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War Trauma: The Notion of Overflow

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Editorial

The Second World War, with more than 50 million deaths, extermination camps and atomic bombs, is a new massive and barbaric cataclysm, affecting a very large part of the planet, not to mention the schisms and atmosphere of civil war that it provokes in countries where the collaboration with the invader has been numerous and active, as in France, for example.

In 1945, Otto Fenichel published *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neuroses*. Two chapters are devoted to trauma. He highlights four types of symptoms:

- Blocking or weakening of ego functions (perception functions, social relationships and sexuality, in particular).
- Emotional overflow. Crises of anguish or anger difficult to curb.
- Sleep disorders, with nightmares of reminiscence and insomnia due to accumulated tensions or excitation.
- Distress and emotional dependence.

Fenichel presents the faint as an ultimate defence, a radical way of blocking the road to any new excitement coming from the outside. For him, one of the functions of the ego is exactly to overcome the past traumas and to avoid future ones. When it is weakened, particularly in case of shocks repeated in extraordinary situations, as in wartime, the ego weakened cannot perform anymore its adapter and protector role [1].

In 1947, Kardiner and Spiegel complete this model by noticing the possibility of an overflowing or overwhelming reaction. If the soldier turns his fear against himself or if he withdraws himself from the support of the group, he will not know how to absorb the stress generated by the fights. In the less favourable cases, his fear of the danger being amplified by his anxiety, the soldier is overwhelmed by what happens to him and will lose confidence in him [2].

Later, the decolonization wars, even if they take place on distant territories, also contained their lot of horrors and disasters.

The Vietnam War lasted ten years. Even if the American military commitment dates August 4th, 1964, there were already 40,000 soldiers on the ground from October 1962. In total, 3 million men fought. The conflict comes to an end

officially on January 31st, 1973 by the agreements of Paris. It was particularly murderous: 75,000 deaths and 15,000 wounded persons at the Americans, three times more at their South Vietnamese allies and nine times more at their north-Vietnamese opponents. The GIs found this war useless, testing and disheartening [3].

On the ground, the men badly accepted a family separation imposed for debatable purposes. They felt the bitterness not to be supported by the nation and fought against the boredom by the alcoholic and drug recourse. At the end of the war, the army began to record refusals to leave for operation, conducts of indiscipline and hostile gestures towards the officers [3].

Beside the climatic and cultural shocks when arriving in Vietnam, the exhaustion due to the fights and the "nostalgia" (characterized by American psychiatrists as anxious, depressive, emotional and addicting symptoms), the main problem concerns "post-Vietnam syndrome".

Post-Vietnam Syndrome, emerging after a latent period of several months following the demobilization, included senses of guilt towards the dead companions, the impression to be scapegoats of this war, accesses of aggressiveness, the feeling to have become a machine to hate and to kill, the loss of any humanity and any feeling of condolence, the incapacity to like the others and to be liked by them.

In addition, arose uncontrollable fears, state of alert, strong shame, mechanisms of avoidance, sleeping disorders, attention and memory disturbances, sexual inhibitions and aggressive or criminal impulses. Moreover, "the veteran sorrow" rises deeply in an existential confusion connected to the loss of innocence and trust of the young man before his departure for the front [4].

As usual, military psychiatrists handled the stress but not the trauma, leaving the completely distraught veterans with their psychic wounds not having been healed. These poor guys had found nobody who could hear them, share, understand and relieve their unbelievable efforts during the war. Thus, their traumas remained intact.

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