The Politics of Identity: Ukraine and Palestine
Sabby Sagall

This article attempts to situate the concept of identity within two contexts, firstly, in the object relations analysis of splitting, especially Melanie Klein's, and secondly, in the application of Klein's view to the process of national identification. American academic Mary Caputi has described the way in which two psychoanalysts have analyzed this: Turkish Cypriot-American psychoanalyst Vamik Volkan and French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva. Caputi posits "the tremendous weight that national identity carries, given its ability to engage deep emotions and to elicit irrational responses." She argues that psychoanalysis sees national identity as part of the individual's large project of establishing moorings, given that national identities aim to denote stable, clearly defined sets of meanings free of ambiguity and ambivalence. [Caputi, 1996, p. 683]. Both Volkan and Kristeva attempt to engage with the issue of "ego formation and the individual's need for a social identity not beset by fragmentation." Caputi aims to use these two theorists to reveal the 'psychoanalytical underpinnings of national identity'. [Caputi, 1996, p. 684]. I will then attempt to apply their analyses to the situations of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (though we should remember that the war has been going on since 2014), and, secondly, the ongoing Israeli oppression of the Palestinians.

Volkan insists on the need to grasp those basic psychic processes originating in the pre-Oedipal phase, He argues that splitting is central to the psychoanalytic contribution to the understanding of international relations. Splitting is a process "used by pre-Oedipal children beset by the anxieties of differentiation". The child is unable to weld together the simultaneously good and bad images of the mother, a dilemma that gives rise to intense conflict. They remain "too cognitively and emotionally immature to tolerate the ambiguity of feelings that these good and bad images stir up." But they know that the rage provoked by the mother's bad image could prove harmful. [Caputi, 1996, p. 685].

This inability to tolerate ambiguity, to allow that good and bad images refer to the same person, leads the child to split the opposing images, apparently resolving the ambivalence. "Hence splitting means that love and rage need not appear to coincide in one relationship. Instead, these emotions can be thought of as discrete until the child is able to accept both pleasant and unpleasant aspects of the mother's behavior." [Caputi, 1996, p. 285]. For Volkan, portions of the mother's split good and bad images that were emotionally meaningful to the child during the pre-Oedipal phase are never integrated into the internalised representations of her formed later. These images, which correspond to the child's developing sense of self, remain as residual, unabsorbed remnants never integrated into the representation of the mother. [Caputi, 1996, p. 686].

Vamik Volkan believes that these residual images are then externalized on to suitable targets which reactivate the emotions associated with them. "Anything which

reactivates … good dimensions of the mother – her all-benevolent, larger-than-life image which is never welded into her internalized representation – now awaits a suitable target on to which it can be externalized. The same is true of her hated dimensions: images of her ability to frighten, threaten or overwhelm the child never integrated into her internalized representation now search for suitable targets of externalization." [Caputi, 1996, p.686].

> Our national identities, our allies and enemies, are all examples of suitable targets of externalization, targets capable of resonating with those emotionally charged unintegrated remnants by linking them to either idealized or devalued external objects. For Volkan, this is the root of both our love for our homeland and our dislike of certain foreigners.

Julia Kristeva agrees with Volkan's analysis of the relationship between psychoanalysis and national identity. She believes that from a psychoanalytical viewpoint national identity performs a crucial function: "National pride is comparable, from a psychological standpoint, to the *good narcissistic* image that the child gets from its mother and proceeds, through the intersecting play of identification demands emanating from both parents, to elaborate into an ego ideal. By not being aware of, underestimating, or degrading such a narcissistic image or ego ideal, one humiliates and lays subject or group open to *depression*." [Kristeva, 1993, p. 52 in Caputi, 1996, p. 687].

Nationality deserves consideration as a discourse providing cohesion and points of reference to a subject beset by fragmentation and relativity. The depression brought on by loss can apply not only to love relations between individuals but also in the relationship between an individual and their surrounding culture. Both Volkan and Kristeva identify the way in which national identity is not solely a matter of political identification but also emanates from the psychological dynamic of splitting begun in childhood. A culture serves the important function of providing the subject with a system of meaning with which they need to identify. [Caputi, 1996, p. 689].

