the collective past, in the narrative of a timeless *Us*; the second, much more tragic, grim, and dire, concentrates on the *psyche*, on the mind of the individual subject, on a dark story of unutterable desires and repressions, on the memory of a tormented childhood. The first, of a historicist nature, would have been formulated throughout the nineteenth century, with the contributions of historians, archaeologists, philologists, poets, and novelists, in what came to be called the "century of History"; the second, of a psychologist nature, arose from the ruins of two World Wars, from the denunciation or moral condemnation of prejudice, and the contribution from the psychology of the masses and psychoanalysis. Both representations coexist today without any apparent contradiction from different goals: the first, to naturalize or reproduce the *nation*, often one's own nation; the second, to denounce the intolerant and aggressive *nationalism*, almost always that of the others.

The historicist representation owes much to the critics of the Enlightenment and the first ideologues of nationalism, to Rousseau, Herder and Fichte, to Michelet, Renan and Barrès, to the publication and diffusion of such texts

as *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man* (1791/1800), *Addresses to the German Nation* (1808/1977), *Le Peuple* (1846/1877), or *Scènes et Doctrines du Nationalisme* (1902/1987). "Nationalism is profoundly 'historicist' in character," said Anthony Smith; it sees the world as a product of the interaction of communities, each with a unique character and a differentiated history (1996, 175). The prominent role of historians in the appearance of the ideology and the nationalist movements is well known: Jules Michelet, François Guizot, William Prescott, Heinrich Von Treitschke, Edmund Burke, Nikolai Karamzin, Frantisek Palacký, Modesto Lafuente… (Berger 2010; Hall 1997, 3-23; Smith 1996, 175-197). Also well known is the prominent role played by the teaching of *History* in the newly imagined communities (Anderson 1991). An epic past that, despite the ample historiographical review of the last few decades, still continues today to be portrayed, reified, reproduced, and trivialized all over the world in historical atlases that recreate the timeless frontiers of the homeland (Kamusella 2010, 113-138; López Facal 2009, 171-193); in the so-called lieux de mémoire – in museums and commemorative monuments, in statues and street names (Condor 1997, 213-255; Nora 1984-1992; Smith 1991); and in theme parks and television series (García-García & Urraco Solanilla 2017, 7-29; Slotkin 1992).[1]

The psychologist representation, much less analyzed to date, has its own academic and intellectual sources: from Charles Darwin, Gustave Le Bon, Wilfred Trotter, and Sigmund Freud to Erich Fromm, Theodor Adorno, and Gordon Allport. It springs from the diffusion and popularization of such works as *The Descent of Man* (1871), *The Crowd* (1896/2001), *Massenpsychologie und ich-analyse* (1921), *The Fear of Freedom* (1941/1982), *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950) or *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954). The objectives of this article would point toward a more detailed examination of this second social representation, which, as shall be seen, used the voices and concepts of evolutionary biology, degenerationist psychiatry, the psychology of the masses, and, in particular, Freudian psychoanalysis to definitively crystallize the popularized image of Adolf Hitler at the end of World War II.

3. War, Regression and Holocaust: The Way to the Psychiatrist's Couch

If the first representation owes much to the historians of the nineteenth century, the second is indebted to the critics of nationalism from the first half of the twentieth century, following the Great War and World War II.

1 As Susan Condor (1997, 213-255) states, the reified representations of "our national history" in buildings and other memorial places bring to mind the description by Moscovici of the processes of "ontologization" (i.e., personification) and "figuration," from which a series of scientific constructs become concrete and "almost visible" when they become part of profane knowledge.

From the 1920s onwards, a growing number of Western intellectuals and scholars began to view nationalism as a key factor in the outbreak of wars and conflicts: "Nationalism promises not to unify, but disintegrate, the world; not to preserve and create, but to destroy, civilisation" (Hayes 1926, 133). For the American historian Carlton Hayes and many scholars of his generation, the term *nationalism* was not necessarily related to the *People* becoming aware of their history and their destiny, with the defense of their autonomy or the assertion of their creativity. Rather, the term *nationalism* was linked to the forces of prejudice, ignorance, and narrow-mindedness, to the logic of fanaticism and the drive to make war. In fact, the causes that explained this phenomenon should not be looked for in the collective past of peoples, as historicism had postulated, but in the individual minds of citizens transformed into an irrational mass taken in by myths and fallacies. Nationalism is "a condition of mind," Hayes concluded, "a form of mania, a kind of extended and exaggerated egotism, and it has easily recognizable symptoms of selfishness, intolerance, and jingoism, indicative of the delusions of grandeur from which it suffers" (1926, 6, 275).

