

## GROUP PSYCHOLOGY IN THE TOTALITARIAN SYSTEM: A PSYCHOANALYTIC VIEW

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*The author discusses the ideas of three important psychoanalytic thinkers about group processes in large social groups: Sigmund Freud, Wilfred Bion, and Erich Fromm. Their ideas are developed and applied to analysis of group processes in totalitarian systems, as they were known to the author in Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. In conclusion, treatment considerations as they apply to patients who grew up in these regimes are developed and illustrated by clinical cases.*

A man is what he remembers. And he is free, thanks to what he remembers. The same can be said about nations.

Leon Surmelian

Three important psychoanalytic thinkers—Sigmund Freud, Wilfred Bion, and Erich Fromm—contributed seminal and stimulating ideas to an understanding of group processes. Their analysis was also applied to large social groups, which can be extended to nations.

In this paper, I discuss their ideas and develop the specific application to group processes in totalitarian systems as I knew them in Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. Personal as well as clinical analytic experience will be used to elucidate salient features of the group psychology in these systems and its effect on individuals. In conclusion, I discuss treatment considerations as they apply to patients who grew up in these regimes.

### FREUD'S VIEW: THE GROUP AS MIRROR OF A FAMILY

Freud (whose books were banned in socialistic countries) predicted in "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego" (1921) the development that actually took place in these countries:

This paper is dedicated to Dr. Alexander Wolf, who made his groups growth-promoting, free and holding environments

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If today intolerance no longer shows itself so violent and cruel as in former centuries, we can scarcely conclude that there has been softening in human nature. The cause is rather to be found in the undeniable weakening of the religious feelings and the libidinal ties which depend upon them. If another group tie takes the place of the religious one—and the socialistic tie seems to be succeeding in doing so—then there will be the same intolerance toward outsiders as in the age of the Wars of Religion; and if differences between the scientific opinions could ever attain a similar significance for groups, the same result would again be repeated with this new motivation. (p. 30)

Freud explains the psychology of groups on the basis of changes in the individual psyche. This original and penetrating analysis of group dynamics was developed further by other psychoanalysts, especially Wilfred Bion in the British Object Relations School and Erich Fromm in the American Cultural School; their findings will be discussed later. Freud's main thesis is that "love relationships, libidinal ties, constitute the essence of the group mind" (p. 23). He chose two groups, the Church and the Army, to illustrate how libidinal ties operate and how they are based on unconscious processes in the ego. He points out that both groups are held together by the illusion that the leader loves all individuals in the group equally, as a substitute father. Therefore, in each group every individual is bound by libidinal ties, on the one hand to the leader (Christ or the Commander-in-Chief), and on the other, to the members of the group. These ties explain the lack of freedom of the individual in a group, and alterations and limitations in his or her personality.

Freud considers that these ties in a group are based on identifications that are the earliest and original forms of emotional ties, derived from the child's relationship to his or her parents:

Identification is the original form of the emotional tie with an object; secondly, in a regressive way it becomes a substitute for a libidinal object tie, as it were, by means of introjecting the object into the ego; and thirdly, it may arise with any new perception of a common quality shared with some other person who is not an object of sexual instinct.

The more important this common quality is, the more successful may this partial identification become, and it thus represents a beginning of a new tie. (pp. 39–40)

Freud, seeing the ego as divided into ego and ego-ideal—which encompasses self-observation, moral conscience, and censorship—developed these ideas further in his theory of superego development. This agency (superego) becomes differentiated out of the ego under the influence of education and parents' prohibitions. For many people this differentiation within the ego is incomplete and poorly developed. Therefore, many people are prone to act and feel in regressive childlike ways; this strongly increases in groups by way of emotional identification with others and by the tie to the leader, who becomes a symbolic father. "A primary group is therefore a number of individuals who have put one and the same object in the place of their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego" (p. 48).

In the primary group, the individual, according to Freud, gives up his ideal and substitutes for it the group ideal as embodied in the leader. In this process of identification with the leader and with each other, all members of the group



have to be the same and have the same. The leader is idealized and members of the group have to be equal; they have to give up their rivalry in order to be loved by the leader and share with each other in this love (e.g., in the Catholic Church, every Christian loves Christ as his ideal and feels himself united with all other brother Christians by the tie of identification; the individual identifies himself with Christ).

In the army the process occurs somewhat differently. The commander replaces the ego-ideal of the soldiers who identify with each other. They derive from this community of egos the obligation to give mutual help and to share possessions, which comradeship implies. This process is not as central or internal as the other identification process, and it is more easily reversed. However, this type of group cannot function without its commander.

