



An Analysis of Freud's View of War

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Abstract. Freud, as an expert in psychoanalysis, is well known to people and has put forward many theories and methods of psychotherapy that have been highly respected by later generations. Due to the influence of the social environment in which he lived, Freud came into contact with a large number of war neurotics in his career in his later years, and he was also immersed in thinking about war. He successively published a series of articles with his understanding of war and death at that time in combination with the instinct theory. Especially in 1933, after his correspondence with Einstein on war was published, Freud's understanding of war attracted the attention of the academic circle, and his own interpretation of war also became one of the important objects of the study of war view.

Keywords: Freud · war · instinct · morality · civilization

1 Introduction

American scholar Arthur Kessler once said, "The most persistent sound in human history is the beating of the war drum. Tribal wars, religious wars, civil wars, wars of changing dynasties, national wars, revolutionary wars, colonial wars, wars of conquest and liberation, wars of prevention and end of wars, and other wars have followed one after another. We have every reason to believe that this chain of war will extend into the future." [1] War emerged with the formation of human society. Many politicians and military strategists always express their unique insights, and Freud was the first psychologist to explain war from a psychological perspective. Starting from the inherent fact that everyone has psychological activities, he explored the origin of war according to the theory of instinct, and analyzed war based on civilization, religion, moral ethics, etc. Freud published a series of articles successively, *Time Reflections on War and Death* (1915), *An Introduction to Psychoanalysis and War Neurosis* (1919), *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), *Why Is There War* (1933), which caused a great stir in the academic circle at that time, and also had a profound influence on the later generations. This study will explore how Freud viewed war.

2 Literature Review

The worldwide research on Freud has been started since the beginning of the 20th century, and the research Angle has changed with the expansion of Freud's thought range, from psychology to religion, ethics, literature and so on. From 1920s to 1950s, "war

neurosis" and "war and psychology" were the main research directions, mainly analyzing the causes of war from the psychological perspective. The masterpieces include H. Goodman's *The psychological analysis of war* and R. Stagner's *Psychological Causes of War*. With the end of the Second World War, Freud's ideas began to be widely used in various disciplines, such as anthropology, sociology, political science, ethics, and so on, and most of the construction of civilized society as the center of discussion. Represented as Le Hoffman's *War, revolution, and psychoanalysis: Freudian thought begins to grapple with social reality* and S. Feshbach's *Human Aggressivity and War*. Well into the 21st century, Ginette Roy collaborated with Cornelius Crowley on *D.H. Lawrence, His Contemporaries and the First World War*. Dagmar Herzog wrote and published *Cold War Freud: Psychoanalysis in an Age of Catastrophes*, Marlene Bellinos wrote *Freud and War*, these authors have stepped away from the background of the 20th century and looked back at history to make a more objective and comprehensive analysis of Freud's concept of war.

Since the 21st century, under the influence of international studies, Chinese scholars began to study Freud's view of war. This research includes academic articles analyzed from ethical perspective, such as Chang Suqiao's *Insight into the Ethical Significance of Freud's Theory* [2], moral perspective, such as Yao Dazh's *Freudian and Moral Psychology* [3], and cultural perspective, such as Wang Guangrong's *Review of Freud's Social and Cultural Views* [4]. Additionally, there were two representative works: Wei Lishu's *Why There Is War -- An Interpretation of Freud's War Thought* (2015), and Shan Xiaochun's *Freud and Jaspers: Reflections on War and Times* (2018). The former book made a great contribution to the analysis of Freud's view on human instinct and the origin of war [5]. The latter book compared Freud's and Jasper's thought on war [6]. Due to different historical background and research perspectives, Freud's war view is more biased to psychological analysis and micro perspective. Freud believes that the root cause of war is death instinct, and hopes to oppose war with things that promote the development of civilization. This study will mainly focus on Freud's view on war, which will be explained in detail from three perspectives: instinct, civilization and religion.

3 The Origin of War

The First World War, 1914–18, was the worst since the age of cold weapons. After the war, the economy of all countries declined, and the soldiers and civilians of all countries had psychological problems of varying degrees. In the face of this situation, the leaders of various countries decided to take the lead in reviving the economy and solving the problems of people's livelihood. But the good times did not last long. The economic crisis of 1933 spread from the United States to the whole world, bringing global panic. The world situation that had just stabilized was faced with a new crisis. However, the League of Nations, which aims to solve disputes by non-violent means, did not play its due role after the war, which made the international situation more and more fierce.

In this international context, as a psychoanalyst, Freud met the golden age of his career. On the one hand, he received a large number of patients and collected a lot of first-hand information about the trauma of war. On the other hand, he began to write related books and published a series of articles, from the perspective of the psychological perspective of the origin of war.

3.1 Instinct

After the First World War, Freud suffered from mental illness. His son's participation in the war and the displacement of life made him have a more profound thinking about the war. Freud stated that instinct can be divided into biological instinct and sexual instinct, who recognized the powerful destructive force of human beings and wrote in the book "...Two kinds of instinct are distinguished: one is the purpose of guiding life towards death, while the other is the sexual instinct, which strives for and produces life recovery", which is often referred to as "death instinct" and "life instinct". Death instinct is also called "aggression instinct" and "destruction instinct". The death instinct is something we all have, something that is completely inherent in human nature. One part of this instinct is in the body, which creates masochism, and the other part is out, which creates aggression and destructiveness and becomes uncontrolled impulse. During the war, unheard and unseen atrocities impinged upon people's consciousness, either in fear or in pursuit of excitement, and most people abandoned their moral limitations, unleashed their human rage, and experienced the pleasure of satisfying their instincts.