Different schools and academic currents were to participate in this academic turn; such currents included evolutionary biology, degenerationist medicine, and the psychology of the masses (García-García 2015a, 333-346; 2015b, 103-123; 2016, 91-103; 2023, 71-100). On the one hand, the voices of evolutionary biology were soon echoed by the scholars and intellectuals between the two World Wars to describe nationalism as a manifestation of the darker or shadowy parts of the psyche: as a deplorable and painful, but maybe inevitable, outbreak of primitive and brutal instincts or desires on the part of the human race (Howerth 1919, 174-187; Scott 1926; Trotter 1915/1947). According to the English naturalist Ernest Hankin (1937, 151), "Nationalism is self-assertion of that redoubtable being, 'the cave-man within us.'" When the war drums are heard, the "herd instinct" comes to the fore, as the American sociologist Ira Howerth (1919, 175) said: "a nation, then, is a herd." Instead of the nation becoming aware of its history and its destiny, nationalism now appeared as the rebirth of the irrational and bloodthirsty "beast" hidden underneath the conscience of the civilized man. As the American psychologist George Stratton (1929, 252) stated, "Scratch a Russian and find a Tartar… scratch a civilized man and find a savage."

Furthermore, the intellectuals of the period also used the language of medicine and degenerationist psychiatry to condemn and curse the ideology. Thus, nationalism was presented at the same time as pathological and as a moral perversion of civilization (Playne 1925; Toynbee 1915; Wells 1929; Zimmern

1918). Although the experimental advances in genetics at the beginning of the twentieth century had discredited the concept of evolutionary *degeneration*, the degenerationist rhetoric continued to be used in academic and political forums (Pick 1989). For the English historian Carolyne Playne (1925), nationalism was a social neurosis caused by the stress and tension of modern life. The American historian Mildred Wertheimer (1924, 159, 178) and the English political scientist Harold Laski (1932, 26) spoke of a "virus" or "infectious disease." The Hungarian-born British writer Adam de Hegedus wrote of "a contagious disease," an epidemic worse than the Medieval Black Death (1947, 46-47). As with nineteenth century degenerationism, the voices of science alternated with those of religion and prophecy announcing the Apocalypse; "Nationalism is the curse of our time" was repeated by George Gooch (1924, 6), Carlton Hayes (1926, 246), and Wilson Wallis (1929, 819).

On the other hand, the behavior of nationalists was similar to that of a primitive, irrational, brutish, and unconscious mass, as had been described decades earlier by the French social psychologist Gustave Le Bon in his book *The Crowd*. Following the Great War, nationalism was often presented as a doctrine started by an interested, unscrupulous elite, a malicious minority willing to convert all the people, by means of mental suggestion and propaganda, into a criminal and barbarian mob or crowd, mobilized for war (Howerth 1919, 174-187; Rocker 1937/1977; Schuman 1931, 520-522; Tagore 1922). Scholars and intellectuals from all across the political spectrum (pacifists, socialists, liberals, conservatives, anarchists) all used a template similar to that of the psychologists of the masses to explain the origin and development of World War I. "The problem [of nationalism] is one for the social psychologist and for the philosopher interested in group behaviour and mass emotions," stated the American historian Frederick Schuman (1931, 522). In Europe, the term *nationalism* came to be associated with extreme, intolerant, warmongering behavior that should be explained through psychology and condemned in moral terms (Allport 1927; Stagner et al. 1942, 381-394; Sulzbach 1943; Vaussard 1924).

Even so, the psychological turn could only be completed with the contribution of psychoanalysis following the rise to power of Adolf Hitler as the chancellor of Germany (García-García 2021, e1603; 2023, 72-100). At that time, using the thesis that Sigmund Freud himself had put forward in *Massenpsychologie und ich-analyse* (1921), some authors saw a kind of compensatory identification in the behavior of the nationalist masses and an escape route from the accumulated frustration and aggressiveness (Appel 1945, 355-362;

Fessler 1941, 372-383; Fromm 1941/1982; Lasswell 1933, 373-384; Reich 1933/1972). In the words of Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich:

> "For the psychology of the masses, the nationalist leader (*Führer*) represents the incarnation of the nation… concentrating in his persona all the affective postures primitively adopted toward the father… This identification… is the psychological basis for the *national narcissism*, that is to say, the love for oneself (*Selbst gefühl*) that he extracts from the *grandeur of the nation*… The wretchedness of his material and sexual situation is… overshadowed by the exalting idea of belonging to a master race and having a brilliant führer…" (1933, 86-87).

For these authors, the behavior of the nationalist was the result of the displacement of private, unutterable desires to the political sphere and could be explained in terms of the participants' *narcissism*, *insecurity, repression*, *frustration, inferiority complex*, and/or *illusions of grandeur* (Lasswell 1930/1963, 1933). With the outbreak of a new world war, interest in the psychology and personality of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi leadership intensified even more (Rees *et al.* 1947; Langer 1972). The physicians and psychiatrists of the Allied powers raised the urgent necessity to explore the mind of the leader, his past, his hidden motivations, and his unconscious desires (*Inside Hitler* was the title of a popular and fictional book at that time).[2] Working for the secret services of the USA, the American psychoanalyst Walter Langer wrote a report, published years later as *The Mind of Adolf Hitler*, in which he reconstructed the childhood and adolescence of a subject scarred by impossible dreams, repression, frustration, and adversity; a cruel tyrant and megalomaniac who had suffered for years the direct cruelty of a severe and punitive father:

> "Unable to enter into a 'give-and-take' relationship with other human beings that might afford him an opportunity of resolving his conflicts in a realistic manner, he projects his personal problem on great nations…" (Langer 1972, 155. See Pick 2012).

