Psychological Thoughts on Hitler's Waffen-SS and South-African "Necklacing" Mobs

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The following thoughts have been triggered by a discussion on South-African genocide, aggression, dominance, group-think within military groups, and a documentary on World War II, particularly the madness of Waffen-SS (Hitler's elite guards), that included many interviews of survivors, also historical ones (ZDF info, 2015a).

Particularly interesting are statements of denial or people who defended Hitler long after the war was over. Hinting at what drives people to such behavior was one soldier reflecting that in the end *they had nothing left they really fought for*. British and French fought against the oppression of a dictator, with a purpose. SS-soldiers, or those of Hitler-Jugend, had often frivolously entered their units at a young age in some sort of mass hysteria. Maybe there also was some prestige, as in the beginning only few were admitted, and the training was tough. Just as some fraternities treat their new members badly to create an illusion of a worthy organization (it has to be worth something if you endure that), military drill tends to aim for the same: effort justification (Festinger, 1957) and depersonalization (Grossman, 2014, ch. 6). Once recruits were in, there was no way out due to the demands of authority (Milgram, 1965, p. 65). If soldiers did not perform, comrades were punished along and in turn disciplined the deviant team member. If soldiers tried to escape, they were accused of deserting and executed. So everybody mutually kept the slaughter going. The anxiety to stop probably outweighed the small chance of survival in battle, as anxiety per se is multidirectional away from the most immediately experienced source

of threat (cf. Higgins, 1987). Stereotyping by groupthink into heroes, traitors, and foes by

"*concurrence-seeking* tendency, which fosters overoptimism, lack of vigilance, and sloganistic

thinking about the weakness and immorality of out-groups," to continue is probably the only

valid option left within the group (Janis, 1973, p. 20, his italics). Concordantly, one survivor

decades later reported that when a deserter was executed, at that time in that context he felt that it

was right to kill the traitor (ZDF Info, 2015b; 2015c).

Striking is the fact that most recruits entered the life-threatening membership in the elite

with little to nothing to expect in return. The groups reportedly cultivated a feeling of

invincibility, and by propaganda the SS likely had that reputation in society. On rational

consideration though, it has to appear ignorant to join those troops that count as the most

ferocious in the war and end up in the most dangerous encounters. Compare the participants in

Festinger's (1957) experiment that did an absolutely boring job for just one dollar (which counts

as almost nothing in return). The less soldiers had to expect when joining that war and the more

dangerous and absurd the operations of the units were they found themselves in, the more they

had to defend the cruelties after the war was lost, to relieve the massive dissonance that must

have arisen from joining in the first place.

[Follows a discussion on the South-African gang-killing practice of a "necklace": mobs of people

entrap a harmless person, putting a used vehicle tire around their shoulder (the "necklace"), set

the tire on fire and wait till they burn to death.]

Dwelling on Grossman's (2014) book "On Killing" there is an interesting remark on

military firing squads. As the number of people who seem to be immune to the aftermath of

having killed appears to be only about 1-2%, it is safe to assume that not all people in the above-

described mobs qualify. They will thus have to deal with the consequences. In firing squads who

execute people in situations of war, mechanisms can be observed to organize distance from the person to be executed and proximity to authority and group. Squad leaders only appear as nearby, established persons of authority and are not involved in the actual killing. Groups provide the social, justifying background, and blindfolding creates distance (ch. 6). This is in line with Milgram's (1965) findings.

Comparing the "necklacing" mobs, the dominant persons who initiate violence may not be directly involved in violent acts but only encourage those who execute them. The tire necklaces, especially once they are burning, probably function as instruments to de-humanize victims. This serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it lowers the resistance that has to be bypassed for the later act of ignition. Secondly, the tire has to be ignited, not the person, again lowering resistance. Finally, once it is burning, it keeps the aggressors from having to consume 100% of the consequences of their actions, as the face is partially hidden by the flames and material and afterwards hardly recognizable as such. The lack of perceiving the consequences of one's actions has been discussed in the context of suicide bombing (Grossman, 2014, ch. 6).

