

International Seminar on  
**Memory, Trauma and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding<sup>i</sup>**

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Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace,  
199 Preston Road, Brighton, BN1 6SA UK

**NOTES**  
**by Scherto Gill**

**BACKGROUND**

In 1932, in a series of correspondent exchange between Einstein and Freud concerning the possibility for humanity to be delivered from the menace of mass violence, Einstein posed such a question: How is it that these devices succeed so well in rousing men to such wild enthusiasm, even to sacrifice their lives? He suspected that man has within him a lust for hatred and destruction, a passion exists in latent state in normal times but emerges in unusual circumstances when it is called into play and raised to the power of a collective psychosis. Although in his response, Freud expressed little hope for an end to mass violence, since then, scholars such as Prof Volkan and others have been optimistic with regard to the contribution of psychology and psycho-analysis in international relations, diplomacy and peacebuilding. Vamik dedicated decades of his life to the study of mind and human interaction, in his own words, as a sort of vaccination in a preventive medicine program designed to stave off human slaughter.

This work echoes the interests of the GHFP's Healing the Wounds of History work. We are particularly interested in understanding the root causes of mass violence, especially how unresolved past trauma may continue to perpetuate cycles of violence. Thus the aim of this seminar was to explore the healing of traumatic memories in post-conflict recovery, reconstruction and peacebuilding.

**OUTLINES OF SEMINAR PRESENTATIONS**

The main presentation of the seminar was given by Professor Vamik Volkan. He drew on his nearly 40 years' experiences in the field of international relations and peace-related diplomacy and investigated the inextricable link between large group identity, conflict and dehumanisation of the *other*. The term "large group" here refers to tens, hundreds of thousands or millions of people, most of whom will never know or see each other, and who share a feeling of sameness, a large-group identity. When large groups (tribal, ethnic, national, religious, and political ideological groups) are in conflict, psychological issues contaminate most of their political, economic, legal, or military concerns.

Vamik argues that a large group is not the same as a single, stand-alone person. Yet multitudes of people in a large group do share a psychological journey, such as complicated mourning after major shared losses at the hand of the Other, or when they use the same psychological mechanism such as "externalisation" of unwanted images that makes the Other a shared target. These journeys become sustained social, cultural, political or ideological processes that are specific for the large group and that influence this large group's internal and external affairs.

Vamik points out that large-group psychology in its own right can inform us about "psychological borders" which allow thousands or millions people sharing certain sentiments that represent their large-group identity and mark its "border" between "us" and "them". A psychological border also supports the "security" of large-group identity. When there is shared anxiety and regression in large groups in conflict, a simple physical border between them is not enough to protect the antagonists'

identities. Instead, it is necessary that the physical border must evolve as a psychological border to defend against any possibility of interpenetration.

Furthermore, each large-group identity has its own “identity markers.” Those markers which are associated with the shared images of ancestors’ traumatic histories are called “chosen traumas.” Chosen traumas (linked to ‘entitlement ideologies’) become reactivated when a large group finds itself in a crisis situation and asks the question “who are we now?” When representatives of opposing large groups meet to negotiate a peaceful co-existence they also reactivate chosen traumas and this creates a “time collapse”: feelings, perceptions, fears, prejudices, and wishes connected with chosen traumas become intertwined with feelings and thoughts about the current enemy. This magnifies the dangers, confuses reality, and leads to “magical thinking,” thus complicating attempts at peaceful solutions in internal and international affairs as well as during negotiations with the “Other.”

Therefore, Vamik proposes that psychoanalytically informed diplomatic strategies can be best suited to deal with the above challenges and difficulties. He offered a number of ways of taming the inflamed shared psychological processes and preventing possible massive disasters. He also shared his ‘unofficial diplomacy’ experiences in terms of how spaces could be created for dialogue amongst former enemies. For more details on these examples as well as extended arguments on large group identity formation, [please refer to Vamik’s paper entitled: ‘Large Group Psychology in Its Own Right’](#).

Professor Nigel Young offered an initial response to Vamik’s presentation. He argued that the tendency to collectivise historical or chosen traumas and memory could potentially be problematic as large group may not be the only belonging identity that the individuals have. Such a tendency (shared by some social scientists, including Durkheim) is linked to methodological fallacies: misplaced concreteness, and anthropomorphising collectives. Nigel does not see that groups have “minds” or “personalities” as such, but they are, however, creators and carriers of ideology. To treat groups as if they were individuals, with a collective consciousness akin to individual consciousness could befuddle our analysis. Thus Nigel suggests that collective trauma and memory of it, be it war, genocide or other pathological behaviour, must also be treated culturally and structurally. That is also to say that killing, violence or aggression is not the typical, the certain, nor inevitable human response.