The British psychiatrist Henry Dicks, who had clinically treated Rudolf Hess, also found the origin of his sadomasochistic character in the figure of a cruel, terrifying father. Once more, the infamous contribution of the adult Hess to German politics seemed to be already written since the childhood of the

2 Written by a Galician Jew, Samuel Roth, based on the notes of Adolf Hitler's imaginary psychoanalyst. The text demonstrates the strong impression of psychoanalysis in the academic and profane representation of the Nazi dictator. See Pick 2012.

young Rudolf: the repression of instincts, frustration, and latent hate toward others, the need to identify with a substitute father, the paranoid dynamic, the projection and aggressiveness toward the scapegoats. Dicks completed the psychoanalytical diagnosis with language close to that of the criminal anthropologist Cesare Lombroso, portraying Hess as an atavistic and simian person whose face gave "an impression of baleful strength":

> "… a receding forehead, exaggerated supraorbital ridges covered with thick bushy eyebrows, deeply sunken eyes, irregular teeth, a very weak chin and receding lower jaw… The whole man produced the impression of a caged great ape, and 'oozed' hostility and suspicion" (Rees *et al.* 1947, 28-29. See Pick 2012).

By the mid-twentieth century, the psychiatric interpretation of nationalism had spread from the clinical sphere, reaching other areas of academia and spreading beyond as social representation or profane knowledge; nationalism engaged the private passions of disturbing and dangerous individuals, of those who suffered emotional problems, a tormented childhood, and an authoritarian personality (Adorno et al. 1950; Kurth 1950, 293-312; Shafer 1955; Snyder 1954). In his bestselling book *Escape from Freedom*, the German American psychoanalyst Erich Fromm described Hitler as someone who was frightened of his own freedom, someone with an inferiority complex, hating and envious of others, "a nobody" without a professional future and many affective problems– insecure, neurotic, full of hostility toward his peers, resentful about life, fascinated by authority, by sadistic desires about dominating the weak, and by masochistic impulses about submitting to an external power (Fromm 1941/1982, 232-264). Following the war against Hitler, the representation of the nationalist leader had changed in many Western platforms and forums; instead of a heroic educator of people, a charismatic personage addressing a sluggard nation on the wrong road, to paraphrase Anthony Smith, the leader seemed rather more like a sick person, a psychopath who wishes to create a new empire on Earth in order to try to deal with his own misfortunes, generating even more intractable problems (Smith 1971). The wars of the nationalist had come from his own mind, from the grievances and resentment toward others, from the battles lost in childhood (García-García 2023, 72-100).

4. Return to the Past: The Western Press and the Debate over Ukraine

Interest in this subject is not limited to the sphere of study of historians or social scientists; it is not restricted to the clinical sphere of medicine and

the psychiatrist's couch. The debate concerning nations and nationalisms has always spread beyond the sphere of historiography and expert research, reaching beyond academia to be reformulated and reproduced in the political and media spheres as social representation and profane theory (Moscovici 1961/1979). The concept of *social representation* of Serge Moscovici has a direct connection to the thesis presented here: the categories and formulations of psychiatry and psychoanalysis of the mid-twentieth century still have widespread echoes and acceptance in the profane explanation of nationalism. Although research into authoritarianism declined from the 1960s onwards, and the sociological interest of literature increased, the psychodynamic concept of the nationalist has continued to be one of the most widespread and penetrating social representations of the ideology. This is encountered again in best-sellers signed by scientists, writers, and polemicists to account for conflicts and wars closer to us, in Bosnia, Kosovo, or Azerbaijan, or to explain the behavior of such leaders as Marine Le Pen, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, or Donald Trump (Kristeva 1993; Kecmanovic 1996; Ignatieff 1998; Burston 2017, e1399).

In the second part of this article, the thesis is put to the test, focusing on the debate over Putin and the illegal invasion of Ukraine, an invasion that the Russian leader had called "a special operation" and which was carried out *in the name of the nation*, the Great Russia, "*Great Rus*." After all, Putin stated, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, and Russians should have always been a single nation (see Breuilly & Halikiopoulou 2023, 25-29; Girvin 2023, 39-44; Knott 2023, 45-52). What did the Western press have to say about the war? In order to approach this question, an exploratory analysis has been carried out of more than 200 articles and opinion columns appearing during the first weeks of the conflict in different Western countries, such as Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Although this analysis does not, in any case, seek to exhaust the many and varied interpretations that have been made concerning the conflict, the number of articles reviewed is sufficient to test the continuity and penetration of the clinical and psychopathological vision of nationalism. In fact, the media construct of the war is a fertile area in which to explore the validity of the social representation; as part of the framework and explanation of the conflict, the press sets itself up as a privileged vehicle to express the dominant views concerning nationalism. This process serves as a channel to rediscover, recreate, and adapt the profane vision of the ideology.

