

The Conception of the Enemy

by Arthur Gladstone (1959)

At the present time many people in this country regard Russia as the enemy (or all the Communist countries together or simply all Communists wherever they are). And many people in Russia similarly regard the United States as the enemy (or all the capitalist countries together or simply all capitalists wherever they are). Throughout history there have been countless examples of such hostile pairings. There are some basic patterns which seem to hold for nearly all such antagonisms. Each side believes the other to be bent on aggression and conquest, to be capable of great brutality and evil-doing, to be something less than human and therefore hardly deserving respect or consideration, to be insincere and untrustworthy, etc. To hold this conception of the enemy becomes the moral duty of every citizen, and those who question it are denounced. Each side prepares actively for the anticipated combat, striving to amass the greater military power for the destruction of the enemy. Many actions which are ordinarily considered immoral become highly moral when carried out against the enemy. Often people praise their compatriots for the same actions they condemn in the enemy. The approaching war is seen as due entirely to the hostile intentions of the enemy. The only way to prevent the war is to frighten the enemy by achieving and maintaining military superiority (in fact, by outdoing the enemy in the use of methods for which the enemy is generally condemned). Eventually the growing hostility and the military preparations do lead to war, each side believing that the war was made necessary by the actions of the other. In the hope of contributing to understanding of this often-repeated pattern of interaction, I propose to discuss an important mechanism contributing to the conception of the enemy.

Perhaps a good way to begin is by pointing out that there are some very definite advantages in having an enemy. For example, among the advantages which many of us in the United States derive from having Russia as an enemy are the following: We have the very considerable stimulation to our economic system provided by the manufacture of armaments and preparations for war in general. (It is true that equivalent economic stimulation could be provided by other measures, such as provisions for human welfare, but there is a great deal of opposition to such measures.) We are provided with a satisfying explanation for many

conditions and events that displease us. Politicians are provided with a sure-fire campaign issue and vote-getter. The rest of us are provided with a crusade in which all can participate. Let us not underestimate the great psychological satisfactions provided by a crusade. There is the smug satisfaction arising from the recognition that we are morally superior to the Russians. There is the self-respecting satisfaction arising from the feeling of being needed by the cause, of being able to make a social contribution. And there is the red-blooded satisfaction of being able to hate and to prepare to kill and destroy without feeling qualms of conscience. Similarly, the Russians derive great advantages from having the United States as an enemy, but it is probably not necessary to detail them here.

However, the various advantages of having an enemy do not in themselves account for the belief in the enemy. It is not a general rule that men believe what it is convenient to believe. We need to examine the circumstances under which this can happen. We also need to examine the factors which determine that two particular nations become each other's enemies instead of some other pairing.

Psychoanalysts have been especially concerned with beliefs which are convenient but which embody distorted representations of reality. We may therefore hope to obtain from psychoanalytic investigations and theorizing some help in understanding the belief in an enemy. Psychoanalytic theory provides a classification for the various forms of reality distortion, which are known as defense mechanisms. A defense mechanism serves to protect an individual from becoming aware of things which would cause him an intolerable amount of anxiety. The things kept from awareness are usually facts about the individual himself or about other people important to him. Among the defense mechanisms are: repression (which is basic to all the others), projection, rationalization, isolation, denial, reaction formation, etc.

Projection is the defense mechanism which is most relevant for understanding the conception of the enemy.¹ Projection is the ascription to others of impulses, feelings, and other

¹ A number of writers (e.g., 1,2,5,6,7) have already pointed out that projection may play a part in the development of international hostility. The purpose of the present paper are to present this important concept clearly to a large non-psychoanalytic audience and to emphasize

characteristics which exist in an individual but which he cannot admit to himself. Projection is seen in extreme form in paranoid mental patients with delusions of persecution. These people project to others hostile feelings which they cannot admit having themselves. The operation of projection becomes clearest when such a patient attacks someone who is not bothering him. The patient explains that this attack was made purely in self-defense, that the other person had actually attacked him first, or was just about to attack him, or was part of the plot against him. (Paranoia involves other mechanisms besides projection, particularly reaction formation against homosexual attraction, but we mention it here only as an illustration of projection.)

In milder forms than this the mechanisms of projection is quite common, so common that we have all experienced it. For example, when we make a mistake or cause an accident through carelessness, we sometimes project the blame to some inanimate object. "The poor workman blames his tools," says the proverb. When we break something or lose something or when we are late for an appointment or make an embarrassing slip, we often find ourselves looking for some person or circumstance onto which we can project the blame.