However, Caputi argues that Volkan and Kristeva too readily accept *national identity* as that construct best able to provide the subject with a suitable target of externalization without considering the extent to which it can "complicate, intensify, and strain relations between potential enemies…(they) scrutinize those psychoanalytic processes which undergird ideological and geopolitical constructs while failing to appreciate how fully such processes are affected by the political realm." [Caputi, 1996, p. 691]. This failure prevents them from seriously considering alternative representations with which those same psychic process might link up. "Might there not exist suitable targets for externalization less likely to encourage warfare? ... these authors posit the nation-state almost as an immutable entity and do not engage those positions highlighting the ominous, overstated, or simply untruthful dimensions of national identity." [Caputi, 1996, p. 691].

The problem is that Volkan does not consider seriously the idea that the nation-state is an "overrated concept, one exaggerated… in its pretensions, a harmful construct with destructive consequences… In addition to providing a good narcissistic image,

doesn't the nation also justify, encourage and exacerbate human aggression." As for Kristeva, she too fails to articulate alternative entities capable of reflecting a good narcissistic image. [Caputi, pp. 692-3].

Let us also remember Freud's assertion in his essay 'Mass Psychology and Analysis of the I': "when people are together in a mass all individual inhibitions fall away and all the cruel, brutal, destructive instincts that lie dormant in the individual as a leftover from primitive times are roused to free drive-satisfaction." [Freud, 1921/2004, Penguin ed., p. 26].

Russian National Identity

In July 2021, Vladimir Putin wrote an article arguing for the historical unity of Russia and Ukraine. He asserts that Russians, Ukrainians and Belorussians are all descendants of Ancient Rus which was the largest state in Europe. Slavic and other tribes were bound together by one language – old Russian – and also, by economic and political ties, by the rule of the princes of the Rurik dynasty and by the Orthodox faith. The spiritual choice made by St. Vladimir, Prince of Novgorod and Grand Prince of Kiev, still determines Russian beliefs today.

However, many centuries of fragmentation and living within different states naturally brought about regional language peculiarities, resulting in the emergence of dialects. At the same time, the idea of the Ukrainian people as a nation separate from the Russians started to form and gain ground among the Polish elite and a part of the Malorussian ('Little Russia': historical term for Ukraine) intelligentsia.

In 1922, when the USSR was created, with the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic becoming one of its founders, a fierce debate among the Bolshevik leaders resulted in the implementation of Lenin's plan to form a union state as a federation of equal republics. The right for the republics to secede from the Union was included in the Constitution. Putin believes this was a dangerous time-bomb which exploded the moment the safety mechanism provided by the Communist Party's leading role disappeared in 1991.

In the 1920's-1930's, the Bolsheviks actively promoted the 'localization policy', which took the form of Ukrainization of the Ukrainian SSR. The localization policy, Putin says, played a major role in the development and consolidation of the Ukrainian culture, language and identity. At the same time, under the guise of combating so-called Russian great-power chauvinism, Ukrainization was often imposed on those who did not see themselves as Ukrainians. This Soviet national policy secured at the state level the creation of three separate Slavic peoples: Russian, Ukrainian and Belorussian, instead of the large Russian nation.

The Bolsheviks, Putin claims, treated the Russian people as inexhaustible material for their social experiments. They dreamt of a world revolution that would wipe out national states. That is why they were so generous in drawing borders and bestowing

territorial gifts. Russia, Putin says, was robbed. Yet inside the USSR, borders between republics were never seen as state borders; they were nominal within a single country, which, while featuring all the attributes of a federation, was highly centralized – this, again, was secured by the Communist Party's leading role. But in 1991, all those territories and people found themselves abroad overnight, taken away from their historical motherland.