4.1 *The Voices of Psychology*

The invasion by the Russian army, from the very start, engendered an enormous flood of news following the events that modified international geopolitics, endangered the world order, and threatened to set off a nuclear conflict. Suddenly, the war in Ukraine opened the TV news, hogged the headlines in the newspapers, and demanded the opinion of all kinds of experts and commentators: politicians, journalists, war correspondents, diplomats, military strategists, academics, intellectuals, philosophers, essayists, writers, artists, and celebrities of the communication media. Among this wide range of commentators and debaters**,** the authoritative voices of psychologists and psychiatrists had enormous coverage and notoriety during the first weeks of the conflict. The examples are legion. In the *Chicago Tribune* and *The Boston Globe*, the psychiatrist Leonard Glass and the clinical psychologist Edwin Fisher were asked about the psychology of Vladimir Putin (Glass & Fisher 2022; Fisher 2022). In *The Conversation* and *The Scotsman*, the professor of psychology Magnus Linden was also questioned about the state of a leader with "antisocial, dark personality traits" (Linden & Wilkes 2022). In the pages of *The Telegraph*, *The Sunday Times*, and *Clarín*, the neuroscientist and clinical psychologist Ian Robertson drew a picture of a leader who, while not actually mad, suffered from extreme "narcissism" (2022a, 2022b, 2022c). Along the same lines, the neuroscientist specializing in the study of psychopaths, criminals, and dictators, James Fallon was required by the press of the UK (*Express*), Germany (*FOCUS online*), Argentina (*Infobae*) and Spain (*El País*, *El Correo*, *La Voz de Galicia*) to give a diagnosis concerning Putin: "I have identified in him most of the traits that define a psychopath" (Fallon 2022a).

The voice of psychology was not only heard through the words of psychologists. Journalists, novelists, philosophers, historians, and political experts often spoke of the conflict using very similar terminology. In the newspaper *The Guardian*, the journalist Peter Pomerantsev stated that the territorial demands of Putin were not of a "geopolitical" but "psychological" nature; that is, his claims to Russia's "spheres of influence" were more about "his state of mind" (Pomerantsev 2022). The journalist Jonathan Freedland (2022) wrote in a similar vein; although the Russian ethno-nationalists did not consider Ukraine to be a true nation, deserving its own State, the current war had nothing to do with frontiers and international politics but with the psychological deficiencies of the Russian leader: "the whim of one, possibly crazed, man." Similar opinions were printed in *The Guardian* (McEwan 2022), *The New York Times* (Brooks 2022), *El País* (Beevor 2022a), and

Político (Motyl 2022). In any case, according to the journalist David Brooks, to understand the origin of the war, the only possible path was to move from politics and international relations to social psychology and psychiatry:

> "I don't know about you, but the texts of experts in international relations have not been of much use to me for understanding what this crisis is about. However, the texts of specialists in social psychology have been a great help… [Vladimir Putin] is an entrepreneur of identity. His great achievement has been to help the Russians recover from their mental trauma -the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union- and to give them a collective identity… Yet, it has all spiraled out of control... Putin's policy of identity is so virulent because it is highly narcissistic… and narcissists… are insecure souls who try to hide their fragility …" (Brooks 2022).

Another proof of the centrality of the clinical perspective in the debate on the war was the explicit reference to such authors as Sigmund Freud, Erich Fromm, Theodor Adorno, Henry Dicks, or Walter Langer. For instance, the journalist Peter Pomerantsev quoted the studies of Erich Fromm and Henry Dicks to establish a comparison between the mentality of Putin and that of the Nazis (Pomerantsev 2022). The economist and sociologist Mauricio Rubio, in *El Espectador*, expressly mentioned the clinical reports on the mind of Adolf Hitler carried out in the 1940s by the psychoanalyst Walter Langer (Rubio 2022); meanwhile, the journalist Karl Grossman, in the pages of *The Long Island Press*, evoked the classic study of Theodor Adorno on the authoritarian personality (Grossman 2022). Other columnists mentioned Carl Jung, Edmund Bergler, or Jacques Lacan (Marriot 2022; Rubio 2022; Ubieto Pardo 2022). Even so, it would be the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, who was most quoted in the debate on Ukraine (e.g., Artigue 2022; Fox 2022; Gonzales Posada 2022; Ivars 2022; Marriot 2022; Rubio 2022; Ubieto Pardo 2022). According to Luis Artigue (2022), the "imperialist" and "psychopathic" zeal of Vladimir Putin only hid "a dangerous defect worthy of study by Freud."

In his study on social representations, in the diffusion of a scientific theory with the image of its creator ("personification"), Serge Moscovici saw a common way to convert complex and inaccessible scientific knowledge into familiar and profane knowledge. In this case, the popularized and vulgarized image of Freud and his couch often continue to be brought into the political and media debate on nationalism and the war (Ffytche & Pick 2016; García-

García 2023, 72-100; Pick, 2012). In the words of the film producer Robert Fox, printed in the *Evening Standard*:

> "…a better understanding of Putin's motivations for a greater Russia, and the lesser Ukraine, might be derived from the collected works of Sigmund Freud. It is time to put Vladimir V. Putin on Professor Freud's legendary couch… He is increasingly working a path of parallel realities, and at times seems to be in a world of his own" (2022).

