

Vladimir Putin as a Return of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: A Psychohistorical Exploration of the Nature of Human Contradictoriness

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The split personality of Vladimir Putin draws parallels with the characters of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. From our current knowledge of developmental psychology, especially prenatal psychology, we can recognize and describe traumatizing conditions in early childhood as a background for such personality splits. These traumatizing childhood conditions experienced by Putin are in an interplay and inner resonance with the traumatizing childhood conditions in Russia. It is essential to acknowledge how early childhood traumas have shaped our collective history, as evident in the violent and exploitative structures of domination across societies. By examining the significance of early childhood conditions, we can gain a deeper understanding of human nature and work towards a more empathetic and peaceful world.

Keywords: Putin, psychohistory, prenatal psychology, war, trauma.

In assessing the personality of Vladimir Putin, two perspectives overlap. In his early days, Putin was suave and agreeable, while the apparatchik he became culminated in his violent policies with military means. In 1886, the

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English writer Robert Louis Stevenson described such a seemingly strange contradiction in one person in the fictionalized persons of Dr. Henry Jekyll and Mr. Edward Hyde. In his story, the honorable doctor and scientist, and the violent criminal, are two sides of the same person. Exploring the nature of human contradictoriness, which stems from the unique conditions of early development, sheds light on the origins of this kind of split personality.

The Nature of Human Contradictoriness

A fundamental problem in the nature of *Homo sapiens* is a self-overload by the conditions of his early development. Due to the evolutionary-biologically conditioned birth in a state of neurological immaturity and incompleteness, the second part of the fetal development and maturation in the first year of life occurs in the outside world, the extrauterine early year (Portmann, 1969). Therefore, the infant is in an existential dependence on the related presence of a mother or relationship person who has to compensate for the neurological immaturity. Sigmund Freud formulated the situation: “The psychic mother object replaces the fetal situation for the child” (Freud, 1926, p. 169).

This unnaturalness of the initial conditions of life is the background for the vulnerability of the child at the beginning of life. At the same time, it is the background for the astonishing creativity of humans to reshape themselves and their environment again and again. This is a vast topic that I have unfolded and explained in five books (Janus, 2011a, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021a).

Due to the premature nature of human birth, early experiences, and associated traumas are stored in the midbrain and right cerebrum, inaccessible to the linguistically organized left hemisphere of the brain. However, they continue to influence the experience and behavior in an emotionally related and mediated way. At the same time, under traumatic conditions, they are effective only as repetitions, dominating the experience and behavior of the so-called dissocial person.

In this context, missing or negative empathy is of special importance, as mentalization research assumes (Taubner, 2016). In the initial period of life, empathy is either learned or not (Tronick et al., 1978), as is the case with the frightening numbness of dissocial people. This applies equally to collective socialization conditions, as has been extensively researched in psychohistory (DeMause, 2000, 2005; Fuchs, 2019; Reiss et al., 2021).

Goethe's Faust exemplified the dichotomy of good and evil sides in us, with fairy-tale and myth-like features. A half-century later, Robert Louis Stevenson was able to formulate and portray these different dimensions in the concrete sub-personalities of Henry Jekyll and Edward Hyde in a very personal way. However, only today, based on prenatal psychology and psychohistory, can we, as shown above, grasp the developmental psychological traumatization background of this hidden resonance in being traumatized early in childhood. This leads us back to the formation of contradictoriness between Vladimir Putin and Russian society.

The Psychological Background of Putin's Contradictoriness

From a psycho-historical point of view, the current war is a reenactment of the immense traumatization of the Russian and Ukrainian populations in their history, especially during World War II (Snyder, 2022). The war was outwardly over in 1945 but lived on in people as an embodied horror (Van der Kolk, 2019). Then, it erupted again in the context of social modernization and the associated individuation or transformation demands of recent years in the form of envisioning a restaging of the war.

This dynamic is reflected clearly in Putin's statements that the so-called special operation is intended to prevent a genocide of the Russian population planned by the Nazis in Ukraine. I believe Putin speaks from the experience of his parents: the German army, led by the Nazis, planned the genocide of the population of Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg) through starvation. This put a traumatic burden on Putin's parents. His mother narrowly escaped starvation, while an older brother of Putin's starved to death. Putin's father lost five older brothers in the war and suffered a serious war wound while defending Leningrad. Putin's father also allegedly forced the pregnancy against the mother's will, as she is said to have testified to a friend (Sadovnikova, 2017). Both parents had to work in a factory and could hardly care for the boy, who grew up on the streets in the milieu of violent youth gangs (Fuchs, 2022; Müller-Meiningen, 2022).

In an interview, Putin has described himself as a former ragamuffin. According to a childhood story, rats lived in the staircase of Putin's home in Leningrad. Putin had difficulties at school. According to credible testimonies, he was saved by a female teacher who cared for the disadvantaged boy and systematically supported him (Sadovnikova, 2017). Putin was born seven

years after the war's end but the traumatization of his parents and the Leningrad population, half of whom had starved to death during the army siege still reverberated when he was conceived, carried, and born. This background of trauma in Putin's family has its counterpart in the extreme traumatization of Russian society.