The Russian Federation recognized the new geopolitical realities; and, indeed, did a lot for Ukraine to establish itself as an independent country. Throughout the difficult 1990's and in the new millennium, Russia has provided considerable support to Ukraine. Whatever 'political arithmetic' of its own Kiev may wish to apply, from 1991–2013, Ukraine's budget savings amounted to more than USD 82 billion, while today it holds on to the mere USD 1.5 billion of Russian payments for gas transit to Europe. If economic ties between our countries had been retained, Ukraine would enjoy the benefit of tens of billions of dollars.

For Putin, Ukraine and Russia have developed as a single economic system over decades and centuries. However, by declaring independence, Ukrainian leaders promised that the Ukrainian economy would be one of the leading ones in Europe and the standard of living among the best. However, in 2019, before the pandemic, Ukraine's GDP per capita had been below four thousand USD. This is less than Albania, Moldova, or Kosovo. Ukraine is today Europe's poorest country.

It was the Ukrainian authorities who frittered away the achievements of many generations. Putin says "we know how hardworking and talented the people of Ukraine are. They can achieve success and outstanding results with perseverance and determination." Russia is still one of Ukraine's top three trading partners, and hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians come to Russia to work. "When the USSR collapsed, many people in Russia and Ukraine sincerely believed and assumed that our close cultural, spiritual and economic ties would last." However, Ukraine's ruling circles decided to justify their country's independence through denial of its past. They began to mythologize and rewrite history, edit out everything that united us, and refer to the period when Ukraine was part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union as an occupation. "The common tragedy of collectivization and famine of the early 1930s was portrayed as the genocide of the Ukrainian people."

The situation in Ukraine today involves a forced change of identity. And the most despicable thing is that the Russians in Ukraine are being forced not only to deny their roots, generations of their ancestors, but also to believe that Russia is their enemy. Today, the 'right' patriot of Ukraine is one who hates Russia. But Russians see them as their own people. For Putin, it is important for Russians to understand that their "partner is defending its own national interests and not serving someone else's, that it is not a tool in other people's hands fighting against us." Russians respect the Ukrainian language

and traditions, their desire to see their country free, safe and prosperous. He is confident that Ukraine's true sovereignty is possible only in partnership with Russia. "Together we have always been and will be many times stronger and more successful. For we are one people."

Ukrainian National Identity

Canadian Professor Dominique Arel argues that Ukrainian national identity can be traced back to the 19th century, at a time when nationalist movements appeared all over Europe. Nationalism hinges on the claim that a culturally distinct nation has the right to self-rule, In Europe, with the exception of the Balkans, nationalism was based around the claim of a distinct language. The early Ukrainian nationalists believed that the unique Ukrainian vernacular, distinct from Russian and Polish, made the Ukrainians a nation.

Arel rejects Putin's assertion that the invasion was to protect Russian speakers who were allegedly being killed in the eastern Ukrainian province of Donbas. He also rejects the claim that an independent Ukrainian state is a foreign invention and a security threat to Russia, justifying the invasion as defence against NATO expansion. At the root of this worldview is Putin's false belief that Russians and Ukrainians are 'one people' and that Ukraine is merely an extension of Russia — an idea that can be traced back to the Russian imperial representation of Ukrainians (Little Russians) as junior brothers of Russians (Great Russians).

With the 'collapse' of the Russian monarchy in February 1917, a 'Ukrainian National Republic' (UNR) was declared in Kyiv. After the Bolsheviks took power in Moscow, the UNR declared independence in January 1918. Lenin understood the power of nationalism, and in particular, the psychology of people who felt wronged by Russia's sense of superiority. This led to the Soviet Union recognizing Ukrainian as a separate language and granting Ukraine official 'statehood' in the form of a Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. The expectation was that the formal equality of nations would dissipate nationalism. As long as Lenin was alive and leader of the Soviet Union, Ukrainian independence was guaranteed.

