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Psychoanalysis in the War: A Debate with Russian Colleagues

For years I have been monitoring online or in presence supervisory groups formed by Russian psychoanalysts, who live and practice in various cities, including outside Russia. These are dear friends as well as colleagues who closely follow Western psychoanalysis, especially French, and many of them call themselves Lacanians.

Some of these analysts detest Putin and call him Putler (Putin + Hitler), they say they are under surveillance by the regime and condemn the invasion of Ukraine. But not a large number of them. With one of these groups, which had been active for over 20 years, I had a meeting to discuss clinical cases on February 28th. A few days earlier they had sent me a written case for discussion online.

Here I have tried to transcribe the discussion more or less as it happened. There were about ten participants in all, whom I will call with the letters of the alphabet. The conversation took place in English.

Sergio Benvenuto: "I've read the clinical case. But before commenting on it, I would like to ask each of you your opinion on the current war in Ukraine."

Some ask me why.

S.B.: "Psychoanalysis is not done on the moon, but on the earth. The psychoanalyst is also a citizen, and lives in the same society as his analysands. Furthermore, I'm convinced – in the wake of Lacan – that psychoanalysis is not a neutral technique of treatment, but is based on an ethical approach to subjectivity. Psychoanalysis is first of all an ethical cure, and in this sense it has a political dimension. I think that some political options are therefore incompatible with psychoanalysis – fascism and racism, for example."

A (group leader): "I think it's not just a war between Russia and Ukraine. Many Western countries are behind this war, using Ukraine for a war against Russia."

B: "I see things as a psychoanalyst. In my opinion all these years Ukraine has been teasing Russia until she got what she wants, war. I believe that both countries, with the war, have brought what they wanted into reality: a conflict."

S.B.: "This thesis reminds me of the one advanced by some that Jews had an unconscious desire to be victims, and this explains the Holocaust. It may also be that in many Jews there is a kind of victimizing passion. But when Hitler began to persecute them and then exterminate them, appealing to these possible unconscious phantasies, is a way of justifying the Shoah. The order of the analysis of the unconscious and the order of real violence must be separated. In the case of the Holocaust, a psychoanalyst cannot but side

with the Jews. And not only because Freud was a Jew...

Another example. In our practice, we notice that some women have an erotic fantasy of being raped. Does this erotic fantasy imply that if they are actually raped, then they are not victims? A woman who has fantasies of rape for that very reason may be much more traumatized by real rape than one who does not. If I see a rape, I report the rapist to the police, I don't take into account any of the masochistic *phantasmes* of the woman.

Was there an unconscious desire in many Ukrainians to fight Russia? Even if there had been, this in no way justifies the invasion of another sovereign country."

C: "I was born in Ukraine, and I have relatives and friends in Ukraine. I feel half Ukrainian. But that doesn't stop me from seeing things from a Russian point of view too. You mentioned the Jews. In the Ukrainian anthem there is the phrase 'Ukraine is not dead', in short, they want to resurrect Ukraine. The Jews also wanted to be resurrected as a homeland, and in the end they obtained a homeland, Israel. But at what price! They always have conflicts and wars with their neighbors."

S. B.: "You mean that Ukrainians, like Israelis, are bound to have endless problems with their neighbors. But there is an essential difference: Jews went *en masse* to Palestine from all over the world, while Ukrainians have always been in Ukraine."

B: "The West cannot blame Russia for attacking other countries, given that Western countries have attacked Lebanon, Serbia, Iraq and Libya in recent decades. It is the logic of power, which applies to you as well as to us. Giorgio Agamben too says that 'even the moral discourse is a discourse of power'."

C: "You Westerners didn't allow Ukraine and Russia to solve their problems with each other, you became involved in conflicts that are not yours."