What factors determine whether an individual will use the mechanism of projection with respect to a given item of feeling or behavior? One factor is the extent of which the item is unacceptable to the individual. To what extent is it incompatible with his self-conception? Would it be only slightly discomforting to acknowledge this about himself or highly anxiety-arousing? A second factor is the extent to which the individual's past history and personality make it possible for him to project. A third factor is the availability of a suitable object onto which he can project, a suitable scapegoat. Feelings of hostility can more convincingly be projected onto someone who is actually rather hostile than onto someone who is rather friendly.

At this point an objection may be raised. If hostility is ascribed to an individual who is actually rather hostile, why should this be called projection? Is it not simply a realistic understanding of the hostile individual? There are several important characteristics of projection which help to distinguish between projection onto an individual who is an appropriate object and

its research possibilities somewhat more than previous writers have done.

the realistic understanding of that individual.² The most important characteristic is that projection involves a denial of some fact about one's self. The individual who projects sexual impulses or hostile impulses onto another person denies that he himself has such impulses toward that person. The denial involved in projection facilitates a black-and-white picture of interpersonal situations, a picture in which the projector is completely innocent and the other party is completely to blame for any difficulty or unpleasantness. Another important characteristic is that the projector generally has little or no evidence for his accusation, and, when he does have evidence, it does not seem to be the basis for his conviction; if his evidence is discredited, he will find or manufacture other evidence. A third characteristic is that the projector's apparent insight into the personality of the other is frequently limited to the particular trait or traits which he denies in himself. Related to this is a fourth characteristic, a tendency to exaggerate the importance of the projected trait, even to see it as the key to the whole personality of the other. A fifth characteristic is the tendency to assume that the trait projected onto the other represents conscious motivation, whereas, if it is actually true of the other, it is quite likely to involve unconscious motivation. A sixth characteristic is the tendency to see the projected trait as having especial reference to one's self. Thus, if the other is seen as hostile, he is likely to be seen as especially hostile to the projector. Finally, the seventh characteristic which distinguishes projection is that the projector's accusation of the other often turns out, very conveniently, to be useful as justification for similar behavior by the projector. A familiar example is the zealous guardian of public morals, who projects his sexual interest and curiosity onto others and then finds it his duty to seek out obscene material in order to protect others from it. The use of projection as a justification is especially important, and especially dangerous, in international conflict. An example is provided by a speech made at a recent American Legion meeting. According to the newspaper account:

Maj. Gen. Hugh J. Casey, USA, (Ret.) said last night the Soviet Union, not the United States, will decide when and if World War III starts....

²Sappenfield (7) gives a good description of the characteristics and functioning of projection. Among the earliest presentations of the concept of projection are two papers by Freud (3,4). The account of projection given here has drawn from these sources but also includes aspects which neither of these authors mentions.

He said: "When the Soviet Union is prepared, when it is ready, when it thinks the time is ripe for success, then the decision will be made to start World War III. And nothing we do is going to affect that decision."

For this reason, Casey told the Legionnaires, the United States should not hesitate to act aggressively in trying to keep world peace (8).

I have already mentioned three factors which affect the occurrence of projection (unacceptable aspects of the self, past history, and availability of a scapegoat). Now we need to make three additions to the list, which apply particularly to the kind of projection that is relevant for international conflict. One additional factor is the amount of contact between the projection and the object of projection. Projection can occur and be maintained more readily when the object is distant, not easily accessible for verification of characteristics. The distance which facilitates projection can be physical distance and it can also be social distance, which interferes with free interaction and the development of an accurate conception of the other.

The second factor to be added is the climate of opinion. We generally find it easier to share the beliefs of others than to oppose them. Many people believe the earth is round simply because everybody else believes it too. Widely held projections are a special case of this social influence on our beliefs. It is easier to believe that the sexual desires of Negro men are a threat to white womanhood if your friends and neighbors believe it too. Furthermore, if a belief is widely held it is much more likely to be acted on, since there is likely to be social approval for the action. Thus, a project which is shared by a number of people is likely to have much more serious social consequences than if each of those people developed a different (though equally erroneous) projection.