In addition, the repressive structures of the violent tsarist rule with their devastating effects on the situation of children (Ihanus, 2001a, 2001b, 2008, 2016; Krimer, 2022; Lincoln, 1981) were followed by the Stalinist tyranny with about 750,000 executions in the so-called "show trials" during the *Great Terror* at the end of the 1930s, a Gulag system with 17 million prisoners in predominantly inhumane conditions, and the visitation of the German army's war of extermination which resulted in the deaths of 20 million Russian soldiers and 7 million civilians. A problem in recent Russian history is how Stalin became the good savior of the fatherland through his victory over the even more violent felon Hitler, thereby legitimizing his claim to imperial power.

Consequences of Psychotraumatic Stress

Today, we know from research the effects of psychotraumatic stress in the form of anxiety, depression, and insecurities, and the disposition to commit violent acts (Fuchs, 2019, 2021, 2022; Hartwich, 2022; Huber, 2018; Janus, 2021b, 2022; Mareckova et al., 2018; Müller-Meiningen, 2022; Scheinost et al., 2017; Van der Kolk, 2019; Verny, 2005). In addition, the restriction of the capacity for conflict is an important consequence, which is why the reaction to difficulties quickly turns into violence, into acting out one's own trauma on the other. The allegedly "miserable creature" that "has no right to exist" corresponds to the so-called "equivalence mode" in mentalization research, in which the outside is perceived in the mirror of one's own strong emotions (Taubner, 2016, p. 72). This rejected part had no real home or *raison d'être*, as can only be found in an empathetic parental relationship with non-traumatized and mature parents. Putin's tendency to classify everything by hostility, conspiracies, and threats is the expression of a deep disturbance experienced during his life *in utero* and his extrauterine first years.

Perhaps the often polemically heated discussion about the war in Ukraine can be better understood if one realizes that the German Reich, i.e., our great-

grandparents, grandparents, and parents who lived during the two world wars, were caught in a similar projective reenactment of early childhood experiences of violence, where “a beating never hurt anyone,” and infants were left to scream “so that their lungs were ventilated” (DeMause, 1979, 1996, 2005; Ende, 1979; Janus, 2021b). This lack of empathy was also a characteristic feature of earlier European politics, not only in German colonial policy but also in the violent structures of English colonial policy (Elkins, 2022) and the Belgian colonial policy in the Congo (Conrad, 1902). From history, we know about the violent and exploitative structures of European societies’ domination and the Catholic Church’s criminal history (Deschner, 1989). The war in Ukraine can be seen as a reenactment or continuation of this historical psychotraumatic stress.

Reflections

It is not easy to understand the paradoxes of history with great creative developments and, at the same time, frighteningly destructive violence and abuse—a kind of collective staging of the dimensions of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. In the novella “Turning of the Screw,” the American writer Henry James (1898) describes how a hostile rejection of children and a disregard for their relational needs can lead to such a split into an angelic and a malevolent side. The abysmal cruelty in family and social relationships in Russia is also portrayed in several of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novels. The life of most of the Earth’s population was existentially marked by this cruelty.

Parents’ empathic capacities were fragmentary and had an incomplete response to children’s real needs. This was especially true when humans began to live in unnaturally large groups after the invention of agriculture and animal husbandry, thereby damaging or deforming mothers’ instincts from their primate heritage. The early separation of mother and child in early and advanced civilizations, and the associated rupture of the existential need for an empathetic presence of a caregiver had tangible consequences for the mental health of the offspring (Renggli, 2001). From today’s knowledge, we can recognize this as a reason for the tremendous cruelty of wars.

The chance of our time consists in the fact that we can reflect on these connections for the first time and we can recognize the premonitions of great writers. The perception of the life-historical significance of the conditions at the beginning of life can be a great resource. Then the question arises: how

can one give such a fundamental meaning to the traumatic aspects of early childhood conditions when we expect parents to love their children? That is precisely where the study of the history of childhood within the framework of psychohistory can give answers (DeMause, 1979, 2000).

We can see today that only in the second half of the last century, a larger part of the population in Western societies reached a maturity that allowed a truly empathetic relationship with children (Armbruster, 2006; Axness, 2012; Franz, 2009; Grille, 2005, 2016). From a psycho-historical point of view, the love of parents in the historical process has a fundamental importance. Parents, with an instinctive love for their children, do everything possible so that their children grow up under less traumatic conditions than they had to suffer. This process is agonizingly slow because of the compulsion to repeat negative patterns stemming from early imprints. The initial unhappiness must first be restaged so that a new learning process can take place.

The disillusionment caused by the horrors of World War I made possible the first approach to a democratic constitution in Germany. Because the collateral damage of traumatizing an entire generation of younger men in World War I was so extensive, it took the repetition of World War II to learn that violence is not the only solution and to develop a maturity of reflexivity that then enabled democratic approaches to break through. One can hope that through such a destructive reenactment of the violent early childhoods in the Bloodlands, a learning process will be set in motion to help human rights, self-determination, and a breakthrough of responsibility.

Conclusion

The psychohistorical exploration unveils the profound impact of early childhood conditions on human nature, echoing through the annals of history. Putin's contradictoriness mirrors the contradictions ingrained in the fabric of societies scarred by violence and exploitation. The trauma of war, as experienced by Putin's family and the Russian population, reverberates through generations, shaping ideologies and policies. In the context of Putin as a symbol of generational (dis)functioning, the imperative for early childhood development, empathy, attachment, and trauma-informed care becomes glaringly evident. The narrative of Putin's life becomes a microcosm reflecting society's broader challenges in breaking free from the cycle of violence and fostering a more empathetic and peaceful world.

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