As stated, Freud (1921) prophetically envisioned that a socialistic tie would take the place of a religious one as an important group phenomenon. He also concluded that in such a situation, an intolerance toward outsiders would develop, as was the case in "the age of Wars of Religion." This development became especially pronounced in Communist bloc countries in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The group psychology of these totalitarian systems (which I experienced in Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union) reflected many regressive dynamics pointed out by Freud as typical for primary groups.

Czechoslovakia became a totalitarian state when Communists seized power in the coup of 1948. The nation's history and tradition were gradually rewritten to conform to official ideology. In this regressive process, fantasy often replaced reality. Objective history and science were systematically and gradually distorted to fit ideological needs. Untrue or partial information and emotion-laden accounts were substituted for memories of the past. The arts ceased to be creative, and free expression was curtailed. People who thought differently were gradually banished from positions where they could have an influence. Many political and intellectual leaders were jailed or executed unless they joined the Party, became silent, or voiced the state ideology. People with different views were not tolerated; they became enemies outside the group. Central to this process was severe restriction of individual difference, initiative, and freedom. Individuals lost their importance and their individuality was submerged in a group. The ideology, based on interpretations of Marx, and of Lenin's and Stalin's teachings, was presented in a dogmatic manner not to be questioned or criticized. Censorship was instituted in all areas; books representing other points of view were removed from stores and libraries.<sup>1</sup>

In the society, group processes—and regression in groups—were organized, supported and systematically used to manipulate and control minds and lives. Ideologically, group membership was valued above any other type of relationship, and the illusion was maintained that all persons are equal. Everyone was expected to identify with the socialistic ideal and work for it. Beginning in grammar school, children were organized into groups of Communist youth. Adults were organized in special political and interest groups which had to espouse Communist ideology under leaders, namely, "commanders" of various importance who operated similarly to commanders in the army. Disobedience was punished in various ways, primarily by ostracism, but also by economic and social deprivations (a young person who did not have the proper "socialistic" consciousness or whose family was not politically acceptable could not be admitted to a university and/or professional school). The only individuals who had relative freedom were top members of the Communist party.

In the Soviet Union, Marx, Lenin, and later Stalin had been elevated to a

position similar to religious leadership. A similar process of idealizing political leaders occurred in Czechoslovakia. Portraits of political leaders became icons in a new "church." Idealized as saviors of mankind, they were supposed to love everybody equally as brothers and sisters. They were not only going to improve people's lot, but would lead them to an era of plenty and solutions for all problems.

In the Soviet Union after Lenin's death, for example, Stalin was raised to the position of semi-religious leader—all-knowing, all-perfect, all-good symbolic father of his people, and often called "our light, our good father, our sun, our savior." He was called a prophet, and his ideas were to be absolute in all fields. He held all top leadership positions in the country and was the Commander-in-Chief. In a poem, which was popular during World War II, he was considered a savior:

Dear Comrade Stalin, we know that you are thinking of all of us in the Kremlin, *we believe in you more than we believe in ourselves* [emphasis added]; dear Comrade Stalin, we want to thank you for being on this earth!

In another poem people thanked Stalin for their "happy childhood." Stalin was the symbolic father who loved and took care of all his children. Although not everybody believed the ideology, it had a mass appeal. Many people never gave up these beliefs, even in Siberia. They believed, as Solzhenitsyn describes, that Stalin did not know what was happening if things were done wrong (e.g., people jailed or killed). Eventually it became apparent that Stalin was a murderer, more like a tribal father who was feared and who prosecuted others. Was this a depth of regression in a group of people who became helpless victims, resembling those of ancient times when tribes were ruled by all-powerful chiefs? Similar, perhaps, to what Freud (1946) describes as the relationship of members of the primal horde to the primal father. Could such denial and splitting in people's consciousness be explained only on the basis of primary identification and idealization of the leader as parent?

#### BION'S VIEW: THE GROUP AS MIRROR OF EARLY DEVELOPMENT

The thinking of W. R. Bion (1959) is helpful in considering answers to the question just asked. Bion, following Melanie Klein, addressed himself to the regressive role of primitive unconscious anxieties and fantasies in groups.

Klein had developed theories of infant development, describing the paranoid schizoid position as being typical for the earliest stage of development. Fear of persecution is seen as an expression of primary anxiety of fragmentation (annihilation), characteristic for early infancy. Splitting, denial, projection, and projective identification are the defenses that predominate in the paranoid-schizoid position. Later, a depressive position is arrived at, which deals with whole-object relationships. Anxiety about the harm to the object and guilt predominate in this stage. Klein (1977) considers these mechanisms and defenses part of normal development, as well as the basis of later psychotic illness or regression.

