War Neurosis through a Freudian Lens
The Psychological Conditions of Soldiers in World War One and their Connection to Freud’s Theories

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During and after World War I, tens of thousands of soldiers returned home suffering from a neurotic condition termed “shell shock.” Some were hysteric, blind, deaf, or even paralyzed, yet otherwise unharmed and physically intact. Medical attention revealed the cause of this sickness to be rooted not in physiology but in psychology, specifically that of repression. Famed philosopher-psychologist Sigmund Freud first identified the condition of repression in 1909 and published his findings in 1910, naming repression theory “the corner-stone on which the whole structure of psycho-analysis rests.”¹ Over the next 30 years, Freud delved into the human psyche and arose with abundant theories detailing how humans become dissatisfied with their lifestyles, their communities, and themselves. In 1930, he published Civilization and its Discontents, in which he states that “a person becomes neurotic because he cannot tolerate the amount of frustration which society imposes on him in the service of its cultural ideals.”² The process by which WW1 soldiers degenerated into “war neurosis” can be used to explain and prove the validity of Freud’s views and propositions. The contrast between the barbaric state of war and society’s unyielding social and psychological expectations agitated opposing hemispheres of the conscience, throwing soldiers into a raging mental battle that could only be absolved through Freudian psychoanalysis.

Freud’s conjectures about the conscious and unconscious components of the mind are essential to understanding both repression and neurosis. To Freud, the term “neurosis” encapsulates all disturbances of mental normalcy or equilibrium: anxiety, obsession, hysteria, phobia, etc. In 1923, Freud published The Ego and the Id, which details his most famous contentions concerning personality theory, or the makeup of the psyche and how it impacts

human behavior. He divided personality into three different sections: the id, the ego, and the superego. The id represents unconscious, instinctual human passions while the superego, alternatively known as the “ego ideal,” represents the cultural and social standards of the subject’s environment which delineate and critique his actions. The ego serves the purpose of navigating the primal desires of the id – most notably, sexual and aggressive urges – juxtaposed with the loftier responsibilities demanded by the superego. The id operates on the “pleasure principle,” which means it seeks pleasure and attempts to instantly gratify using the fastest means possible. Often, the superego is in opposition to these means due to their lack of social acceptability, so the ego assumes the task of devising a sufficient method to pursue pleasure. If this method fails to be acceptable and the subject feels threatened by the guilt or anxiety imposed by the superego, he may unconsciously use repression as a defense mechanism to submerge memories of this event and rid himself of undesirable tension. Repressed events may reappear to the individual in dreams, because in sleep, the mind no longer controls the presentation of mental images. Freud proposes that when defense mechanisms such as repression are used with frequency, the subject will develop some form of neurosis.

Freud’s personality theory explains why volunteer soldiers comprised an unprecedented percentage of the mobilized forces in WW1. In an age of increasing societal limitations, the outbreak of the war revived the collective id of the working class by promising young men an opportunity to pursue immediate pleasure under the guise of social and patriotic responsibility. Before the beginning of WW1, the prospects of pleasure in the lives of men were made bleak by the isolating age of the Industrial Revolution, which left workers dissatisfied with their nine-to-five lifestyles. Freud postulates that the primary cause of suffering in a civilization is a
lack of freedom, claiming that “what we call our society is largely responsible for our misery, and that we should be much happier if we gave it up and returned to primitive conditions.”

Freud’s words hold true especially in regards to the age of industrialization, as the behavioral conventions grew harsher with the development of cities and society itself. These constraints left individuals cursing peaceful inactivity and yearning for the excitement of more “primitive conditions.” In 1913, the German poet Alfred Walter Heymel echoed this sentiment in writing, “In the wealth of peace we feel the deadliest dread. / We are bereft of prowess, mission or direction, / And long and cry for war.” These longings were shared around the world, for when Heymel’s wish was granted in 1914, working class men in France, England, and Germany flooded the streets and cheered. Winston Churchill shared in this excitement, writing to his wife on the day of the war declaration, “Everything tends towards catastrophe and collapse. I am interested, geared up and happy...I pray to God to forgive me for such fearful moods of levity.”

