

WORLD WAR I - AND THE ROOTS OF ADLER'S CONCEPT OF SOCIAL INTEREST

Edward Hoffman

“I felt throughout the war as a prisoner feels.”
-- Alfred Adler (1870-1937)

“From our perspective today, [Alfred] Adler as a psychological pioneer was groping in this article [on aggression] for a description of the human tendency toward assertiveness; his term *aggression drive* therefore was actually a misnomer, and before long, he would stop using it in this context. Ironically, after . . . the mass horrors of World War I, Freud would emulate Adler's original formulation by positing the existence of an innate human urge for destruction. In this same 1908 article, however, Adler was already suggesting that our so-called aggression drive often transforms itself into socially useful channels:

Charity, sympathy, altruism, and sensitive interest in misery represent new satisfactions on which the drive, which originally tended toward cruelty, feeds. . . . The greater the aggression drive, the stronger will become this cultural transformation. Thus the pessimist becomes the preventor of dangers, Cassandra becomes a warner and a prophet” (Hoffman, 1994, p. 61).

“Following the assassination of military commander Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his (p. 90) wife, Sophie, in the provincial capital of Sarajevo in Bosnia-Herzegovina [in 1914], Europe's nations were rapidly escalating charges, demands, and threats against one another. Soon the clashing field of psychology would be subsumed by a far bloodier war that would irrevocably change Adler's own life and subsequent career” (p. 91).

“Certainly, few could have imagined the swift series of events that unfolded after the assassinations at Sarajevo on June 28. Although its own investigatory commission two weeks later could find no evidence that Serbia's provincial regime had shared complicity in the terrorist act, the Austro-Hungarian government decided otherwise. On July 23, it presented the Serbians with a ten-point ultimatum to prevent and eliminate all nationalistic challenges to the Dual Monarchy's sovereignty over the Balkan region. Much to the surprise of many, Serbia agreed to all but one of the demands; but eager for a potent retaliation, or ‘punitive expedition’ as many Austrians called it, the empire declared war on Serbia on July 28, and began shelling its capital, Belgrade, the same day. Within the week, all of Europe's major powers with the exception of Italy were at war: Germany joined with Austro-Hungary against England, France, and Russia.

“The scale of military movement was historically unprecedented. Across Europe, approximately six million men received orders in early August and began mobilizing for active duty. Within Vienna as most elsewhere, the popular mood was almost euphoric with patriotic excitement. The spirit engulfed many intellectuals like Freud, who confided to a colleague that, ‘for the first time in thirty years, I feel myself to be an Austrian and feel like (p. 92) giving this not very hopeful Empire another chance.’ . . .

“But not so for Adler. . . . shortly after the Sarajevo assassinations were publicized, Adler had an ominous intuition that a long, disastrous war was in the making and would greatly affect civilians as well” (p. 93).

“Refusing to regard his military service as a patriotic virtue, Adler [as a physician] soon began feeling personally responsible for sending his young patients to their potential deaths. He found especially unnerving, even traumatizing, the necessity for making selections among them for renewed battle field participation. Such painful decisions were antithetical to his idealistic nature and two decades of medical work devoted to safeguarding human life. Years later, Adler would remember long, sleepless nights in which he agonized over his role in prolonging the endless suffering. But he seems to have kept such unpopular sentiments to himself. . . .” (p. 100).

“. . . Adler had been devoting considerable thought to the psychological causes of war. Impelled to new theorizing by the destruction he had witnessed, he clearly saw no answer in conventional religion. Adler . . . certainly saw no evidence of divine intercession as Europe’s battlefields continued to fill with the corpses of young men.

“Nor did modernist philosophy provide Adler with any satisfying answers. Though he had long admired Nietzsche’s bold emphasis on individual will as the highest value, it now seemed indisputable that what civilization needed was not more individualism but more *social feeling*: compassion, altruism, and selflessness. Such qualities, of course, were deemed ethical; but they were ultimately psychologically rooted, Adler was sure. Drawing upon his earlier work, he became convinced that so many people lack this vital cluster of traits because they feel inferior and inadequate. In contrast, emotionally healthy people possess social feeling in strong measure and are also able to encourage it in others. If men and women, and particularly children -- who had most of their lives still ahead of them -- could overcome their sense of inferiority, then they could truly begin helping others. It was up to science and not religion, specifically, the modern science of psychology, to seize the initiative and foster this key personality trait throughout the world.

“During military leave, upon visiting friends . . . Adler first revealed his new concept; it would appear in print the following year. . . . Initially, Adler seemed the same jovial figure to his friends But to their uneasy surprise, he now began zealously promoting the importance of social or community feeling (*Gemeinschaftsgefühl*). In German, the term carried an ethical, almost religious connotation that seemed at odds with the iconoclastic physician they had long known” (p. 101).

“Speaking before the Zurich [Switzerland] Association of Physicians, he began quoting the dictum of nineteenth-century German medical reformer Rudolph Virchow that, ‘Physicians will eventually become the educators of humanity’” (p. 104).

“This was an extremely optimistic pronouncement to a civilization torn by the greatest mass destruction of its history. But Adler was seized by the vision of promulgating his psychological system throughout the world. In this sense, he shared the revolutionary zeal of his wife, Raissa, and her Bolshevik friends, but he believed that true change could occur through psychology rather than violent political action.

“On November 11, the ‘silence heard around the world’ took place as Germany surrendered to the Allies. The fighting that had claimed over fifteen million military and civilian lives was over. The same day, Emperor Karl I abdicated his throne in Vienna, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire was no more. The first Austrian Republic was declared the next day. For a war-weary Adler, the time was finally at hand for tremendously expanding his dormant psychological movement” (p. 105).