In following Klein, Bion extended and supplemented Freud's theory of group behavior, based on his observations of small and large groups at the Tavistock Clinic in England. Extending his findings to explain group processes in large social institutions, he agreed with Freud that a family group provides the basic

<sup>1</sup> Marlinova, O., 1990: Group Psychology in the Totalitarian System: A Psychoanalytic View; In: Group, New York (Brunner/Mazel, Inc.), Vol. 14 (No. 1, 1990), pp. 44-58.



pattern for all groups (especially healthier groups), but he argued that it did not go far enough. Bion's contention is that the more a group is disturbed, the more central to its dynamics are activation of psychotic (infantile) anxiety, and defenses against it. Groups, he believes, are peculiarly prone to the activation of the primitive mechanisms described by Klein as characteristic of paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions. He calls these modes of behavior and feeling in groups "basic assumptions." Bion's central concept is that in every group "two groups" are present: "the work group" and "the basic assumption group"; these are two aspects of the functioning of the group. Basic assumptions are distinct emotional states of groups derived from irrational, unconscious aspects of the personality, and according to Bion they are present, in varying degrees, in all groups. These are the basic assumptions of 1) dependency, 2) fight-flight, and 3) pairing. If these basic assumptions prevail in the group, it resists change, and it does not learn and adapt to reality.

A "work group," on the other hand, is analogous to the functions of the conscious ego—it deals with reality and tasks. The members of the work group cooperate:

The work group constantly tests its conclusions by a scientific spirit, seeks for knowledge, learns from experience, and constantly questions how it may best achieve its goal. It is clearly conscious of the passage of time and of the progress of learning and development. It has a parallel in the individual with the ego, in Freud's sense, in the rational and mature person. (Rioch, 1972, p. 21)

Bion (1959) points out that the more a group is pervaded by basic assumptions, the more it is disturbed. In the basic assumption mentality, thought is stabilized on the platitudinal and dogmatic level, and the members are opposed to learning and development; all three basic assumptions contain the idea of the leader. Regarding the first basic assumption, Rioch (1972) reports:

The essential aim of the basic assumption dependency group is to attain security through and have its members protected by one individual. The leader is idealized and made into a kind of God who will take care of his children. (p. 22)

In Bion's view the leader is often tempted to fall into this role in the group and go along with the basic assumption dependency of the group. This description corresponds to Freud's characterization of the relationship between members of the primary group and its leader. The second basic assumption is that of fight-flight. As Rioch (1972) describes it:

The assumption is that the group has met to preserve itself and that this can be done only by fighting someone or something, or by running away from someone or something. Action is essential whether for fight or for flight. The individual is of secondary importance to the preservation of the group. . . . The leader who is felt to be appropriate to this type of group is one who can mobilize the group for attack or lead it in flight. He is expected to recognize danger and enemies. (p. 24)<sup>2</sup>

This type of leader usually has paranoid features, so that he can find an enemy even if none is obvious. He must be concerned about preservation of the group; if he is not able to do this he will be ignored.

3) Finally,

The third basic assumption of the group is that of pairing. Here the assumption is that the group has met for purposes of reproduction, to bring forth the Messiah, the Savior. . . . No actual leader is or needs to be present, but the group, through the pair, is living in the hope of the creation of a new leader, or a new thought, or something which will bring a new life, will solve the old problems and bring Utopia or heaven. . . . As in the history of the world, if a new leader or Messiah is actually produced, he will of course shortly be rejected. In order to maintain hope, he must be unborn. (Rioch, 1972, p. 25)

Bion points out that Freud described the Church and the Army as two major societal institutions which mobilize and use in a sophisticated way the basic assumptions of dependency and fight-flight, respectively. Bion adds a third group "aristocracy," concerned with breeding—which uses the basic assumption of pairing. Bion sees these groups (Church, Army, and Aristocracy) as specialized work groups. He says further,

But another possibility has to be considered, namely that these groups are budded off by the main group of which they form a part for the specific purpose of neutralizing dependent group and fight-flight group respectively and thus preventing their obstruction of the work group function of the main group. If we adopt the latter hypothesis, it must be regarded as a failure in the specialized work group if dependent or fight-flight group activity either ceases to manifest itself within the specialized work groups or else grows to overwhelming strength. In either case the result is the same—the main group has to take over the functions proper to the specialized work group, and yet fulfill its work-group functions. If the specialized work group cannot, or does not, cope with the basic-assumption phenomena that are its province, then the work-group functions of the main group are vitiated by the pressure of these basic assumptions. (Bion, 1959, pp. 156–157)

From this author's description of the Communist totalitarian system and its group psychology, it can be seen that a basic-assumption mentality predominated in the society, rather than being channeled into specialized groups like the Church or the Army/Many processes described by Bion as typical for a basic-assumption mentality (e.g., primitive, impulsive feelings and actions) have been characteristic for the system and its ideology; for example, dogmatic thinking, clichés/slogans, fantasy about omnipotent leaders and dependency on them, lack of realistic criticism, "fight-flight," and "pairing" mentality. It could be said, based on Bion, that the work function of the society was obstructed by "basic assumptions," and therefore society could be seen to be in a state of regression. Thus, official ideology represented the influence of a basic-assumption mentality, while the work group functions were also preserved and continued to maintain learning and development—which effected some progress.