S.B.: "I was among those who severely condemned the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003 (even Obama, a senator at the time, voted against that war), for the same reasons that I now condemn the invasion of Ukraine. Even if I admit that there is a mitigating factor for the invasion of Iraq (which for me does not avoid condemnation): it is that Saddam Hussein was a dictator who had massacred part of his people. While Zelenskij is not Saddam: he is an actor who was democratically elected by his people by a very large majority. As for the other Western interventions you speak of, I believe there are more nuanced reasons.

However, even if the West has committed terrible crimes, this does not justify the fact that today Putin is committing a crime of his own. It would be like saying: 'Since my neighbor stole from someone, I will steal too'".

D: "You've turned Putin into a monster, as if he were Hitler. You have created a scapegoat. But this is your phantasy."

S.B.: "Actually when we say Putin we mean a political line. We are not referring to the psychology of a man, but to a political action and vision that we condemn. When I say we are at war, I do not at all mean a war between Ukrainians and Westerners on the one hand, and Russians on the other. The war is across the board. It is between those with one idea of ??politics and freedom, and those with another."

F: "Zelenskij himself has publicly declared that Ukrainian soldiers use bombs [...*with a deadly and forbidden material, whose composition I don't remember, Editor's note*]"

A: "You Europeans have a certain idea of ??democracy and you want to impose it on everyone else. You want to export it with weapons, as you did in Afghanistan. We have a certain idea of ??democracy, which does not coincide with yours. But anyone who deviates from your model of democracy is a scoundrel, a Hitler. You want to impose your principles on us. We voted for Putin freely, no one forced us to vote for

him.”

S.B.: “It’s true, Hitler too took power in 1933 thanks to free democratic elections, about half of Germans voted for him. But I would like to understand how your idea of ??democracy is different from ours. Does your idea of ??democracy include the fact that a state can invade another nation recognized by all other countries?”

A: “But the Ukrainians were always against the Russians, even during the last war. Some, like Bandera, allied themselves with the Nazis and committed various crimes against civilians. Then, after the war, Bandera was welcomed by the West, in particular by West Germany. And many other pro-Nazi-Ukrainians ...”

S.B. (interrupting): “...These are things from over 70 years ago. No, my question is what do you think about what’s happening *today* between Russia and Ukraine. And I’d like to hear it from each of you, to understand who I’m working with.”

D: “I have friends and relatives in Ukraine who are Russian-speaking. They tell me that teachers ask children even 5 or 6 years old if they speak Russian or Ukrainian at home. They want to know if they watch Russian shows on television... Well, they use children for espionage. They want to impose Ukrainian on everyone.”

E: “I live in Vienna. All the media here talk about Ukraine and never about Russia. Everyone is on the side of the Ukrainians and the Russian point of view is never illustrated at all. It’s regime propaganda.”

S.B.: “I don’t know what’s happening in Austria. In Italy, just last night, at a debate on the war, the Tass correspondent in Italy was invited and she was able to express the official Russian point of view. They also interviewed a young Italian man who has been in Donbass for years to fight with the independentists against Ukraine, and he says he’s doing it because he’s a communist... But I don’t think either of them managed to convince anyone.”

C: “Before Putin our country was starving, we had nothing left. After Putin we gained a certain prosperity, our dignity was restored...”

B: “I’m disappointed, because I thought you partially understood the Russian world. It seems to me that you do not understand something essential about us. I voted for Putin, I respect Putin’s decisions, I admire Putin. I am Russian and I follow what he does. What you haven’t understood is that Putin is Russia! “

S.B.: “Hitler also said that Germany was Hitler, and Hitler was Germany! But as a psychoanalyst I cannot believe in identities, and I always consider identifications as alienations. I prefer Russian colleagues who condemn Putin’s policy, at least until recently.

My father, born in 1916, was always an anti-fascist in Italy. When war broke out against the Anglo-Americans and Soviets, he hoped that Fascist Italy would lose and that the Anglo-Americans and Soviets would win. Was he a traitor to the country? Sure. But he didn’t betray his principles. After all, Italy itself ended up changing sides and fighting the Nazis. My father was a dissident. And I know that there are many dissidents even here in Russia. I know some of them, and they say they are ashamed, as Russians, of what Putin is doing to Ukraine. They would never say, as you have done, that ‘Putin is Russia’.”

