

Processing shared experiences of collective trauma

“O Lord our God, Give rest to the souls of Thy departed servants in a place of brightness, a place of refreshment, a place of repose.”

Departing prayer

'When Tolstoy dies, everything will go to hell!' [Chekhov] said often.
'Literature?'

'Literature too.'

Bunin's memories of Chekhov, 1914

Shadows of the dead

When I was a child in the Soviet Union, I had a book that opened to a picture of an ageing bald man squinting up with a cunning glint in his eye, with the words “Lenin lived. Lenin lives. Lenin will live on” emblazoned alongside. No adult could explain what this meant. The mysterious inscription became but an ornament to me, however the unanswered question took root in my young mind, shaping my Soviet identity.

Fast forward a few decades, and for over four years now I have been working within easy reach of Red Square, ever proximate to the deceased body of the man who lived, lives and will live on. The eternity-evoking granite cube tomb, brought to life by the great master of religious edifices Schusev, became a state tribune. Lenin’s mausoleum is a hitherto unknown architectural construct, a symbol of Soviet identity. This frightful embodiment of the collective Soviet idea – which on the one hand speaks of the inability to overcome loss and trauma and bury the past, while at the same time becoming a stage for receiving countless solemn processions – is undoubtedly a bold symbol of pride. The embalmed mummy has no hope of either change or eternal peace. The only possible course of action is an endless stream of sacrifices in the name of a dead idea and a dead body, which has been instructed to live forever. It is only now that I am beginning to understand the frightening meaning of the mantra so diligently inserted in my mind at the outset of my journey through life. Could it really be that we will be forever bound by the invisible power of the unquiet shadows of our ancestors?

Collective processes and collective trauma

What collective processes are currently under way in Russia and what unresolved collective trauma do they expose? This understanding is virtually impossible to attain while living there. I have found it very painful to touch upon the topic of collective processes in Russian society, particularly in relation to the acute conflict near Russia's southwest borders. It was only at a May conference in Potsdam, dedicated to fostering mutual understanding between Ukrainians, Russians and Germans, and exploring our shared history, that I was able to approach the conscious exploration of these processes and begin to understand the trauma that lies beneath.

I had a dream on my third night in Potsdam. I am in Red Square on a warm sunny day. In the square stands a contemporary art installation. The space is filled with rows of human feet in red boots. The feet are about the same size, and each one has a QR code which takes you to a history of the victims of Soviet rule. The installation is titled *No more parades*. The dream was an illustration of the states I experienced during the conference in immersing myself in the personal and collective experiences of the delegates. As long as everyone is marching as one, there is no need engage the mind, to think about the substance of mass action: purpose and destination are irrelevant. It seems that my psyche responded to the interaction with collective and individual traumatic ideas by constructing a vivid image of “the termination of a senseless process”.

Putting an end to things is indeed very important, beautifully illustrated by Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *The Red Shoes*. The story's main character, a little girl who sought her sense of identity through external validation and not internal processes fell prisoner to her own Shadow. The only way to set herself free – to stop – was to sacrifice her feet, to which the red shoes had become attached.

Jung was asked about the reasons that Shadows manifest in such destructive forms. The reason is that when we reject God, we find him in the most unexpected place: in the Shadows (in the form of the Devil). The only way the heroine could save her soul was to chop off her shoe-bound feet and repent. The reward was regaining the path to God, to Self.

Plenty of sacrifices have already been made: the 20th century brought us many an executioner and many a victim. The only thing that is required for the full rehabilitation of the collective soul is repentance. Without this repentance we will not be able to stop; we will continue to march on in our red boots, waving red banners. Instead of shedding warm tears to mourn the victims, we will keep senselessly flaunting our strength and rattling our swords at parades, demonstrating our yearning to put them to use.

One of the most important discussion points for my Potsdam group was the possibility of containing two polarised states to overcome a crisis borne of collective trauma. We have both good and evil inside us at the same time. We need to find the strength to accept our evil and aggressive side, in all of its destructive potential, while developing our good, creative and constructive side.