In his theory, Bion extends the explanation of group dynamics beyond that of Freud, to elucidate more primitive phenomena. Certainly one of them is the pervasive dynamic of splitting, which often occurs in groups (the "good" member inside versus the "bad" member outside) as a defense against persecution anxiety. Also, his description of the fight-flight phenomenon, in which an

individual is secondary to the preservation of the group and where enemies have to be found, applies in many ways to the ideology prevailing in totalitarian systems. The split was perpetuated between a "good" member of the group (or system) and a "bad" outsider (with different views), who was seen as an enemy. If an individual opted for a different point of view, or desired to leave the country, he or she was seen as a traitor. In this paranoid view of the world, people were not individuals with the right to independent thinking and expression, but manipulated pawns on the stage of world history. In keeping with this view, different political, religious, or artistic opinions were treated as immoral, dangerous or criminal.<sup>3</sup> Different systems (especially capitalism) were seen in the same light, namely, as "enemy states" plotting the destruction of socialism. Aggression was projected outside, and the threat was seen as coming from outside the group or the system. Using Bion's point of view, Stalin could be seen as a paranoid leader who led the group in a fight-flight.

In my opinion, the group dynamics described by Bion help to explain how a society can be swept (or manipulated) into the state of regression which predominated in the totalitarian system. Since primitive, unconscious processes exist in all people—as potentials for regression—and since they are especially stimulated in groups, they become dangerous possibilities that could be (under certain conditions) actualized in political movements or religious cults.<sup>4</sup> They can be especially reinforced and manipulated by leaders who fit particular "basic assumptions" and who can use them for their objectives. Bion (1959) says:

To me the leader is as much the creature of basic assumptions as any other member of the group, and this, I think, is to be expected if we envisage identification of the individual with the leader as depending not on introjection alone but on a simultaneous process of *projective identification* (M. Klein, 1946) as well. The leader, on the basic level, does not create the group by virtue of his fanatical adherence to an idea, but is rather an individual whose personality renders him peculiarly susceptible to the obliteration of individuality by the basic-assumption group's leadership requirements. (p. 177)

In contrast to the usual notion of a leader, seen as having a special power, Bion elucidates the dialectic relationship between the group and the leader. The "power" of the leader lies in his or her ability to respond to and articulate primitive basic assumptions of the group and to become merged with them.

#### FROMM'S VIEW: THE GROUP AS A PATH OF ESCAPE

Bion's ideas about group dynamics offer a valuable perspective on the most primitive phenomena in groups. They are also clinically valuable even if the processes described are rarely seen in a pure form. Usually they fluctuate in groups, and are interwoven with more realistic group functions. However, under some conditions these regressive processes can predominate in a group, and these important questions can be asked: How can a specific group, or a whole society become dominated by a basic-assumption mentality? What are the reasons for this development? How can we explain the fact that group regression takes place in certain groups, cultures, or societies, and not in others? I will try to answer these questions, taking Erich Fromm's ideas into consideration.

Fromm, one of the prominent representatives of the "American Cultural

School," integrates Freud's theory with Karl Marx's dialectic theory of history and social criticism. In Fromm's view, man is not so much a creature of instincts but rather a creature of culture; in this dialectic interplay, man creates history, but is also created by it. Fromm sees as a central problem in man his need to be significantly related to the world and to himself, in order to avoid intolerable loneliness and isolation. For this, man needs some frame of orientation or devotion, which he can find in organized religion, political institutions, or in a comprehensive idea. Historically, man had a determined place in relation to his group, which existentially defined what he was and how he should live, and which gave him security (Thompson & Mullahy, 1950).

In his analysis of Western European culture, Fromm shows that development of man's consciousness led to questions about his existence and his relationship to his group. Ultimately, man must face contradictions in his life, the inevitability of death, and his own aloneness. In *Escape From Freedom*, Fromm (1941) describes how modern man became more alone and isolated than he was in previous epochs, where he was part of a secure, ordered world. In the epoch of capitalism, modern man became more free but also alone and isolated, overwhelmed by impersonal forces. Fromm sees that the essential task of modern man is to find the solution to this dichotomy between self-reliance, on one hand, and feelings of aloneness, on the other.