The key turning point of Ukraine's relationship with Moscow came in the late 1920s and early 1930s, with the victory of Stalin's faction over his left-wing opponents at the end of the 1920s. A developing 'state-capitalist' [SS] Soviet Union embarked on the collectivization of its agricultural sector, abolishing private property in rural areas and forming state-controlled farms in its place. The aim was to dispossess the peasantry in order to create an industrial society. The economically induced famine in 1932-33, leading to the starvation of entire territories, and the brutal political persecution, cost the lives of around four million people. [Kessler, 2022, p.4]. Ukraine would not obtain its independence until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Arel highlights Ukraine's determination to join the EU and NATO, to make Ukrainian the sole official language and to promote a historical memory that emphasises the divergent past and future of Ukrainians and Russians. [Arel, 2022, p.8].

The struggle between national or ethnic groups is also the locus of rival conceptions of identity as defined by the competing ruling classes. Western or American imperialism, and NATO see Ukraine as politically, economically and militarily part of the west. The Russian elite see Ukraine as part of its political and cultural sphere. The struggle between these rival ruling classes is also a struggle over competing internalized identities with bad images externalized by Russian nationalists on to western imperialism and by pro-Westerners and Ukrainian nationalists on to Russian imperialism. Of course, political actions and events are not directly shaped by internal representations and projections but these phenomena are important links in the overall chain of explanation.

Israel/Palestine

According to Zionists, "there was no such thing as Palestinians," as Golda Meir famously put it. She continued: "When was there an independent Palestinian people with a Palestinian state? It was either southern Syria before the First World War and then it was a Palestine including Jordan. It was not as though there was a Palestinian people in Palestine considering itself as a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country from them. They did not exist." Zionist ideology was encapsulated in its famous slogan "A land without a people for a people without a land."

Ilan Pappe has described this as a 'fabricated narrative', attacking the familiar claim by the then Israeli President Shimon Peres. Peres denied "the existence of approximately twelve million people living in and near to the country to which they belong. History shows that the human consequences are horrific and catastrophic when powerful people, heading powerful outfits such as a modern state, denied the existence of a people who are very much present. This denial was there at the beginning of Zionism and led to the ethnic cleansing in 1948. And it is there today, which may lead to similar disasters in the future — unless stopped immediately." [Pappe, I, 20th April 2013, p.2].

The 'Decolonize Palestine' website quotes Rashid Khalidi's book *Palestinian Identity,* where he argues that attempts to erase the indigenous population is a staple of virtually all settler colonial contexts. This erasure can be physical such as through genocide or ethnic cleansing, or through ethnocide which aims to destroy their culture and remove them from public memory. This erasure attempts to justify the colonization of land, and delegitimize any claims by the indigenous population who might object to it.

The claim that there is no such thing as a Palestinian identity, or that it was invented in 1967 - solely as a means to destroy Israel - is quite popular among Israelis and Zionists. Every settler population tries to erase indigenous ties to the land. In typical colonialist fashion they cannot conceive of an indigenous history that does not in some way centre them. It is as if all Palestinian history is just a reaction to Zionist aspirations.

According to Khalidi, Palestinian national identity can be traced back to Ottoman times, but arguably it started crystallizing in its modern form during the First World War. It is important to keep in mind that nationalism as a whole first touched the region around

that period. While the British Mandate period did see a rise of Palestinians identifying with the idea of a greater Arab nation, this did not preclude regional Palestinian identity and sense of belonging. It is not a contradiction to identify both as an Arab and a Palestinian. [Khalidi, 1997, pp. 63-88, in Nassar, 2001, p.4].

There are multiple elements that coalesced to create this proto-Palestinian identity, the first of which was the significant religious attachment to Palestine as a holy land by the people living there. Of course, Palestine has been an important religious nexus throughout history, but this feeling of attachment was particularly strong among those living there. Another element was the distribution of Ottoman administrative boundaries and the special status afforded to Palestine.

It is important to emphasize that all of this preceded any encounter with Zionism: there is a common assertion that Palestinian identity grew as a consequence of Zionist colonization of Palestine, even though no such claim is made for the neighbouring colonized Arab countries which all developed identities and nationalisms of their own. It is worth noting, however, that for Palestinians, the Zionists were yet another imperial or colonial force in a history full of such forces, be it the Ottomans against whom the Palestinians rebelled, or the British.

