9 Social Influences Affecting the Disposition to War

After the Second World War discussion of the effects of the character and attitudes of individuals on the way in which international relations were conducted took a new turn. Group psychology began to appear more relevant than individual psychology. The development of attitude-testing and opinion-polling made it possible to examine and compare, on a genuinely scientific basis, the sentiments of particular national groups, particular occupation groups (such as the military, civil servants or politicians), or particular age-groups, towards other countries. Many studies of this kind were undertaken in this period. The first extract reproduced below, comparing the attitudes of nationals of particular countries, demonstrate some of the conclusions drawn from studies of this kind.

Some writers in seeking to discover the cause of hostile attitudes to foreign states, attempted to draw analogies with the animal world. The observations of ethologists about aggression among animals led some to conclude that humans inherited similar tendencies from their primeval past. Konrad Lorenz, in his celebrated study of animal aggression, went on to consider (as in the passage reproduced below) reasons for group hostility and war among humans. But he was careful not to draw any direct inference from one to the other. Indeed he discovers quite different factors at work among human beings: factors that had their basis in social organisation rather than individual psychology. He drew attention particularly to a phenomenon he calls “militant enthusiasm”, whether for a nation or a cause, and the role this can play in directing aggression to external objects.

Others were less cautious. One conclusion drawn by some from animal behaviour studies was that humans shared with animals a “territorial instinct”, which led them to defend with special tenacity the homeland which they saw as their own. This thesis was put forward in disregard of the fact that the primates, the animals closest to the human species, show little evidence of any such “territorial imperative”; or that, among humans, immigrants often fight for their adopted country at least as tenaciously as native-born residents and
sometimes more so. These and other factors led many to doubt the thesis that humans share the instinct of some animals and birds to defend a territory. That thesis is however presented here in the extract from Robert Ardrey's book, *The Territorial Imperative*, which won widespread attention at the time it appeared.

More persuasive were the writings of social psychologists. Decisions about peace and war are reached in an institutional setting and there was increasing scepticism about the relevance of conclusions reached on the basis of the individual psychology of citizens (except, perhaps, that of their leaders). Doubts of this kind are expressed in the passage quoted below from Herbert Kelman's book *International Behaviour*. He questions the degree of attention so widely given to the role of "aggression" in personal motivation, suggesting that in modern conditions motives of fear and mistrust may be more significant. But he is particularly concerned to show that in international relationships, individuals, including key decision-makers, are operating always within a particular social and political environment. Only a multidisciplinary approach, therefore, which takes account of all the various sources of influence, is likely to increase our understanding of the attitudes and actions which affect their decisions.

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**Buchanan and Cantril – The Individual’s Attitude to International Society***

“The individual’s assumptions concerning the nature of the world, of which ideas concerning men and nations and war and peace are fragments, form the intellectual framework within which he considers proposals for change. The four questions which deal with these more


Hedley Cantril (1940– ). Specialist in research on public opinion and author of many studies based on the findings of opinion pollsters. Formerly directed the Office