The basic question is whether human beings will give up their integrity and freedom in order to feel related to others in the symbiotic way relied upon before the development of their individuality. The ways in which man tries to escape from the problem of individuation Fromm calls "mechanisms of escape." If a man cannot choose the "positive freedom" (in productive love and work and the integrated genuine expression of his capacities), he may try to eliminate his aloneness by merging with somebody or something outside the self in order to undo separation and isolation. Fromm sees these regressive tendencies, or mechanisms of escape, as potential driving forces in all people. The irrational methods of relating back to the group are sadomasochism, destructiveness, and automaton-like conformity:

The annihilation of the individual self and the attempt to overcome thereby the unbearable feeling of powerlessness are only one side of the masochistic strivings. The other side is the attempt to become a part of a bigger and more powerful whole outside of oneself, to submerge and participate in it. This power can be a person, an institution, God, the nation, Conscience, or a psychic compulsion. By becoming part of a power which is felt as unshakably strong, eternal, and glamorous, one participates in its strength and glory. One surrenders one's own self and renounces all strength and pride connected with it; one loses one's integrity as an individual and surrenders freedom; but one gains a new security and a new pride in the participation in the power in which one submerges. One gains also security against the torture of doubt. (Fromm, 1941, p. 177)

Fromm points out that if the individual finds cultural patterns that satisfy masochistic strivings (like submission to the "leader" in fascist or totalitarian ideology), he gains illusory security by uniting himself with others who share his feelings. Fromm's important idea is that a dialectic relationship exists between individual neurotic tendencies and cultural patterns. He clarifies how a culture where destructive patterns predominate can promote the develop-



ment of certain characteristics in people, which in turn become a basis for destructive social and political systems.

In addition, Fromm's concept of a *social character*—by which he means the prevailing character structure typical for a certain culture or a class—helps to explain cultural patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting. He defines it as “the essential nucleus of the character structure of most members of a group, which has developed as the result of the basic experiences and mode of life common to that group” (1941, p. 305). Character, in turn, determines the thinking, feeling, and acting of individuals.

Fromm describes, as an example of social character, an “authoritarian character” which was typical for the lower middle class in Germany, where it became a basis for fascism under certain historical and economic conditions. Typically, an “authoritarian character admires authority and tends to submit to it, but at the same time he wants to be an authority and have others submit to him” (p. 186). He possesses simultaneously sadistic and masochistic traits. Significantly, Fromm points out that even if people with an authoritarian character rebel, their longing for submission remains present, consciously or unconsciously. This is the reason they can change so easily and suddenly from extreme radicalism to extreme authoritarianism. The most important features of an authoritarian character are a craving for submission to a higher power and a conviction that life is not determined by one's wishes and interests.

It might be said that the traits of authoritarian character, as described by Fromm, are developed through specific modes of upbringing, although Fromm himself does not analyze how these occur in families. However, he points out that in general, the family functions as a specific psychological agent in society.

The prevalent mode of a child's upbringing, his or her guidance by parents and other significant adults, develops specific “security operations,” to use the Sullivanian term (Sullivan, 1953). In addition, the education process constitutes another mechanism by which character is formed. Fromm (1941) includes in his analysis of the human condition biological and psychological needs and conflicts (including unconscious ones), as well as man's general tendency to grow, which he sees as an important dynamic:

It also seems that this general tendency to grow—which is the psychological equivalent of the identical biological tendency—results in such specific tendencies as the desire for freedom and hatred against oppression since freedom is the fundamental condition of any growth. (p. 315)

It is this dialectic view of man's development, integrating psychoanalytic understanding with understanding of history and culture, which is the unique contribution of Fromm.

Many of the phenomena pointed out by Fromm as typical for Nazi ideology were also prominent in the political ideology of the totalitarian systems which I am describing. I focus here on the psychological analysis of the relationship of an individual to the group. One prominent feature common to both ideologies was a stress on greater community, the interests of the nation, or a political system; these interests were always stressed over individual choice. One of the favorite slogans of state Communist propaganda was “One for all and all for one.” Superiority of a given system was proclaimed and rationalized as serving the best interests of mankind. The wish for power and domination over other nations was justified as a “higher principle.” Sadism, aggression, and destructiveness were projected outside to other “enemy” groups and nations, who were accused of a “wish to dominate and destroy.”<sup>5</sup>

Another important feature common to both regimes was a demand that the individual must be dissolved in a higher power. Ironically, it was Goebbels who defined socialism thus: “Socialism is sacrificing the individual to the whole” (cited by Fromm, 1941). Mass political and sports spectacles were popular in both regimes; in these group spectacles, people were forced to experience their inclusion in an all-powerful whole, and to feel unconsciously a loss of sense of self and significance as individuals. They were also gaining an illusory power from the omnipotent group. Slogans containing primitive emotional appeals—idolizing leaders or the Party, expressing hatred and contempt for “enemies” outside the group—were constantly used at political meetings and celebrations, and appeared frequently in the press and on radio broadcasts.