Furthermore, Nigel offered a possibility of locating a group “memory” which helps shape one’s identity at the intersection between the macro and the micro – neither at the individual nor at the large collective level – but at the level of what we can call “communal” memory or consciousness, such as an extended family, a small village, a local church, or a battalion of soldiers.

He shared his experiences of studying communal and transnational relationships which could serve as a basis for alternative identity – a consciousness that can transcend the negative, conflictual view of the other, i.e. “enemy images” and hostile stereotypes. Nigel claims that there is a more universal and redemptive response to conflict, marked by what he calls the “recognition scenes” that are based on a shared humanity rather than large collective group identifications based on memory of chosen trauma. Recognition scenes as shown in films, literature and other media can often be a humanising alternative to the memory of trauma aimed at dehumanising the other and justifying aggression. This was conceived as a conscious humanisation of the other which ought to be at the centre of constructing a peaceful culture.

Thus narratives and myths of solidarity must be celebrated more widely and today’s cosmopolitan societies could make it possible to diffuse the tension embedded in large group identities. Nigel thus calls for a proactive pre-figurative memory as a cultural practice to awaken the core “human” self which is the basis for genuine sustainable peace. [Refer to Nigel’s summary for more details.](#)

## EMERGING THEMES

Following Vamik and Nigel's presentation, the participants of the seminars discussed a number of emerging themes are summarised below:

### a. **Competing Victim Narratives and the Politics of Victimhood**

In many post-conflict situations, groups appear to compete with each other about their victimhood. In particular, in situations where a lack of access to economic and social resources persists, and where their turbulent history remains contested, nations, communities and groups compete for victimhood (more on this see Volkan 1997, and Noor et al. 2012). This could partly be due to the possibility that a sense of victimhood can permit whoever represents themselves as a victim to legitimise their further violence and aggression as a way to reclaim justice. Another analysis offered was that victimhood is being sought competitively due to the fact that there always involves a selective process of accounting for history – hero, losers, or bystanders which is seen as necessary as part of our memorial culture around violent conflict. The need to negotiate victimhood reflects a need to look through conflicting accounts of history in order to clarify the roots of violence and determine who might bear the greater responsibility for them.

A number of cases were offered to illustrate competitive victimhood:

Darcia reflected on the situation in post-Franco Spain, where two groups competed about their victimhood: those who lost the civil war and who continued to be persecuted throughout the Franco period; and those who were the victors of the civil war, and who were on the Franco side. For the past ten years, the latter group have been pursued by the former who simply want to know what happened to their families during the war and to give dignity to those who suffered. Despite the qualitative differences in their grievances, both groups represent themselves as victims.

Graham questioned the intention behind what he termed 'politics of victimhood' in Northern Ireland, where narratives about victimhood served to provide a framework for analysing the roots of violence, as well as for justifying and legitimatising each group's aggression. On one side, the IRA's narrative for their armed struggle was that there was no other option under the circumstances – when the route via democracy was closed down, civil rights were beaten off the streets, armed soldiers operated a shoot to kill policy and criminalisation took place in the community. On the other side, the Unionists' narrative was 'law and order' - as the loyalist terrorists disturbed the peace, police and armed forces were implored to support and protect the state and to defend its people.

Like these two examples, most competing victim narratives are profoundly incompatible and irreconcilable. However, at the heart of the incompatibility and irreconcilability in most cases there lies undeniable structural injustice and structural violence. Indeed victimhood narratives seemed to have often been reproduced as the result of peoples and communities' experiences of historical structural inequalities and injustice, and the narratives pertain to the present day due to an inability in the post-conflict peace processes to deal with the socio-economic issues that perpetuated segregation and violence at the first place and which continue to prompt competition for resources, housing and space, alongside other practical problems.

In any case, it is recognised that the tendency towards competitive victimhood is deeply problematic and can greatly impede the prospect of future peaceful coexistence between conflicting groups.