The fact that Churchill scolds himself for indulging in this enthusiasm demonstrates that the prospect of war appeals directly to the id, as it offers a cathartic excitement fraught with opportunities to exercise aggression. Propaganda posters of the era played off of these same promises and framed war as a pursuit of both purpose and pleasure. One such poster champions the phrase, “Adventure and Action – Enlist in the Field Artillery,” while another, depicting a

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3 Freud, Sigmund, Civilization and its Discontents.
smiling soldier, demands, “He’s Happy and Satisfied – Are You?” Such sayings appeared to guarantee a primal satisfaction enjoyed outside of society’s confines. Thus, men enlisted in droves, eager to satisfy their appetite for reckless pleasure.

Once at war, the absence of civilization caused the deterioration of moral standards, further provoking the id and, from Freud’s perspective, setting the backdrop for war neurosis. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud outlines three requirements for civilization: beauty, cleanliness, and order. With the opening lines of Wilfred Owen’s poem *Dulce et Decorum Est*, the absence of the first two components can be immediately proved: “Bent double, like old beggars under sacks, / Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge, / ‘Til on the haunting flares we turned our backs, / And towards our distant rest began to trudge.” Order is a different matter, as military organization is certainly present in war, though the strategies employed in WWI were far from orderly. Freud defines order as “a kind of compulsion to repeat which, when a regulation has been laid down once and for all, decides when, where, and how a thing shall be done, so that in every similar circumstance one is spared hesitation and indecision.” The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1917 outlined such compulsions in attempt to prevent inhumane war practices. Despite the fact that every power participating in WWI signed off on these agreements, they were violated relentlessly by each country involved. Germany looted and destroyed civilian property in the Rape of Belgium, the Ottoman Empire carried out three genocides: Armenian, Assyrian, and Greek, and every party employed the use of poison

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9 Freud, Sigmund, *Civilization and its Discontents*.
gas. Psychoanalyst Ernest Jones claims that these war practices encouraged men “to indulge in behavior that is throughout abhorrent to the civilised mind… All sorts of previously forbidden and hidden impulses, cruel, sadistic, murderous and so on, are stirred to greater activity.” Freud voiced these exact sentiments in writing,

...Nor should it be a matter for surprise that this relaxation of all the moral ties between the collective beings of mankind should have had repercussions on the morality of individuals...When the community no longer raises objections, there is an end, too, to the suppression of evil passions, and people perpetrate deeds of cruelty, fraud, treachery and barbarity so incompatible with their level of civilization that one would have thought them impossible.

These allusions to “forbidden and hidden impulses,” the weakening of morals, the awakening of “evil passions,” and the perpetration of “barbarity” points directly to the activation of the id. Without beauty, cleanliness, and order, the morality of the soldiers corroded, urging indulgence in the id’s desires.

At the same time, however, a semblance of society fortified the superego by way of rigid military organization and coerced subordination, which dramatically opposed the cravings of the id. Obedience in wartime, as author-historian Alexander Watson put it, “ceased largely to be a conscious choice and instead became a default option.” The structure of the military operated on a strict hierarchy, where each platoon was controlled by a lieutenant and a sergeant, both whom maintained contact with the higher-ups. The lieutenant was responsible for exemplifying military and social values so as to inspire his men’s continued subservience and support. If a

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private failed to comply with orders, no matter how miniscule his offense was, he was either
punished severely or, on occasion, executed to set an example. This was justified by an
unforgiving belief in obedience, illustrated by one of the military regulations in the French
Army’s Code as of 1914: “Discipline is the main strength of armies, it is important that a
superior receives a subordinate’s entire obedience and submission at all times.”16 This logic was
used to justify military atrocities such as the Souain corporals affair, where three French soldiers
were executed on the grounds of cowardice for their inability to climb out of the trenches on
account of falling bombs and corpses. These killings caused the superego to place severe
restrictions on the urges of the id, for a single misstep could cost a soldier his life. The force of
these demonstrations assured not only the men’s behavioral compliance, but also their unyielding
ideological loyalty. Throughout the course of the war, the total number of men executed for
disobedience or cowardice was at least 2,167; a considerable amount, but nothing compared to
the near 60 million men who fought in total.17 18 When men were caught between their patriotic
obligation and their own self-preservation, the former prevailed 99.96% of the time. This
outcome is the superego’s doing; a potent example of responsibility overriding instinct. The
overwhelming existence of this trend even in the heat of the “fight or flight” moment
demonstrates the tenacity of the superego and its unflinching psychological grip on the minds of
the soldiers.