Mental trauma, psychopathic personality, couches… A new war that had begun and was justified *in the name of the nation* was once more denounced by the West from the narrow perspective of psychologists and psychiatrists as the result of the imaginary world or the parallel reality of Vladimir Putin. It cannot be dismissed out of hand that certain personality traits of the Russian leader, or his temporary mental state following his isolation and reclusion during the coronavirus pandemic, may have contributed to the final decision to unilaterally invade Ukrainian territory (Kuzio 2023, 30-38). It is something completely different that the psychological perspective and the complete works of Sigmund Freud should end up concealing and clouding all the books and papers of the sociological paradigm.

4.2 *In the Mind of Putin*

In some sense, that is what the Western mass media transmitted. Because of the almost exclusive concentration on the psychic profile and the psychiatric explanations, the reiterative recourse to the supposed psychopathologies of the Russian leader became the focus of a large part of the debate in the press during the first weeks of the war. In fact, the choice of headlines in articles and opinion columns turned out to be highly relevant, with the pages of *The Telegraph, The Guardian, The Huffington Post*, *El Confidencial*, or *El Correo* mimicking the titles of works from the 1940s by Samuel Roth or Walter Langer: *Inside the mind of Vladimir Putin* (Robertson 2022a); *What's going on inside Putin's mind?* (Eltchaninoff 2022); *What's going on inside his head?* (Pomerantsev 2022); *¿Qué tiene Putin en la cabeza?* (Velasco 2022); *En la mente de Putin* (Whittell 2022). Some even brought the term psychology into the title of an article, such as those published in the *Chicago Tribune* and *The Conversation*: *The Psychology of Vladimir Putin (Fisher 2022); Putin: The Psychology Behind His Destructive Leadership -and How Best to Tackle It According to Science* (Linden & Wilkes 2022). Others alluded more explicitly to the demented or psychopathic condition of the president in *El Correo*, *El*

País, *Infobae*, or *The Boston Globe*: *¿Es Putin un psicópata?* (Fallon 2022a); *El 'esquizofascismo' de Adolf Putin* (Amat 2022); *Putin, un psicópata en la ONU* (Gonzales Posada 2022); *The dangerous case of Vladimir Putin* (Glass & Fisher 2022).

The reference to the "mind" of Vladimir Putin can also be seen as a "figuration" in the terminology of Moscovici, a way of alluding to psychodynamic theories and complex clinical notions with metaphors or simplified images easy to understand (Moscovici 1961/1979): what's going on inside Putin's mind? Although the writers of articles asked themselves about the plans and objectives of a leader who questioned territorial frontiers and put the world order and security in danger, the questions about his mind almost always pointed toward the unconsciousness and the irrationality of his actions. The philosopher and journalist Michel Eltchaninoff asked, "Are these the actions of a rational leader?" He concluded that a perpetual sense of victimhood allowed Putin to present "a vision of the world that is paranoid" (Eltchaninoff 2022). The journalist Peter Pomerantsev stated that the issue here is not about rational security demands, which can be defined in negotiations and balanced with the security concerns of others; the issue is instead about hidden desires and motivations, irrational demands that do not refer to a concrete geographical territory, but to an intangible and ethereal region—the unconscious. Once more, the questions and answers concerning the war appear to be taken over by psychiatry and psychoanalysis:

> "… Putin's sphere of influence waxes and wanes. It can mean the Russosphere… It can mean the mystical idea of a "single people" that encompasses Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. It can denote much of central Europe, the countries… "orphaned" by the end of the USSR… Henry Dicks, the psychoanalyst who studied Nazi soldiers during the WWII, came to the conclusion that Hitler's idea of Lebensraum… was not just a geopolitical idea but a sign of a psychology that was so steeped in humiliation it grabbed things outside itself to sate its sense of endless inadequacy. Like an angry infant that doesn't understand its own borders…" (Pomerantsev 2022).

4.3 *In the Childhood of Vladimir*

The constant reference to the leader's mind and subconscious takes us to another common sphere of the Freudian perspective: the dark, disturbing, and turbulent world of childhood. In fact, during the first few weeks of the

war, an urgent, imprecise, and speculative search was carried out concerning the biography of the young Vladimir: a scrutiny or archaeological exploration of his present policies on the basis of his early life and his experiences from the past. Suddenly, as if it were necessary to look for the causes of the war in some omitted and repressed detail of his childhood, writers began to describe a series of details from a childhood that was seen as difficult and traumatic: a sordid upbringing, a lack of affection, bedroom secrets, sexual abuse, fighting at school, humiliations and betrayals by peers, repressed sexuality, latent homosexuality, etc. (Fallon 2022a; Fisher 2022; Garrido 2022; Rubio 2022; Taubman 2022; Whittell 2022). The sociologist Mauricio Rubio (2022) stated that "for several reasons, the possibility that Putin is a closet gay cannot be discarded." In the words of the neuroscientist James Fallon, the case is that he has a terrible past as an illegitimate son who "routinely suffered abuse from an early age, even sexual abuse." Fallon concludes that "the man is settling his scores with the world because of how he suffered as a child. Now he is the bully" (2022a).