[...]

S.B. : “Dear friends, I asked each of you for your opinion because I realize that we are at war. And war is not an unconscious conflict, but a very real one.

I do not consider this a war between Western Europeans against Russians, not at all! I see this as a war between those who believe in liberal democracy – which is the precondition of psychoanalysis, in my opinion – and those who do not believe in it. I think I understand that you don't believe in it.

At this point we lack the basic ethical bases, at least for now, to be able to work together. I think that as there is an ethics of psychoanalysis, there is also a politics of psychoanalysis.

If you wish, we may restart to work together again after the war, which I hope will be brief.

But I also want to say that this is a cause of great pain for me, both because I respect you and am fond of you, but also because, contrary to popular belief, you Russians are in a much more dangerous position than the Ukrainians themselves! Of course, now it is the Ukrainians who are suffering, but I fear that in the end it will be you Russians who will pay a high price, perhaps too high. I don't know if you perceive it the same way, but I see you in serious danger because of Putin's policy. I wouldn't like to see you one day in the position of the Germans just after 1945.

So, though I am not a believer, I would like to say to you sincerely: May God protect you!"

The meeting ended here.

Some said goodbye to me with a smile, others looked furious. I think that, after all, my frankness did not offend them. After all, they too agree: we are at war, it is not possible to work together even on a scientific level. We are on two opposite sides of the barricade, not because they are Russian and I am Italian, but the barricade is between those who support Putin's policy and those who fight it.

I ask myself: did I not want to impose on them in some way a democratic and liberal ethic, ours, without respecting theirs? There is always an ethnocentric risk. I imagine what everyone in this group must have thought of me: that *I am an arrogant Westerner*. That I have my own idea of ??political correctness and that, if theirs is different, I despise them and leave them.

Was I supposed to pretend nothing happened, and do clinical supervision as usual? It would have been a way of denying the real, while psychoanalysis was born to make us aware of the real.

If in 1940 a psychoanalyst with Hitlerite sympathies had asked me for clinical supervision, would I have granted it to him? Surely not. Even if this Hitlerite analyst did not commit any crime and simply allowed himself to follow the ideas of his co-citizens.

By breaking up with friends with whom I worked together happily for many years, I wanted to contribute in my small way to the Ukrainian resistance against the invaders. I tried to show them that certain dictators cannot be supported *with impunity*. If you make certain choices, *you have to pay the price*. Even if in this case the price was minimal: to miss clinical supervisions. It must be understood that our choices have a cost, even if minimal costs like in our case: this is what giving the measure of reality means. Reality is a prize to pay.

Of course, every culture has its own principles, but psychoanalysis is also based on a given ethics. It doesn't matter that this ethics arose in the West: those who want to practice analysis must practice this ethics. And this ethics consists in not *acting out* our impulses of violence and oppression, which exist in each of us. We have to recognize them unconsciously, not commit them in reality. I don't know if these principles are Western or universal, but they are the basic principles of psychoanalysis. Otherwise, you may as well do another job.

I remembered previously discussing a case report brought in by a psychoanalyst from this group. The analysand was a sociopath who traded drugs, and I suppose that with the proceeds of the drug dealing he also paid for his analysis. I told the analyst that in my opinion she had to impose as a *sine qua non* of the analysis the fact that he give up that activity. Otherwise, in fact, the analyst was taking advantage of money earned from a crime, she was de facto an accomplice. Usually my contributions are well received by Russian colleagues, but to my amazement this one wasn't accepted. According to them, the problem of how a patient finances his analysis is irrelevant.

Here is the difference, and I don't think it is between Western democracy and Eastern democracy. Psychoanalysis is a social bond and, like all social bonds, it is embedded in ethical principles which are mostly ethical principles of the Polis in which the analyst and his analysands live.

Not even the psychoanalyst can be impartial.

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