I think that Fromm's important point about people with an authoritarian character, who are especially prone to enjoy domination over others as well as submission and escape into symbiosis, was proven again in the development of the totalitarian systems of the Soviet Union and some other Communist Bloc countries, where enough people participated in the establishment of these regimes.<sup>6</sup>

It is my opinion that Fromm's description of an authoritarian character basically corresponds to the common social character in Russia as well as in Czechoslovakia. However, Czechoslovakia had a different political history with ties to the Western democracies and with her own democratic tradition; therefore, democratic values were part of the social consciousness. Due to these factors, memory as well as a desire for freedom remained more active in many people, and surfaced again in the Czechoslovakian reform movement of the late sixties.

Twenty years later, an open inquiry into the past is presently developing in the Soviet Union. The reform movement, *glasnost*, led by Gorbachev, is promoting economic change and more freedom for the population. In this process of economic and political change, Gorbachev and other progressive leaders can be seen as work group leaders who are developing more realistic, scientific goals for their society, and searching for ways of reaching them. Presently, a democratic movement is making considerable gains in Eastern Europe. Lech Walesa, J. Kurón, and B. Geremek in Poland, V. Havel and the members of the Charter 77 group in Czechoslovakia, and democratic leaders in Hungary and East Germany can be seen as successful work group leaders who are trying to reverse their societies' regressive processes and work for change and growth.<sup>7</sup>

In the opening-up process in the Soviet Union, true information about the past is revealed and important questions are asked about past and present problems. The one crucial question being asked is: “How was Stalinism and its terror ever possible?” I think it is intrinsic to this process that attempts are beginning in the Soviet Union to rehabilitate psychoanalysis and its important place in history and science (see Gilbo, 1988).

#### CAUTION TO CLINICIANS

In the United States, clinicians often work with clients from other cultures. It is most important to have cultural knowledge and sensitivity in treating these clients. As described, immigrants from Communist bloc countries grew up in a society where they had to submit to authority and conform in groups. They lived under pressure to accept norms and values of the state ideology. In all official groups, beginning with school, they were not allowed to express divergent views or question seriously what they were taught. Togetherness



(as opposed to mutuality) was promoted, and a split, simplistic view of the world (good inside versus bad outside) prevailed in the public sphere.

This social experience fostered characteristics of rigidity, intolerance, domination of others, and arrogance. On the other hand, submission to authority and the group was also required. Since people were shamed and punished in groups for divergent views and noncompliance, they often experienced humiliation and helplessness, or isolation as outcasts. These experiences reinforced fear of others and feelings of shame and guilt. Thus, the cultural experience promoted further characteristics which supported the basis of the regime.<sup>8</sup>

The Communist totalitarian system has been in existence much longer in the Soviet Union (after 1917) than in Czechoslovakia (after 1948). It has been more extreme and more influential in the Soviet Union, where it had a stronger basis in past authoritarian regimes. Czechoslovakia had been a democratic state before World War II (since 1918), and the democratic tradition has been important in the country's history and culture. I think that because of this different historical model and social development, the totalitarian system in Czechoslovakia was never deeply rooted or popular as it was in the Soviet Union. Thus the reform movement surfaced in the late sixties with a democratic basis which had a national appeal. In the Soviet Union, where several generations grew up in the oppressive political system (and where autocratic Czarist regimes existed for centuries), the totalitarian system was more entrenched. After Stalin's death, beginning with the Khrushchev era (after 1956), it became less oppressive, but it was still a closed system with the authority of party leaders and the group functioning as a repressive force. There have always been individuals, even in the Soviet Union, who did not succumb to ideology and who developed their own views; however, several generations were deeply affected by the dynamics of the system in which they grew up.

The family was part of the system and traditionally transmitted authoritarian values and attitudes. In childrearing the use of force and physical punishment was common, as well as reinforcement of shame and guilt to ensure obedience. Typically, fear of authority and submission to it was required.

As a consequence of their social and cultural experiences, immigrants from Communist bloc countries (and especially from the Soviet Union) are usually suspicious and fearful of groups, and they look upon counseling or therapy groups in the same light. (The only group where they might be able to participate would be a structured one, featuring some type of education.) It may be difficult for American mental health professionals to understand their attitudes, since they might not be informed about their patients' social experience, and since it is difficult to empathize with such an alien culture. Also, these attitudes are so culturally determined that they appear "normal," and are usually ego-syntonic. A patient may not know himself/herself how avoidance or fear of groups relates to his or her cultural experience. They cannot usually conceive of a group as a "growth or freeing environment," no matter how much it is stressed to them. These attitudes are very deeply entrenched and do not change through emigration to this country. Usually such patients are also distrustful of individual therapy, especially patients from the Soviet Union, because they are not familiar with American psychological treatment practices; psychotherapy in the Soviet Union has been conducted mostly on a behavioral (or cognitive) basis, and psychoanalytic theory and practice has been suppressed. Also, official psychiatry has been used in the Soviet Union for the suppression of dissidents. Healthy people with diverging political or religious views were often forcibly committed to psychiatric hospitals and

"treated" with powerful drugs without their consent, which often resulted in their physical and mental damage, or destruction. Psychiatry and psychology, having been used by the government as an oppressive force, became suspect.