As Vladimir Fédorovski said, we are facing "a complex personality" without a glimmer of fascination in his judgment (Whittell 2022). In fact, the Russian writer and ex-diplomat saw in President Putin a character marked by a childhood of misery and violence, of frustration and resentment, a man who had tried to survive for many years in a conflictive and impoverished quarter of the old city of Leningrad: "The way he has today of responding an eye for an eye in the international sphere goes back to that childhood," Fédorovski stated (Whittell 2022). The writer and journalist Manuel Vicent described him as "a third-rate spy" and "a nobody" born in a marginal quarter populated by thugs. "That nobody is now that thug who is razing Ukraine and has the entire world on tenterhooks," Vicent added (2022). In some sense, the world seems to be a tragic, inverted version of the great man theory of history: a linear and teleological narrative that, rather than heroes and memorable exploits, requires resentful, narcissistic villains, leaders affected by a life full of traumas and childhood complexes that can never be forgotten. In the words of William Taubman:

> "Putin's many grievances against the West, his revivified nationalist ideology and dream of resurrecting the Russian Empire, his recent isolation during the pandemic, and perhaps a hidden illness, too,… all help explain his bloody war against Ukraine. But all are baked into the layers of a man whose main theme of life is a fierce determination to avoid defeat by lashing out against those who humiliate and betray him" (Taubman 2022).

Putting Putin on the couch again and again, focusing the debate on his mental state and his unconscious desires, transferring the reasons for the conflict to a very distant childhood in which everything was preordained, does not seem to help us understand the causes of the current war in Ukraine. Nevertheless, it could serve to justify and rationalize *our* own position in the conflict. In the end, it would not be the first time that Freudian language has been used as a moral discourse to reprove and condemn the enemy: a beleaguered, authoritarian, and malevolent leader that invades and massacres another country and who, in doing so, openly threatens to kill *all of us* (Pick 2012; García-García 2021, e1603).

4.4 *On the Authoritarian Scale*

In fact, Putin's psychological portrait also seems to be court-martial in times of war: an almost unanimous clinical judgment, despite the lack of conclusive proof. As Walter Langer stated in his study on the 1940s, the psychologists and psychiatrists of the twenty-first century recognize the necessary limitations of a diagnosis of the leader that has not been preceded by a detailed clinical analysis (Fallon 2022a; Ivars 2022; Linden & Wilkes 2022). Despite such reservations, nothing has prevented them from putting forward a closed diagnosis since the very start of the war. Despite being based on partial data, rumors, and speculation, the final judgment is often expressed in a categorical way. "There is no doubt in my mind that [Putin] is a psychopath," stated the professor of criminal psychology Vicente Garrido, a perfect example of narcissism, lack of empathy, manipulative ability, and the criminal will typical of the integrated psychopath, who is only discovered when he finally becomes a mass murderer. "Unfortunately, we have already seen several like him," Garrido concluded (2022; see also Gonzales Posada 2022). The neuroscientist James Fallon expressed himself with the same clarity, stating that Putin has the "typical traits" of other dictators of the past: a cold, manipulative, hypersexual, sadistic psychopath (2022a), a portrait similar to that drawn by the psychologist Magnus Linden and the historian George Wilkes (2022).

Some journalists, writers, and historians openly speak of an insane leader who has gone mad while carrying out his duties (Beevor 2022a, 2022b; Freedland 2022; De Azúa 2022; McEwan 2022; Motyl 2022); many other writers, without actually questioning his sanity, still describe Putin using the language of psychology and psychiatry (Bassets 2022; Eltchaninoff 2022; Ivars 2022; Marías 2022; Robertson 2022c; Velasco 2022). Thus, Putin often appears as a "megalomaniac" and a "homophobe" and as "enormously arrogant and self-conscious," to paraphrase the words of the writer Javier Marías (2022). Ian

Robertson states that, although this case is not one of insanity or madness, Putin shows symptoms of narcissism and suffers from the "Hubris syndrome" (Robertson, 2022c). "He is not psychotic, he is not a sick person, he is not crazy," the forensic psychologist Javier Urra repeats, while also describing him as Machiavellian and as a narcissist, a dangerous psychopath (Velasco, 2022). The psychiatrist Vicente Rubio states that, although "he is not mentally ill" and he "is fully conscious of his actions," he still fulfills the profiles of "psychopath" and "evil narcissist" (Ivars 2022).