A plea from Alexandra was noted, that there could never be clearly drawn lines between the victim and perpetrator. So by repeating these terms, we are inadvertently reinforcing their loaded meanings of divisiveness and blame, as well as the emotional baggage of anger, hatred and frustration.

## **b. Timing for remembering**

Shared victimhood and competitive victimhood can occur as long as stories of suffering remain untold, and unheard. However, Mannie pointed out that timing is important here and repression of memory may be necessary sometimes, otherwise it could be too early to raise those 'ghosts' when people are not yet ready to mourn. Although acknowledgement is better than denial and suppression, it is mourning that helps individuals and groups overcome the grief and begin to set foot on the path to healing and reconciliation.

A few examples were offered:

Nigel recalled his own experience when teaching peace studies at the University of Castellon in the 1980s. The shared victimhood, at that point in time, was actually an agreement not to talk about the past. This was more a conscious decision and a tacit agreement to suppress the past, rather than a denial. So timing of remembering is important and in this example, the group were not yet ready to unpack or lift the repression and explore its involvement in the dilemmas and the vicissitudes of war that it went through.

Marina quoted James Baldwin (in *The Fire Next Time*) to illustrate a similar point: "... one of the reasons people cling to their hate so stubbornly, is because they sense, once hate has gone, they will be forced to deal with their pain".

Another example was mentioned quoting WBC Bolts who suggested that Germany wasn't really ready until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century to actually acknowledge what had happened, not only what the Nazi regime had done, but also the bombing and destruction of its own cities. This process took a whole generation.

Sharif used Hungary as a different example in terms of timing for remembering. Psychologically there is an incredibly deep division in Hungary, despite 25 years of so-called democracy. People seem to be living in two separate realities with regard to the country's recent history, which are totally incompatible and irreconcilable. What is worse, in order to maintain such separate 'realities', people must remain divided, as coming together and reconcile the differences would just be too difficult. It feels as if the further away the society is from the trauma, the worse these divisions become, and the views and memories people hold against each other seem to become fossilised.

Vamik agrees that timing is crucial and peacebuilding efforts mustn't force or meddle with this process until the time is right and the groups are ready to face their memories and history. The key is that spaces must be made available for dialogue to take place. Dialogue doesn't suggest being overzealous for change. Instead, it creates space for listening to stories which is also necessary so that people can tell if the timing is right. That is also to say that timing is always right for creating spaces and opportunities for conversation, for dialogue, for thoughtful reflection and for stories. In other words, peacebuilding efforts in this context involve providing opportunities for dialogue and not necessarily taking responsibility for change.

A common factor that prevents peoples, groups and communities from healing is that the people who committed violence in recent history are often the same people who remain in power and who continue to perpetuate the same structural injustices (as in Spain and Lebanon). When this happens, there is no opportunity to have dialogue about historical responsibilities for past violent atrocities. This kind of politics can silence historical narratives very effectively. When a nation, community or group finds it impossible to have a shared narrative account of its history, they will not be able to start addressing the roots of violence. Thus the accumulated trauma will continued be passed on from one generation to the next.

### **c. Some proposal for constructive approaches to engaging with large group identity**

Whilst Vamik's presentation allowed us to begin to understand the process of large group identity formation from psychological perspectives and how this understanding might inform the development of peacebuilding strategies, especially in creating spaces for dialogue between former enemies, the seminar also looked at possible constructive approaches to engaging in large group identity from socio-cultural and humanising perspectives. Nigel's response offered another avenue to explore the individual's agency in spite of their large group identity and how potential benign uses of memory might transcend the 'belonging identity' through humanising moments where individuals were able to perceive and acknowledge the Other as persons even during violent conflict.

Building resistance to divisive and dehumanising narratives was suggested as a possible way to engage with large group identity more constructively. This theme was proposed as a possible interim stage of politics and pre-figurative practices in the words of Ivor, creating precedents for future ways of being or pre-figuring the world as we would like it to be.

A few examples were put forward as possible illustrations:

Narratives are often used to reclaim history in a positive way and have been used by people and communities as a method of diffusing contemporary tensions. Patrice gave an example of this: Arabs and Jews would say that before the modern age and especially before the Balfour Declaration, there was peaceful co-existence between Jews, Arabs and other Muslims in the region and they got along well with one another and shared common hospitality practices. Although not strictly in accordance with historical reality, the intention underlying such narrative is clear – to reclaim a culture of peace.

