Cultural templates and the calibration of trauma

Much has been written about the indirect traumatisation of the postwar generations that have no direct memory of the war and the Holocaust. From a psychoanalytic perspective, many Germans who were born shortly before or after the end of the war introjected a stigmatised identity precisely because the war generation could not confront the question of personal and collective guilt head on. Gabriele Rosenthal conducted a comparative study of intergenerational communication in families of Jewish Holocaust survivors and German perpetrators.¹ Although the silence in both groups was motivated by diametrically opposite factors, namely trauma on the one side and guilt on the other, the children and grandchildren developed similar symptoms. Second and even third generation descendants in both groups were often locked into strong feelings of guilt, episodes of depression and serious psychosomatic disturbances. Rosenthal’s book is one of many studies of such phantomatic legacies that operate across generational thresholds.² These underline that silence is a potent carrier of communicative memory. One approach offering a more nuanced understanding of such transgenerational transmission is the psychology of Vamik Volkan and his team.³ Their concept of ‘the chosen trauma’ helps to explain how it can be that later generations may remain bound to collective identity, even when the experiences that are at the core of this identity are discursively rejected.

Volkan is a psychoanalyst who has studied how massive shared traumas caused by warfare, ethnic conflict or terrorism can set in train an
unconscious process of transgenerational transmission, unless the members of the traumatised generation manage to repair the trauma. Without therapeutic intervention, historical traumas are passed down to descendants through early interaction with parents and other important adults who engender unconscious mental representations of the trauma in their offspring. Volkan and his team speak of ‘deposited images’ through which members of the traumatised generation assign specific tasks to their descendants, such as displaced destruction, repair of damaged self-esteem or reversal of helplessness. Volkan employs the metaphor of the ‘psychological gene’ to accentuate the affective power of deposited images which shape the child’s identity and self-representation.  

The shared image of the traumatic event can only develop ‘because the traumatized self- and object-images passed on to children by their ancestors become amalgamated with their identity as a member of the traumatized large group, which is part of their core identity’. Not only parents and ancestors but also group representations of the trauma fuel the unconscious fantasies about the undigested legacy of the past. So it is that fantasies flowing from historical events massively bolster identification with the group precisely because the group representations have amalgamated with the individual’s core identity. Accordingly, descendants accept the assignment of unconscious tasks which they in turn delegate to later generations. For Volkan the notion of the chosen trauma entails the idea that large groups ‘can be said to make unconscious choices’:

The chosen trauma forms thousands and millions of people designated – ‘chosen’ – to be linked together through their shared mental representation of that trauma. A chosen trauma reflects the traumatized past generation’s incapacity for or difficulty with mourning losses connected to the shared traumatic event, as well as its failure to reverse the humiliation and injury to the group’s self-esteem (‘narcissistic injury’) inflicted by another large group.  

Cognitively, the chosen trauma can be rejected. On the level of affect, however, it creates a cumulative legacy that may include mourning the parents’ trauma or overcoming experiences of defeat or humiliation. As Dirk Moses comments, while members of different generations may adopt different missions, ‘the task is not to forget the chosen trauma as an identity-conferring mission’. In light of this theory, the Dresden narrative derives some of its impact from such a deposited legacy.

Although the chosen trauma inhering in the core identity of later generations is unconscious, it need not necessarily lead an underground