To this day a comment by one of the members of my group – that in case of military action he would kill me simply because of my ethnicity – fills me with horror. This was probably the first time I realised how easily death could befall me at the will of a person trapped by their ideas about their identity. Becoming strong requires finding ourselves – we all go through this stage of acquiring a national identity, a sense of belonging to a particular ethnic group. This rite of passage has great benefits: it allows us to be a more harmonious part of a social group that we identify with, through which we can gain strength and tap into our heritage. However this same thing forces us to be wary of or hostile towards the values of other nations, since they threaten the sense of self we have acquired.

Yet to grow, the notions of identity should be continually questioned and recast. Perhaps during such iterations, nations will no longer see themselves as opposing tribes, but as fellow tribesmen with a shared path in life and a shared home, which is why we all need to learn to agree to live in peace and harmony on this planet.

We all need to contain two polarities: membership of a particular ethnic group and an understanding of the fact that an ethnic group is but a part of a larger community. During group work in Potsdam I found myself starting to relate to the European attendees over our ambivalent humanity and the sadness for the victims of that humanity gone awry. I believe that the unbreakable human spirit will one day allow us to identify ourselves as earthlings, united by our shared and requited love for this planet.

At the moment we are witnessing a difficult and painful process of change that should heal Russian society from past trauma. New ideas about the mind and spirit are probably crystallising at this very moment, but we know there can be no political solutions when it comes to matters of the heart. This is the very reason why we as individual minds and souls should be establishing spiritual ideas that will heal Russia.

In the final stages of its existence, the Russian Empire was a peaceful home for more than 100 nationalities, not counting the smallest ethnic groups. Yet it was not the largest state on the planet. In essence, the *Russia* project was a model for future life on Earth, free of artificial state boundaries. Russia brought this model to life on a smaller scale, on its land. Perhaps this is why Tsiolkovsky's ideas about the cosmos, Bakunin's and Kropotkin's dreams of a harmonious existence of people without a state, Vernadsky's teachings on a noosphere – the sphere of human thought – took root so

keenly in Russia. Russian philosophers were well ahead of their time – even today we are not ready to bring to life the ideas of these great minds. There are still around 100 large national groups living in Russia today, and one would hope that they can live in peace and harmony.

Healing trauma

To recover from trauma, one needs to resolve the unresolved. In his book *The Inner World of Trauma*, American psychoanalyst Donald Kalsched writes: “In our quest to overcome the consequences of trauma, it is important to remember that external factors are not the sole cause of that trauma. Our psyche transforms the external event into a self-traumatising internal force, which starts out as a defence mechanism, but ultimately turns self-destructive. When archetypal defences take hold of the traumatised psyche, their initially noble attempts to safeguard the unshakeable spirit transform them from a self-preservation system to a self-destruction system”. [Donald Kalsched. *The Inner World of Trauma*, introduction to Russian edition 2001 p.10]

I was incredibly happy to live out a great many feelings at the conference that I had previously subconsciously suppressed in Russia to guard myself against the associated pain. In Moscow, I simply emotionally disengaged from the most traumatic topics. But it is important for the spirit to live through such difficult states as well. Facing a trauma is crucial for recovering from that traumatic scenario. Until this is resolved, the spirit will keep attracting traumatic situations in its desire to maintain natural equilibrium.

This is how I think about the unresolved emotional trauma in Russian society, about how much we have squeezed into the Shadows. Potsdam allowed me to experience the power of the psychic load contained in suppressed feelings, emotions and worries.

The 20th century generously doled out hideous trauma. God only knows how much time and effort is required to enable Russian society to restore the psychological wholeness that can shelter all fragments of the shattered collective soul.

Jungian analyst, Tel Aviv University professor Henry Abramovitch articulated the importance of giving your forefathers a home. The Jews were always highly respectful of man's most important transition into life after death, to 'the world beyond'.

The Bible highlights the importance of death: “A good name is better than a good ointment, and the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth” (Eccl., 7:1). Alongside this we see the belief in European folklore that an incorrectly interred person, as well as a person who died a 'bad' death, becomes an unquiet evil spirit. This is how I see the souls of the victims of the crimes of Lenin, Stalin, the Nazis and the like – evil spirits circling the expanses of the Russian lands, seeking new blood. Each new tragedy gives them the chance to be mourned and put to rest with the latest victims. And what do we need? I think we need to finally face and heal our collective trauma, to put to rest the hungry evil spirits and turn them into kind guardian angels.