Based on the theory of the death instinct, Freud expressed his opinion on the causes of war in an open letter to Einstein in 1932: "War seems to be a natural thing because it has a good biological basis and is practically unavoidable" [7].

3.2 Civilization

Freud explained that civilization is "the sum total of the result and system caused by human's defense of nature and the adjustment or accumulation of human relations" [8]. Civilization is divided into two parts. One is the relationship between man and nature, which means that man passively defends nature for the sake of defending himself and the continuation of race. The other part is the interpersonal relationship, a part of society that maintains harmony and stability through internal reorganization. The satisfaction of human instinct -- sexual instinct and death instinct -- is opposed to the civilization of human society. To be specific, civilization expands its position by relying on the ruthless limitation of instinct, while instinctive tendency is constantly constrained and forced to make sacrifices within the bound of civilization that makes it difficult to live a happy life. At the same time, with the development of civilization, moral requirements are getting higher and higher, so that people have to constantly suppress their instincts and fall into the pain of confrontation with instinct. The repression of human heart needs to be relieved by violence. War finds a channel for the release of instincts, so it naturally erupts and expands in the subconscious desire of people.

3.3 Religion

Nietzsche caused a stir in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when he declared that "God is dead". His denial of God and the centuries-old Western pillars of faith and tradition of rationalism caused an uproar that left people without direction. Seeing the power of religion, Freud analyzed the society at that time and came to the conclusion that philosophy, art and religion were all social phenomena closely related to human thinking and consciousness, and all three were competing with the scientific spirit at that time.

Religion, as “a huge force, dominating the strongest emotions of human beings” [9], has received the strongest criticism from the public. But there is no denying that religion was a powerful spiritual force that influenced every aspect of people's lives in Western countries at that time. Freud emphasized that “although the power of religion comes from the truth it contains, the truth is not a real truth, but a historical truth” [10]. In Freud's opinion, social existence is built on the recognition of some common evil; religion is born of guilt and the remorse attached to it; as for morality, it is partly based on the needs of society, and partly on the penance of free guilt. In other words, religion depends on the existence of human guilt and is accompanied by the moral norms in the society. The instinct of aggression and destruction is innate in man, and driven by this instinct, man behaves against moral limits, guilt arises, and religion emerges. But religion can not completely save people from suffering, which keeps them in a spiral of mistakes and regrets, struggling and helpless. It is war that makes the evil in people's heart find a “reasonable” outlet, intensify the evil in life, drive people to commit killing, and brew the tragedy of war.

4 Discussion

Einstein once asked Freud, “Is there any way for mankind to free itself from the evil of war?” [11] In the international context of the time, Freud wrote back:

“War would be avoided if the various groups of mankind would leave to a central authority the power to adjudicate all conflicts of interest. There are clearly two different requirements involved here: the first is the establishment of a supreme authority and the granting of the necessary powers to it. The League of Nations was established as such authority. But the second power has not yet been satisfied: the League of Nations has no power of its own, and can only gain power if the members of the new body, the individual states, intend to obey it. As things stand, that prospect is very slim” [12].

Although the prospect is bleak, it is man-made. Freud finally put his hope in civilization and the future: “It is to be hoped that these two factors, cultural attitudes and a legitimate fear of the outcome of future wars, will hopefully stop war in the near future [13]. Though he was vague about the means of achieving this, he insisted that “everything that promotes civilization can also be used against war” [13].

It can be seen from the correspondence between Einstein and Freud that Freud believed that an institution based on common interests could effectively avoid war by holding the power of overall international relations, coordinating conflicts among countries and safeguarding common interests. However, due to Freud's limited research perspective and energy, he did not put forward a concrete and feasible plan. He simply pinned his hope on the future.

5 Conclusion

This study has elaborately explained Freud's view of war. Freud formally interpreted war from the psychological perspective, especially from the perspective of psychoanalysis, and adopted the instinct theory to study how the mental state of people in a war changed

and how this change affected the development of war. To avoid war, he proposed that the creation of an international authority was more powerful than the League of Nations, but he also placed his hope on the future aversion and fear of war. These two points have been realized to varying degrees in contemporary times. On the one hand, after the Second World War, the United Nations was established. Compared with the League of Nations, it was more powerful in dealing with international affairs. On the other hand, because of the extreme destructive power of heat weapon and the far-reaching effect of the harm they cause, especially the possibility of destroying humanity, World War Three is a danger and has not yet become a reality.

It can be concluded that Freud's analysis of war from the human perspective is of great exploratory significance, and has extraordinary research value. However, as Freud was getting older and suffering from cancer when he created the relevant works, his theories were neither complete nor rigorous. Many of his views were criticized by later generations, especially his research methods only considered psychological factors but ignored realistic factors, which made his works full of idealist thoughts. Although Freud emphasized that his theories were based on biology, some of his analysis was based on his speculation without any concrete evidence. In the context of contemporary rationalism and scientific analysis, this theory is bound to suffer a severe shock.

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