Jean Baptiste offered the Rwandan's promotion of a unified national identity based on citizenship and values as an example of constructive approach to large group identity. The historical roots of Rwandan genocide were identified as including the colonial divisiveness, bad politics and genocide ideology fuelled by historically established structural injustice. Therefore, the Rwandan government's current focus is on unity and solidarity amongst all peoples, de-stressing ethnic differences and stressing the unifying notion of being a Rwandan. The country intends to rebuild itself through re-installing core values shared by all the groups, such as forgiveness, compassion, respect and solidarity, which may seem to have been lost in and through its traumatic history. In addition, the history of solidarity (esp. in village life) revisited in people's narratives has served as an important avenue to restore Rwandan identity; and stories of resistance and rescue during the genocide were equally uplifting, reinforcing the importance of values in Rwandan identity.

Jean Baptiste suggest that a unified narrative of shared values is also intended to have a healing effect because in reconstructing and affirming the value-based Rwandan national identity, those who were cast out, like the genociders, are able to find redemption and acceptance in being Rwandans. The younger generation also connects well with this Rwandan vision which brings hope to them as it also liberates them from the traumas of their parents, whether genocider or victim.

Sharif outlined a similar case of Indonesian's unifying national identity. A country of many islands, multiple tribes on each island, and overall around 160 languages, Indonesia created a national identity using two remarkable tools: the national language (that was not the language of the most powerful group) and the Pancasila – five core values or principles, including (1) Belief in the divinity of God; (2) Just and civilized humanity; (3) The unity of Indonesia; (4) Democracy guided by the inner wisdom in the unanimity arising out of deliberations amongst representatives; (5) Social justice for all of the people of Indonesia.

It was recognised that after experiencing wars and violent atrocities, homogenous groups were created which became 'us' and 'them'. Essentialisation, at the same time, also erases the

particularities and differences within each group and politics and media representations tend to reinforce such divisiveness, leaving no room for nuances or in-between-ness. Therefore, it is suggested that a constructive way of peacebuilding be through engaging with the nuances in memories and stories in media. The nuances, although not the vaccination, might help build a defence mechanism against easy radicalisation or essentialisation.

Personal agency was highlighted as another possible avenue of resistance. Both Nigel and Sharif suggested that our agency or our decision to make a choice in terms of how we engage with memory and narrative, and how we act, also matters in conflict and in processes of peacebuilding. In Nigel's words, individual transcendence may help the way we transcend the so-called collective psychosis.

The possibility of a global identity of being human as an alternative way of identifying who we are was also proposed. This would be a constructive way of engaging with globalisation, and equally a positive way of engaging with large group identity – the human race.

#### **d. The value of psychoanalytical approaches to peace studies**

It was suggested that psychoanalytical approaches have great value in peace studies.

Mannie stated the importance of understanding guilt, which is not only experienced by the wrongdoers, i.e. murderers, perpetrators, and the like, but is also experienced by the people to whom the wrongdoing has been done. Understanding the nature of guilt and how it manifests in people's psyche and affects their perceptions of themselves, the Other, and the world, can be extremely valuable in understanding the dynamics of inter-group relationships.

Fear is another major factor in mass atrocity, and fear is also a factor in not taking responsibility for peace. Darcia pointed out that although Spain was hailed as a good transitional model from dictatorship to democracy, in effect, it was a transition made under a lot of fear – fear of a coup d'état, for instance. Fear was instrumental in persuading people to make compromises with the result that some people felt betrayed, especially those who fought against the dictatorship during the Franco era.

A further topic in which a psychoanalytical approach may help is in understanding the 'garbage of memory' in the words of Eduardo Galeano, the Uruguayan writer. Garbage of memory refers to a certain memory that is being symbolically swept under the carpet, but which never goes away and the 'stings' in the memory tend to remain latent, for some time, in order for a society to reach some 'normality'. However unless we address these 'stings' with psychoanalytical sensitivity, the same impulse that started the violence may prompt people to engage in conflict once again at some point.

Marina also mentioned shame and the significance of understanding the relationship between shame and violence.

Vamik stressed that memory of the past or history never goes away and myths and narrative function as a memory which serves as an identity marker and it comes and interferes with processes of peacebuilding. In fact, most people who have a 'memory' of the past were not even there to experience the war or violence first hand. So they don't really *have* the memory of it. Memory discussed in Vamik's presentation is a particular kind of memory which serves a particular function – a marker of one's large group identity that individuals, groups or communities, under certain circumstances, hold on to. People need the memory of trauma and they use it and the memory of the chosen trauma becomes their identity (even though logically it doesn't make sense).