The following clinical examples may serve as an illustration of this problem. A colleague consulted me about the case of a patient, Mrs. K, a middle-aged recent Russian-Jewish immigrant from the Soviet Union. She was a professional woman who had profited from individual psychotherapy, conducted several years after her arrival in the US. Initially she considered psychotherapy after learning from her American friends about their personal experience in treatment. However, she would not consider adjunctive group therapy when it was recommended later in her treatment. The therapist did not understand her flat refusal, because she was a warm and connected person in spite of neurotic traits. Upon questioning, this patient explained her aversion toward groups mostly on the basis of her past experience. She noted that in her country individual problems were never publicly discussed in the press, and people were not used to exchanging views or criticisms in the public sphere. She felt ashamed to share her problems with other people (except on a one-to-one basis), and she would not trust group members to be helpful to her. On the contrary, she was afraid that the information could be used against her. She developed hatred for group discipline and group influence because in her past, groups were used to suppress individuality, to coerce and punish.

Similar sentiments were expressed by another Russian-Jewish immigrant, Mr. N, a professional man in his late fifties who emigrated to the United States after a successful technical career in the Soviet Union. He would not consider psychotherapy for depression and adjustment problems, even if conducted in his native language. Not familiar with psychotherapy, he viewed psychiatry with suspicion, thinking it applicable only to the treatment of schizophrenia. One of the central traumatic events of his life was the arrest and execution of his father during the Stalinist purges of the 1930s, and social ostracism of his family. Later, he tried to avoid political or public involvement as much as possible. In the seventies, he emigrated to the United States in order to live in a free country (but despite valued individual freedom here, he criticized democratic traditions). When interviewed, he related his avoidance of groups to his past experience. He remembered that he didn't like to be a member of official groups because he expected to be watched and controlled. He further commented that in most groups (at the university and at work) there were usually secret informants whose task was to give information to the KGB regarding a member's criticism or opposition to the regime. In addition, other people would give information to gain social and/or political advantage. This made him very cautious and suspicious of official groups, which he tried to avoid. As a result of these experiences and other problems caused by an oppressive regime, he preferred an individualistic way of life, which he sought in the United States.

In conclusion, I want to mention the case of Miss Z, an immigrant from an Eastern European country, whose treatment I supervised. Initially, she too was helped by her American colleague who took an interest in her and recommended a psychotherapy clinic. A single professional woman in her mid-twenties, she sought psychoanalytic treatment for neurotic depression and interpersonal problems. In supervision, it was important to alert the therapist who treated her to the many losses that Miss Z had suffered through her immigration and help him to explore these losses with her in more depth. Miss Z needed to open up, to deepen and continue her mourning, which was still blocked. In this process, it was important to help Miss Z to explore her anger

and guilt in relationship to the people she left, as well as her deep sadness, veiled grief, and loss. These feelings were connected with earlier conflicts of childhood and youth. Another important issue was Miss Z's difficulty in promoting herself in work situations, despite her considerable talent and a high level of training. It became apparent that she felt inhibited in expressing her views, and usually she followed people in authority. Since she worked in a creative field, where initiative and independence were encouraged, she was at a disadvantage. She was especially inhibited in groups and could not speak up during team meetings and conferences, although she was respected for her work. It was also important to alert the therapist to Miss Z's social and cultural experiences in her home country where she grew up in an oppressive political system. Upon further inquiry, she related that as a child, she grew up during the war in a country occupied by Nazis, in an atmosphere permeated by fear and terror. She remembered being abused by German children and being frightened of speaking to her teachers in a Germanized school. Later, after the war, as a result of the Communist takeover, her father lost his position as director of research in a scientific institute because he refused to join the Communist party. This created considerable hardship for the family, but the father would not betray his principles and eventually found a low-level job. Miss Z's mother came from a well-to-do upper-class family whose property was seized after the Communist takeover. The family house, which Miss Z loved and where she grew up, was also lost. During her school years, Miss Z could not express any criticism or question what she was taught, because the education was ruled by ideology. As an older child, she knew her parents' opposing political views, but officially she had to express agreement with the ideology. To do otherwise would endanger her prospect for continuing education and might create problems for her family. Miss Z was able to enter the university because she was helped by the director of her school, who was a party member with considerable influence, and by her classroom teacher who, unlike the director, was subtly critical of the regime and sympathetic to Miss Z. At the university, a course in Marxism-Leninism was compulsory in all fields. Miss Z related that during a seminar in this course, she once questioned and criticized some presented ideas. Next week she was called in by her department head, who wanted to help her. She was advised to be more compliant and not jeopardize her studies, since she was a top student in her field. After this experience, Miss Z, who was deeply interested in her studies and wanted to get a professional degree, complied and wrote a required "ideologically sound" paper for which she received a high grade.