In the Book of Job, a cemetery is described as “the house of meeting for all living” (Job 30:23). This is an interesting aspect of uniting with one's ancestors, which are forever at one with all generations of a nation, living and dead. A harmonious society remembers the dead.

A ban on facing trauma

The squeezing of psychic processes related to 20th-century trauma from the collective consciousness is largely related to ancestors who were inhumanely tortured by fellow man and not laid to rest. The torturers were commemorated with monuments, had streets and cities named after them, while their victims were forgotten. Such is the individual psyche: traumatic defences are highly resistant to change and you could probably talk about similar mechanisms at the level of a society's collective psyche. There is no experience of overcoming 20th century horrors in the Russian collective consciousness, which creates a sense that this topic is forbidden. The myths that haven't been dealt with need resolving: our psyche strives to actualise this resolution no matter how

tragic it might be. We as psychoanalysts will have a key role in determining how traumatic defences are lifted to enable the healing of collective trauma to stop it from happening again.

Treatment options: collective rituals and symbols. The funeral service as a ritual for the living

The Potsdam conference gave me a lot in terms of understanding and dealing with collective processes in Russia and in Europe, and understanding how we can work together. Support from a group and the associated dynamics have great healing powers.

The Russian Orthodox Church has for centuries carefully preserved funeral rites. Russian Orthodoxy refers to death as 'dormition': a state of sleep in preparation for awakening to eternal life. The church funeral service is the most important burial rite. The funeral prayer asks: "O Lord our God, Thy servant... remit and pardon all their sins, voluntary and involuntary... Give rest to the souls of Thy departed servants in a place of brightness, a place of refreshment, a place of repose." Thus in the minds of the living taking part in the ritual, the departed gains a place of rest, no matter what their life was like.

Parting with the dead in ancient Russia was traditionally a very emotional process. In 1715, Peter I tried to break with this Russian tradition with his 'Decree on Wailing', prohibiting "wailing today and henceforth" at funerals. From this moment, burial rites tended towards simplification.

During the church service, the priest reads aloud the "departing prayer", which asks for the forgiveness of all sins of the deceased, who requests and receives absolution from everyone present. After the prayer is delivered, those gathered extinguish their candles and ask for forgiveness from the departed. At peace with everyone, he is ready to leave the church one last time.

The deceased is lowered into the grave with his face turned eastwards. All of the people who have gathered cast a handful of earth into the grave. This ancient tradition probably dates back to pagan times and symbolises the agreement of all those present to pass the departed to Mother Earth. At the same time, this has a profound impact on the participants: they thus encounter the numinous, watching the transition into the afterlife. Of course the level of engagement with the numinous is deeply individualistic, but the collective experience, even at different levels, unites and helps establish a new identity for each person participating in the ritual: all of them have now let the deceased person go and are ready for life without him.

One often hears that a person who was not present at a funeral is unable to fully overcome the loss – it is as though they never consented to the departure, not benefiting from the healing energy of the group. The burial rite, when performed correctly, eases the pain of the living, tempering their sadness.

I feel a need for a funeral service for all victims and for a profound repentance in Russia. In the 1960s, Polish Catholic priests wrote a letter to their German brethren: "We forgive you and please, forgive us". This letter is thought to mark the start of the rapprochement between the Germans and the Poles after the horrors of World War II. For me these words embody a working formula that can kick-start the process of repentance and reconciliation in Russian society, which miraculously survived the tornado of last century. The ritual we all need is a funeral service, so that they can find a home and our collective psyche can get closer to wholeness. I think that the time has come for our society to regain the psychic energy it lost to trauma and fully accept the fullness of the heritage our ancestors left. And a new post-trauma identity, of course.

The future of Russia largely depends on us, the Russian healers of human spirit – on the extent to which we are able to contain the ambivalence of human nature and our frightening past and present. The practice of group analysis and the experience of known rites can help shape ideas and an understanding of how we can join efforts to respond to the challenges of our truly enormous collective unconscious.