“Of the ‘blessings’ that came in the wake of the Great War,’ he [Adler] noted sarcastically, ‘perhaps no one thing is of such importance as the tremendous increase in the demoralization of youth. Everyone has noticed it and may have taken cognizance of it with horror.’ Remarking that youthful alienation often takes place slowly and silently before exploding into obvious criminal activity, Adler identified certain types of books and movies for their destructive social influence. But his strongest criticism was leveled against Austria’s educational system. . .” (p. 115).

“Postwar Austria had become highly politicized, even in the seemingly lofty field of psychiatry. Weeks after Armistice Day, the country’s provisional parliament had passed a law providing for ‘the determination and prosecution of neglect of duty in military authorities during the war.’ Not long after, a special fact-finding commission was launched by Social Democrats to investigate possible cases of psychiatric malpractice by those serving in the military. In early 1919, serious charges of physical abuse, including torture, were leveled against the esteemed University of Vienna professor who had decisively rejected Adler’s application four years before: Julius von Wagner-Jauregg. . . .

“The official inquiry took place in October 1920, and Wagner-Jauregg testified that during the war he had volunteered, out of patriotic fervor, to treat those soldiers deemed ‘neurotic’ for refusing to fight. Wagner-Jauregg affirmed that at the time he had regarded such men as emotionally disturbed and in need of ‘treatment’ for placing their own self-interest above loyalty to the beloved empire. Although assembled court evidence could not implicate Wagner-Jauregg directly, it confirmed the appalling reports of former Austrian soldiers (p. 116).

“Physicians without any neurological or psychiatric background had indeed been put in charge of field hospital departments where ‘nervous illnesses’ were treated. Their practices included cold showers, straitjackets, isolation cells, public humiliation, naked exposure, burning cigarettes on patients’ bodies, and applying deliberately painful electrical shocks to their nipples and genitals. Such brutal practices were found to be especially common in German field hospitals, and fatal in at least twenty cases.

“Recruited as an expert witness for the commission, Freud submitted a written ‘Memorandum on the Electrical Treatment of War Neurotics.’ He argued that such psychiatric brutality had not been based on well-meaning and mistaken theory, but that physicians had adopted those practices out of political expediency to stop soldiers malingering. In particular, Freud singled out the compulsory military draft of the Great War as ‘the immediate cause of all war neuroses.’

“Diffusing the issue of Wagner-Jauregg’s responsibility by emphasizing the broader, inhumane backdrop of the war, Freud emphasized that, ‘The physicians had to play a role which turned them into something like machine guns behind the front, of driving fugitives back. This certainly was the intention of the War Office. . . . But then, this was rather an unsuitable task for the medical profession. The physician should act as the patient’s champion.’ In short, Freud offered a general condemnation of military psychiatry, but carefully rejected any notion that this

respected colleague had done anything deserving retrospective punishment. . . . ever mindful of university politics, Freud most likely felt it prudent to refrain from uttering any direct criticism of his department's influential head.

“As later recalled by one of Freud's in-laws visiting Adler that day, the founder of individual psychology was enraged to hear about Freud's testimony. Astutely sensing that Wagner-Jauregg would probably be exonerated as a result, Adler was furious and declared that he would have behaved quite differently in Freud's place. Freud should not have spared Wagner-Jauregg from the consequences of his immoral conduct during the war; to defend him nobly was inappropriate: ‘This kind of generosity,’ declared Adler, ‘is out of place with faced with such enemies’” (p. 117).

“Although Adler was becoming influential as a psychological revolutionary, after the war his chief reputation soon became established in the applied field of child psychology. . . .

“Certainly, Adler had long expressed an interest in education. . . . Yet, it was not until after the war, when Adler was already in middle age, that he became most strongly committed to the emerging fields of child guidance and educational psychology. In the early 1920s, Adler seized on these new disciplines as the most worthwhile way to disseminate the teachings of individual psychology to a conflicted and demoralized postwar Europe. Indeed, for the rest of Adler's life, he would argue that, in the long run, educational reform provides the most reliable means for peaceful world improvement” (p. 124).

“Sitting in a small group [at a village cafe in Kitzbuhel, Austria], Adler was casually asked about his wartime experiences as a physician. ‘He spoke with horror of the wicked waste, the senseless futility of all wars, and with biting scorn of the Austrian statesmen who had unleashed the 1914 war,’ [writer and novelist, Phyllis] Bottome later recalled. When a Viennese woman in the group immediately rebuked Adler for criticizing his homeland before Englishmen -- Austria's wartime enemies -- Adler gently replied that, ‘We are all fellow men. Those of common sense in every country felt the same [about the war] -- organized murder and torture against our brothers - - how should it not be unwanted?’ He proceeded to describe the medical horrors and suffering he had witnessed and the Austrian government's repeated lies to keep its citizens supporting the continued fighting. ‘In those hours,’ commented Adler's future biographer, ‘I ceased to think of Adler as ordinary; I knew that what I was looking at, and listening to, was a great man’” (p. 187).

“Adler . . . stressed that the ‘meaning of life’ comes through helping others and, in this way, leaving an enduring legacy for future generations. So much needed to be done -- and *could* be done -- in fields like education and child guidance; to complain about humanity's foibles was the mark of a selfish, spoiled personality” (p. 256).

Hoffman, Edward. (1994). *The drive for self: Alfred Adler and The Founding of Individual Psychology*. New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.