However, this does not mean that Palestinian identity was not influenced at all by its encounters with European or Zionist colonialism. For example, Najib Azuri wrote in 1908 in response to Zionist goals in Palestine that the progress of 'the land of Palestine' depends on expanding the Ottoman Sanjak district of Jerusalem to include northern Palestine. [Khalidi, 1997, pp. 28-9]. Evidence of early Palestinian identification and attachment to the land is abundant. One need not look only at some of the larger indicators, such as the founding of the *Filastin* (Palestine) newspaper in Jaffa in 1911, but also at the smaller ones, such as a group of Palestinian immigrants to Chile founding a football club and naming it *Deportivo Palestino* in 1920.

This talking point becomes even more evident when you consider how hard Israel has worked to co-opt and appropriate Palestinian identity and cultural markers, such as the *Keffiyeh*, *Dabkeh* and even Palestinian cuisine. It simultaneously seeks to sever the ties of the indigenous people to the land while stealing indigenous identity hallmarks in an attempt to self-indigenize its settler population. Ultimately, all these claims aim to whitewash the crimes committed against Palestinians by implying that they shouldn't have been there in the first place, that they do not belong, and that the settlers are more worthy of the land.

Conclusion

To conclude with Klein, the split good and bad images which correspond to the child's developing sense of self but remain unabsorbed are, instead, projected on to suitable external targets which reactivate the emotions associated with them. These external targets are arguably determined by political factors - nationalist campaigns, wars, etc.

However, we need an alternative external entity capable of absorbing our narcissistic projections. Marx's comments in 'On the Jewish Question' are relevant here. "Political emancipation is not the final and absolute form of *human* emancipation… Human emancipation, will only be complete when the real, individual man has absorbed into himself the abstract citizen; when as an individual man, in his everyday life, in his work, and in his relationships he has become a species-being." By 'species-being', he means our ability to identity with all human beings, to see beyond social divisions that only mask economic self-interests. For Marxists, an alternative, socialist world would enable the individual to relate to others in a non-nationalist spirit in such a way that whatever external projections were necessary would be made on to humanity as a whole.

References

Arel, Dominique, online *A Short History of Ukrainian Nationalism – and Its Tumultuous Relationship with Russia,* 17th March 2022.

Azuri, Najib, in Nassar, Issam, *Reflections on Writing the History of Palestinian Identity*, *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics and Culture*, Vol. 8, No. 4, 2001.

Caputi, Mary, *National Identity in Contemporary Theory,* in Political Psychology, Vol. 17, no. 4, 1996.

Freud, Sigmund, *Mass Psychology and Other Writings,* 1921/2004, Penguin ed., p. 26].

Khalidi, Rashid, *Palestinian Identity: the Construction of Modern National Consciousness,* Columbia UP, New York, 1997.

Kessler, Mario, *The Forgotten History of Ukrainian Independence*, online Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 21/03/2022.

Klein, Melanie, *A Study of Envy and Gratitude,* 1956, *Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms*, 1946, in *The Selected Melanie Klein*, edited by Juliet Mitchell, The Hogarth Press, The Institute of Psychoanalysis and The Melanie Klein Trust, 1986.

Kristeva, Julia, *Nations Without Nationalism*, trans. By Leon S. Roudez, 1993, New York: Columbia University Press.

Volkan, Vamik, *The Need to Have Enemies and Allies: From Clinical Practice to International Relations,* 1988, Northvale, NJ, Jason Aronson.

Kessler, Mario, *The Forgotten History of Ukrainian Independence,* 2022, online Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung /German language edition of Jacobin.

Khalidi, Rashid, *Palestinian Identity: The construction of modern national consciousness*. Columbia University Press, 2010*, in Decolonize Palestine* website*,* p. 1.

Marx, Karl, *On the Jewish Question*, 1843/1844, in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society,* translated by Easton & Guddat, Anchor Books, Doubleday & Co., 1967, pp. 216-248.

Pappe, Ilan, online *Electronic Intifada*, 20th April 2013.