Although after immigration, Miss Z now lived in a country with more freedom and worked in an environment where criticism and questioning were possible, she could not overcome her fears stemming from past social experience. Because of these problems, group therapy was recommended to her later in addition to individual therapy. It was her experience in an analytic therapy group that eventually helped her to overcome fears of exposure, punishment, humiliation, and ostracism, as well as a sense of shame and guilt. It was important to understand her fears on the basis of her childhood relationship with significant people as well as on the basis of her social and cultural experiences.

## CONCLUSION

Psychoanalytic understanding is applied to exploration of group phenomena of totalitarian systems. Freud's seminal ideas about primary groups, Bion's

concepts of "basic assumption" and "work group" mentality, as well as Fromm's analysis of culture and social character, have been found to be particularly important and relevant to this study. The author uses her personal experience of totalitarian systems, in Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, to illustrate and illuminate specific salient individual and group dynamics in those systems.

Cross-cultural treatment considerations for patients from those countries include knowledge of the ways in which psychological development is shaped by the system, affecting attitudes toward groups and group therapy—the focus of this author's research.

## NOTES

1. It was significant that Freud's books became "libri prohibiti." Special permission was necessary for a psychology student to borrow books in the library of the Charles University of Prague; however, only a few of Freud's books were available for official study at that time.

2. This type of leader and his or her relationship to a group was powerfully shown in a Russian film, "Commissar," directed by Askoldov, released in the era of *glasnost*. During the civil war a young woman who is a commissar in the Red Army becomes pregnant while on duty. She stays with a poor but loving Jewish family in a provincial town where she gives birth to her child. The family, with several children of their own, cares for her and befriends her. In a hauntingly beautiful and tragic scene, the commissar sadly sings a lullaby to her newborn child, whom she then leaves behind, being compelled to go back to the army. The child is left with the family, who takes him in as their own. In this film, a spiritual reverence for life and feeling is poignantly juxtaposed to an empty, deadly struggle in the war against enemies, led by a commissar in the Red Army. It shows how deadly social ideology could subvert life and humanity.

3. The other superpower has not been devoid of paranoia. George Orwell predicted some type of effect on each superpower in his *Tribune* column (London), October 19, 1945: "Few people have yet considered [the] ideological implications—that is, the kind of world-view, the kind of beliefs, and the social structure that would probably prevail in a state which was at once *unconquerable* and in a permanent state of 'cold war' with its neighbors" (p. 9).

4. The tragic example of such a cult that began in this country is the group formed by Jim Jones that ended with mass murder/suicide in Jonestown, Guyana.

5. American culture has been dominated by the Cold War since 1947. Secrecy, distrust and interference with civil rights began to occur in that year, and reached a peak during the McCarthy era, although they have continued in some situations which have political significance. For example, in 1986 and 1987, top leaders of the American government and possibly the President himself secretly approved the Iran-Contra operation, which resulted in military aid to the rebels fighting the Communist government of Nicaragua. This was an illegal evasion of Congress's Boland Amendment.

6. However, this process was resisted by many people in Czechoslovakia. Memories of the older generation, a democratic social tradition, books, art and religious faith continued to be a link with the past. In the late 60s, a reform movement was started by writers and intellectuals, which developed into an attempt to change the totalitarian system into a more democratic political system. However, Dubcek's "socialism with a human face" failed because the Soviet Union intervened and occupied Czechoslovakia in August of 1968. Freedoms were again curtailed and a massive immigration to the West followed. However, discredited official ideology lost any grip on the people and became openly despised. Spirituality and creativity went mostly underground and continued in the personal work of many individuals as well as unofficial professional and artistic groups.

7. This paper was written before sweeping democratic changes began in Czechoslovakia in November 1989. The speed of these changes, their organization and national appeal, demonstrate the importance of a democratic tradition in the consciousness of the people. Actually, they refer to their "democratic infrastructure."

8. These data validate Fromm's theory about the dialectic interplay between the culture and the character.

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*To Dr. Bruce Galuppo  
with warm regards,  
Olga Marlin*

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SYSTEM: A PSYCHOANALYTIC VIEW**

**Olga Marlin, Ph.D.**

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