The most frequent portrait is indebted to the classical literature on the authoritarian personality (Adorno et al. 1950; Freud 1921/2010; Fromm 1941/1982). In fact, the voices of psychoanalysis repeatedly appear in descriptions of the Russian leader: self-conscious, humiliated, resentful, insecure, narcissistic, megalomaniac, authoritarian, psychopathic, paranoid, sadistic, Machiavellian, cynical, hypersexual, perverted, homophobic (Artigue 2022; Brooks 2022; Fallon 2022a; Fisher 2022; Fox 2022; Garrido 2022; Gonzales Posada 2022; Grossman 2022; Linden & Wilkes 2022; Marías 2022; Motyl 2022; Rubio 2022; Taubman 2022; Whittell 2022). Two characterological traits are cited much more than the rest: narcissist and psychopath. "His story is classically Freudian… a tale of narcissism and betrayal," states Robert Fox (2022). Narcissists such as Putin "crave recognition, but they never have enough… they crave psychological security, yet they act in self-destructive ways," states David Brooks (2022). The diagnosis is repeated many times: "extreme narcissist" (Robertson 2022c); "evil narcissist" (Ivars 2022); "super macho narcissism" (Whittell 2002); "psychopath" (Garrido 2002); "narcissistic psychopath" (Fallon 2022a). For Putin the narcissist, "the other does not exist," the psychiatrist Javier Lacruz warns; "he lacks empathy, presents a false pride, despises others and unfailingly seeks power" (Ivars 2022). Before us is an authoritarian leader with such disturbing antisocial tendencies as Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy (Linden & Wilkes 2022); a leader who is "unmoved by the torturing and poisoning of his enemies" (Arias 2022).

If many columnists use the categories made popular by psychoanalysis in order to delve into the mind of the Russian leader, then there are also those who have recourse to the voices of neuroscience, genetics, kinesics, or even criminal anthropology, until they can create a portrait not unlike the *homo delinquent* (Arias 2022; Fallon 2022a; Hernández 2022; Pomerantsev 2022). For instance, the writer Jorge Hernández looks at the form of his head: "a skull that tends to the ovoid (unmistakable syndrome of brilliant psychopaths)" (2022). Examining the features of his face, the writer and linguist Juan Arias

warns, we only see "signs of machismo and a compulsion to fight and reach victory at any cost, as well as an insensitivity to pain in others" (2022; see also Ivars 2022). Various authors have described him as a "wolf," a "cannibalistic bear" and an "aggressive ape," or a "very dangerous beast"—as if Putin were an atavistic being or a return to the primitive stages of evolution (Beevor 2022b; De Azúa 2022). The expert in politics and verbal communication Mario Russo states that "Putin is an aggressive ape. His body is continually in a most primitive attacking stance" (Martos 2022).

4.5 *In the Mirror of Evil*

As mentioned above, a frequent way to convert a clinical and academic theory into a familiar and vulgarized social representation is to associate its abstract formulations and statements with a real, concrete individual, often its creator, or to transform the erudite and complex language of science into a symbol or icon, as in Freud's couch (Moscovici 1961/1979). Even so, the reception of the psychological paradigm of nationalism would never have been so effective and penetrating without the memory of an alternative iconic character, much less related to the intellectual creation and academia than to war and total destruction. In fact, besides being the incarnation of infamy and wickedness, following WWII and the Holocaust, the figure of Adolf Hitler will be remembered as a simile or metaphor of psychological malaise and mental collapse, someone with emotional problems, a tormented childhood, and authoritarian personality. As the historian Daniel Pick rightly pointed out, the words "Hitler" and "little Hitler," or the pejorative terms "Nazi" and "fascist," came to be used after the war as a metaphor or rhetorical figure referring to psychological conflicts, "authoritarian qualities," and "pernicious states of mind" (Pick 2012, 242).

The psychiatrization of the Russian leader has been repeatedly constructed in the distorted, amplifying, and shameful mirror of the person responsible for the Holocaust (Amat 2022; Bassets 2022; de Azúa 2022; Fallon 2022a; Friedman 2022; Grossman 2022; Motyl 2022; Pomerantsev 2022; Ruane 2022; Rubio 2022; Vicent 2022). Thus, many articles incorporated the comparison in the headline itself: *Vladimir Putin: la reencarnación de Adolf Hitler* (Flandez 2022); *Putin, el reflejo distorsionado de Hitler* (Beevor 2022a); *Everything Vladimir Putin is doing echoes Adolf Hitler* (Baker 2022); *How Putin is following Hitler's playbook* (Jones 2022); *El 'esquizofascismo' de Adolf Putin* (Amat 2022); *Inside Vladimir Putin's fears and paranoias that mirror Adolf Hitler in 1945* (Hanlon 2022); *Petrified Putin's 'deepening paranoia' is eerily similar to Hitler's final days* (Roberts 2022). From *The New York Times*,

the columnist Thomas Friedman saw in the invasion "a twenty-first-century rerun of Hitler's onslaught against the rest of Europe" (2022). From *The Guardian*, Peter Pomerantsev stated that, despite the apparent differences between both regimes, "the underlying mindset is the same" (2022). From *El País*, Lluís Bassets spoke of the same "erratic and paranoid personality... as if Hitler had managed to get nuclear weapons" (2022). The American historian Alexander Motyl, in *Politico,* insisted in this comparison:

> "Both men came to power after their countries experienced imperial dismemberment and economic collapse. Both promised to revive their nation's glory and enjoyed enormous popularity… Both identified their nations with themselves. Both promoted reactionary ideologies that identified one nation -Jews for Hitler, Ukrainians for Putin- as the enemy. And both used their national minorities living in neighboring states as pretexts for expansion. Both were also consummate liars and had deranged personalities…" (Motyl 2022).