Alexandra suggested that the division and conflict between Shiia and Sunni Muslims is the result of a chosen trauma, i.e. the assassination of Hussein. Understanding this chosen trauma better would be an important step towards the peace process in the Middle East. Patrice echoed Alexandra's concern and pointed out that similarly, other religious communities (Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, and so on) have also suffered unresolved traumas in their histories. Therefore it is necessary to open up new possibilities of internal dialogue within the religion in order to explore the relationship between religion and power, religious differences and violence, and more, just as happens in their parallels in the non-religious contexts. Thus three levels of dialogue are necessary: intra-religious, inter-religious and inter-worldview in order to explore large-group identity.

Vamik shared some of his experiences in facilitating dialogue amongst leaders representing different groups where both individual and large-group psychology interferes with the processes of dialogue and mutual understanding. He suggested that sensitivity to these individual and large group dynamics is the basis to creating a space for sustained dialogue. To this end, Vamik has developed a tree model. The dialogue process presented in the Tree Model is aimed at helping individuals, especially leaders of groups, to remove some obstacles to dialogue, so that spaces can be opened for dialogue. [Please refer to the article about the Tree Model for more details.](#)

## CONCLUSION

What emerges from this seminar are two different ways of understanding memory:

- (a) Vamik's approach to understanding memory of trauma from a psychological perspective;
- (b) Nigel's approach to understanding memory as a pro-active process of humanisation.

The former is a key to unlocking the reasons why groups can fight so violently against each other. Memory here is conceived as an identifier of large group identity. This is part of human nature. It is not necessarily memory of what one has experienced, but a recollection of something, an event even if it occurred many centuries ago. For large groups, memory in this sense serves a particular function – to provide the large group with a sense of continuity of its identity. Where the memory is glorious, it can allow the group to assume self-esteem, to feel great and to celebrate being themselves. Where the memory is traumatic, it can become problematic and result in the group's shame, humiliation, vengefulness, and so on. Indeed, from generation to generation, the task can be different, depending on the macro climate of a region or society. When structural injustice persists and one group continues to suffer its consequences, its members would memorialise past victimisation and claim that they are the largest victim. This 'memory' makes them feel powerful and they use the same memory to justify their vengefulness and violence. So it is this kind of memory that we must seek out and if possible, help heal. In addition, it was argued that large group identity and personal identity are inseparable. So we must be sensitive to both, either in creating spaces for dialogue, or designing peace processes.

The latter approach to understanding memory is a further step towards humanisation. Nigel proposed a way of conceptualising identity that both identifies with large group though it may not be their only "belonging identity" and with oneself as an individual who has one's traits, values and course of action. Thus during violent conflict, individual transcendence of identity through for instance an 'identification scene' where the memory of togetherness with (rather than opposition to) the other can serve as a way for humanity to move forward towards peace. It is a constructive and proactive approach to memorisation that might help us re-set the way we use remembrance culturally, so that it is not just about mourning, or mourning loss, but also about celebrating togetherness.

As the participants of the seminar expressed, both approaches deserve our attention and reflection.

## **FURTHER QUESTIONS:**

There remain several questions yet to be resolved:

Fundamentally, given the part that memory of trauma plays in large group identity, how do we design and develop processes in order to help people remove the 'stings' in the memory? How important is it to talk about (elements of) traumatic experience and what is the ideal timing?

Constructive ways of developing large group identity based on shared values and citizenship are celebrated in the afore mentioned examples. However, it is yet to be clarified in terms of the kind of structural processes that must be in place in order to engage in healing of memory.

Mannie also gave an example of trauma following financial crisis, where the ignorance and incompetence of senior bankers, regulators, and politicians resulted in trauma to ordinary people losing jobs, homes, and even lives. How will memory of this kind of trauma affect society? What are the healing mechanisms available to deal with such trauma?

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### **<sup>i</sup> Seminar Presenters and Contributors:**

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Prof Nigel Young: Emeritus Professor in Peace Studies, Founder of Bradford Centre for Peace Studies / Editor in Chief, 'Oxford International Encyclopaedia of World Peace

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