Grossman argues that the higher a resistance people have to overcome to perform an act of violence, the bigger their trauma will be. So in those mobs it is likely that followers who play an active role in the killing will suffer most. The initiators do not necessarily have to be directly involved in the act of killing. This suggests the hypothesis that the people who have the most resistance to the act of killing to begin with, once they are involved and have transcended the threshold of killing, will defend the actions of the group most vehemently. As those acts are widely considered criminal, social backup is not to be expected except from their directly involved peers. Thus, rationalization is only available within the group upon prior stereotypes. This may lead to the repression of trauma and continued violent behavior.

Trauma and memory have been controversially discussed (McNally, 2005). The hippocampus may over-generalize associations although originally causative events are not consciously reconstructed, firing for similar events at a later time (Richardson, 2012, "The context-sensitive brain"). Repression, in this sense, may be seen as avoiding to actively reconstruct memories of the traumatizing event. Accompanying the release of stress hormones, traumatizing events should be easily remembered. It is likely due to subsequent coping processes that memories are altered into substantially different versions. Due to hippocampal pattern generalization, subsequent anxiety is to be expected in a variety of situations (McNally, 12005, p. 818-819). This continued aggressive behavior has been observed in child soldiers in Congo, and if violent behavior is continued may even turn into appetitive aggression (Hermenau, Hecker, Maedl, Schauer, & Elbert, 2013, p. 2).

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Hello Rosseweater,

The DSM-IV-TR characterizes a passive-aggressive personality disorder by "negativistic attitudes and passive resistance", and an opposition to meeting expectations that have been set by other people (Americal Psychiatric Organization, 2000, p. 733). Characteristic are obstruction of efforts, excuses, and external attribution of failures. Thus one can assume that somebody else will be hurt by the action of a passive-aggressive individual, for example, by failing to meet objectives. It can also be assumed that the passive-aggressive individual is aware of the consequences that are caused by their resistance and are not properly addressed. There is an intention to hurt, and the other party is likely to experience the hurt, it thus qualifies as aggressive in both definitions we have discussed.

The problem arises how to delineate passive aggression from resistance to hierarchies. Western societies in many situations take hierarchies for granted, whereas it is only one of many possible forms of organizing. Even more, hierarchies appear to contradict the democratic principles they root in. This contradiction is blurred by republic systems that are only democratically ratified, but widely operate in hierarchical modes. As open aggression is legally sanctioned, passive aggression in some cases may be the only way of civil disobedience, which is an important component of any political system. Just because certain laws managed to pass legislation does not make them ethically and morally normative. Even though a political party may have gained power, it often represents less than 50% of the nation's population, thus the majority of the population is likely to be in opposition to the prevailing government. The more compliance any system or organization demands, and the more rigorously disobedience is punished, the more important passive resistance becomes as a tool (cf. Brennan, 2008).

The question stays whether this form of resistance is aggression. Resistance is only effective when there are consequences. If workers go on strike without consequences for company and society, that strike is useless. In Germany public transports are on strike this week. The population, of course, expects the companies to cope and transport to work as always. If this was possible, then the striking workers would simply be useless. According to Fuess (1990), strikes "are easier to mount in a duopoly than in a competitive industry" (p. 59). In any way, the company's output must be reduced substantially for the strike to be effective. However, this dynamics already presumes an asymmetrical distribution of power, that is, hierarchical relationship. This struggle for dominance also exists among unions, as you can see in Deutsche Welle's (2015) article on the strike: Lobbyists aim for a law to be passed in summer that would bind smaller unions to the agreements of the larger union within the same company. May such a law also be seen as an act of aggression?

Thus, aggressive behavior appears to be necessary in the negotiation of needs particularly once hierarchies are established. The difference is to be found in the way this aggression is expressed and the effect on the victim. Different cultures allow different types of expression of aggression, as well as different effects on victims. Many countries, for example, allow financial aggression on jobless people or people with jobs that are arbitrarily defined as "less qualified" (unemployment like education is not voluntary, and financial aggression does hurt).

<div align="center">References</div>

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