16 Girault, Philippe, "Une phrase du règlement militaire de 1914 : « La discipline faisant la force principale des
armées, il importe que tout supérieur obtienne de ses subordonnés une obéissance entière et une soumission de tous
17 Loez, André, "Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers’ Attitudes Towards War," International Encyclopedia of
18 Svoljšak, Petra, "World War I casualties," Government Communications Office, Accessed May 21, 2019,
The simultaneous provocation of both the id and the superego left soldiers to deal with an expansive mesh of mental dilemmas, which often proved to be psychologically scarring. According to Freud, an ongoing antagonistic battle between the id and the superego such as this is what activates the unconscious defense mechanism of repression. It follows that, as soldiers continuously repressed their wartime horrors, they reached a psychological breaking point and developed “shell shock.” It is predicted that by the end of WW1, 325,000 cases of shell shock occurred in total.¹⁹ Men discharged from the military on the grounds of this precarious condition were sent to mental institutions, such as the renowned Craiglockhart, situated in Scotland and distinguished for housing the famous poets Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. Both poets were treated by psychiatrist W. H. R. Rivers, whose investigation into the causes of shell shock heavily supported Freud’s claims. Rivers noted the harmful effects that repression was having on his patients, observing that “the process of repression keeps the painful memories or thoughts under a kind of pressure during the day, accumulating such energy by night that they...take the most vivid and painful forms when expressed by the imagery of dreams.”²⁰ Even Owen’s aforementioned poem makes reference to this phenomenon by describing the trauma of witnessing a gas-induced death: “In all my dreams before my helpless sight, / He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.”²¹ These examples make obvious reference to Freudian theories on the significance of dream imagery. Rivers recognized the trend of sleeplessness and repressed imagery in his patients, combatting it with treatment methods that were both revolutionary and effective. When the medical opinion of the time told soldiers to “banish all unpleasant and

²¹ Owen, Wilfred, "Dulce et Decorum Est."
disturbing thoughts from [their] mind,” Rivers’ made use of the “talking cure,” which required patients to counteract repression by discussing their experiences openly. During the three years that Craiglockhart was open as war hospital, it serviced between 1,500 and 1,800 soldiers thanks to Rivers’ practices. The success of Craiglockhart helped popularize Freud’s ideologies, proving the viability of his contributions to psychoanalysis.

World War I brought with it an overwhelming chaos and depravity which stood in stark contrast to the discipline demanded by the military code. The psychological landscape of the soldiers assumed the same geography as the war in which they fought: immoral impulses at odds with patriotic responsibility. The mind of a soldier became a battlefield in itself, with id and superego clashing with enough ferocity to leave the subject damaged in regions far beyond the physical realm. Though of course a Freudian lens is not the only instrument with which to examine and explain this battlefield, it certainly provides a convincing and valuable perspective in regards to how our experiences shift and rend the fabric of our psychology. An essentiality about Freud’s viewpoint is its confidence in the individual; if a man suffers a breakdown, it is not he who is weak, but his surroundings which are insupportable. As the Great War wore on, this idea became widely recognizable, as it was not only the privates who were damaged mentally but the officials and leaders as well. Shell shock struck up and down the ranks, indiscriminately dispelling illusions of masculine impenetrability and awakening the world to the true gravity of the battlefield horrors and their lasting repercussions, both internal as well as external. As the men trudged home on Armistice Day, 1918, they shouldered the burden of not only the lives they had lost, but the life they had lived – and for that, humanity is forever accountable.

22 Rivers, William, _An Address on the Repression of War Experience_.
23 Hammond, Claudia, “Did Craiglockhart hospital revolutionise mental healthcare?”
24 Hammond, Claudia, "Did Craiglockhart hospital revolutionise mental healthcare?"
Bibliography