Their rise to power following the break-up of the empire, their total identification with the nation, their reactionary nationalism, their recalcitrant xenophobia… Although these and many other historical parallelisms and similarities could be established between one character and the other, the last traits that Motyl points to provide rhetorical strength and narrative plausibility to the entire comparison: their mental insanity and their absolute evil, the same old traits of the *uomo nazionalista*.

5. Concluding Remarks

In the early 1990s, the British historian Eric Hobsbawm interpreted the owl of Minerva's circular flight as the definitive twilight of a modern era of nations and nationalisms (Hobsbawm 1990). "After all," said Hobsbawm, "the very fact that historians are at least beginning to make some progress in the study and analysis of nations and nationalism suggests that, as so often, the phenomenon is past its peak" (1990, 192). Since then, several generations of researchers and experts in nationalism have continued, with the apparent distance and coldness of the owl, to expose and deconstruct the political passions of a world of invented traditions, imagined communities, and banalized flags (Anderson 1991; Billig 1995; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Nevertheless, at this point, it would seem convenient to remember that the experts on nations and nationalism are only a small, almost insignificant, part of the population as a whole; for many other academics and most ordinary citizens, the gods and altars of history are still intact and are remembered

and celebrated. In a recent analysis of the Western media's interpretations of the war in Ukraine, the historian Alexander Maxwell exposed how the wider public still consider the historicist or "primordialist" representation of the past to be valid. "While nationalism theorists have mostly rejected primordialism, politicians and the wider public typically have a primordialist and essentialist understanding of national history" (Maxwell 2022b, 152). In the cited research, Maxwell also alluded to another outstanding and persistent aspect of the rhetoric concerning nationalism: the psychiatrization or "stigmatization" of a leader with "fantastic," "delusional," or "deranged" ideas that is repeatedly compared to Adolf Hitler (Maxwell 2022b, 163-164; see also Maxwell 2022a, 94-103).

The continuity of the world of nations and nationalism could be put to the test by the penetration of the two social representations: the historicist, which naturalizes the nation and essentializes the past (often, *our* nation and *our* past); and the psychologist, which articulates the condemnation of nationalism (almost always that of the others). This second representation becomes particularly visible at times of ethnic conflicts and territorial wars. As a spectator of the war in Bosnia, the Serbian psychiatrist Dusan Kecmanovic (1996) stressed the close link between nationalism and authoritarianism. The F scale of authoritarianism identifies the prejudices, dogmatism, and intolerance toward foreigners, presenting the nationalist as someone with low self-esteem and emotional problems; a weak, frustrated person who brings pain, death, and destruction to others in the attempt to hide a lack of affection. A similar rhetoric has been used by psychologists, psychiatrists, and many other writers during the war in Ukraine. Several writers expressly cited the names of Sigmund Freud, Erich Fromm, Henry Dicks, Abraham Maslow, and Theodor Adorno (Artigue 2022; Fox 2022; Gonzales Posada 2022; Ivars 2022; Pomerantsev 2022; Rubio 2022; etc.). However, the modernists Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, or Eric Hobsbawm have very seldom been quoted. This provides credibility to the initial hypothesis: the ideas and suppositions of modernism have been very little heard beyond the halls of academia, in the field of politics and the media, or as social representation and profane theory. Alternatively, one could believe that the owl of Minerva is the first to be sacrificed in times of hawks, tanks and drones.

In the field of nationalism studies, it has long been known that nationalism is a fluid, "chameleon like" ideology (Özkirimli 2000, 61); a "modular artefact" (Anderson 1991, 21); a "ductile tool" (Tamir 2021, 237) which can be used for many public and private ends, consciously or unconsciously, but not always of a projective nature (Ramírez 1992). It is also well known that it is not possible

to look for the key to ideological processes in the personality of a minority of individuals (Bauman 1997; Billig 1978; Mock 2019, 105-129). Neither can nationalist wars simply be explained as a regression to primitive barbarism or a lost battle of childhood. Even so, the psychodynamic concept of the nationalist as tormented, narcissistic, and turbulent is still one of the most penetrating and lasting social representations of the ideology, a profane theory periodically raised by politicians and communicators to explain the origins of war. And all too frequently it is an outraged, psychiatrizing discourse that transfers the causes of the conflict to a faraway, uncertain time, that masks their own responsibility in the present and projects onto others all the blame, complexes, and moral destitution, making dialogue and pacification even more difficult.

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