The third factor to be added relates to the ability to project onto a group of people, such as a political or ethnic group, or a nation. This would seem to require that the group be personified, so that it is thought of somewhat as a single individual, or that the group members be regarded as essentially similar to one another. These ways of thinking about groups seem to be extremely common, so this is probably not very much of a limiting factor.

Thus far I have talked about the derogatory conceptions of one another held by hostile nations and have implied that these conceptions are not completely realistic. I have suggested that the psychoanalytic concept of projection may help us to understand the conception of the enemy, and I have pointed out six factors which affect the operation of projection.³ (By the way, I have *not* meant to suggest that projection is the only mechanism which influences the conception of the enemy nor that the conception of the enemy is the sole cause of war.) It is now time to show how the details of this approach can be filled in and its usefulness tested by research.

If this approach is to be applied to the current international situation, perhaps the first question to be asked is: To what extent do our conceptions of the Russians and their conceptions of us involve projection rather than realistic appraisal? For simplicity, I shall talk in terms of studies to be carried out in this country; it would obviously be desirable to carry out corresponding studies in Russia.

One possibility would be to compare the conceptions which various individuals have of themselves with the conceptions they have of Russians, perhaps using techniques similar to those used in studies of stereotypes. Are the traits which an individual regards as especially reprehensible also the ones which he denies in himself and ascribes to the Russians? Russophobes, Russophiles, and relatively neutral individuals might be compared. It would be desirable to have objective information about the personality of each individual to compare with his conception of himself.

Another possibility would be to have subjects give their reactions to accounts of specific actions by Russia (such as military preparations, offers to negotiate, antagonistic speeches, _____ speeches, etc.) and also to accounts of similar actions by the United States. It would be of interest to learn the motivations ascribed to _____ responsible for a given action, the subject's approval or disapproval of it, and his estimate of its probable consequences. We would

³ These six factors should be taken as hypotheses rather than as well-established principles. There are varying amounts of evidence for them, but the evidence is not conclusive for any of them.

expect those who project to interpret similar actions by the United States and by Russia in quite different terms, in accordance with their projections. Later recall of accounts of these actions might also be studied to see whether there are memory distortions which indicate projection.

A third possibility might be the development of a test of an individual's general tendency to use the mechanism of projection. An individual's performance on this test might be compared with his conception of Russians.

If studies along these lines were to show, as I believe they would, that our thinking about the Russians (and their thinking about us) involves a great deal of projection, this would make it important to carry out a number of additional studies to increase our understanding of this problem and to see what can be done about it. I will mention briefly some of the topics to be studied: how the tendency to project develops and the effects of various childhood situations and child-rearing procedures; investigation and further specification of the factors affecting projection which were suggested above; the extent to which men in positions of power, such as political leaders, make use of projection in their thinking about the Russians; the ways in which news and information about Russia are handled in the mass media and the effects of this handling on the audience's conception of the Russians (this could be studied in relation to the personality dynamics and the tendency to project of various communicators and various segments of the audience); the effects of exchange programs, foreign travel, and other forms of contact (again, in relation to the personality dynamics and tendency to project of the participants); the effects of psychotherapy, especially psychoanalysis, on the tendency to project and on the conception of the Russians. It should be possible to develop other methods for promoting more realistic thinking about the Russians and to do action research on their use and effectiveness.

Before closing, there is a final question to be considered. Suppose that the basic hypothesis of this paper (that projection plays an important role in our conception of the Russians and their conception of us) should turn out to be correct. Suppose, further, that we were to discover and apply methods for eliminating projection from our thinking. Would we be any better off than we are now? How would this affect the fact of two antagonistic power

systems with differing ideologies competing for world domination and threatening each other with nuclear weapons? It would, I believe, change our ability to deal with this situation and to control its destructive potentialities. If the danger from the opponent could be seen in realistic terms, instead of being greatly exaggerated as a result of projection, it should be possible to devise reasonable ways of dealing with the danger instead of preparing for a holocaust which will destroy both sides. If the people on each side could recognize the extent to which their own actions serve to provoke and frighten the other side, instead of placing all the blame on the "enemy," it should help tremendously in working out disarmament proposals which will serve to protect both sides instead of being to the advantage of one's own side. And if the people on both sides could recognize the extent to which they have needs and goals which are compatible, and even mutually dependent, this should facilitate the development of co-operative arrangements which are a necessary basis for peaceful relationships.

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