



## Article

# INVASION OF UKRAINE: OBSERVATIONS ON LEADER-FOLLOWERS RELATIONSHIPS

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This paper illustrates how and when the personality characteristics of a political leader can initiate and/or become intertwined with societal and political processes. We are not suggesting that “real world” issues and secondary process calculations are not important or should be discarded in favor of psychological considerations. Instead, we suggest that psychoanalysts and psychodynamically informed mental health professionals can contribute to a more complete analysis of political or societal processes and the personalities of leaders who play major roles in them. Only through such interdisciplinary work can we fully understand the complex and intertwined nature of the crucial events that shape political leaders’ internal and external worlds.

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On February 24, 2022, Russia launched an invasion of Ukraine, and the world began witnessing horrifying events unfold and brutality take place against civilians and innocents. We are reminded of sociologist and former US Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Fred Charles Iklé's (1971) statement that

there has never been a period in history without men acquiring positions of power who were willing to die, and to see others die, for causes that they themselves invented and which were espoused by only a few of their henchmen. In several countries the political process is such that leaders can come to the top who consider it a virtue, or perhaps part of their "revolutionary" creed, to live dangerously. "*Vivere pericolosamente*" ("to live dangerously") was one of Benito Mussolini's favorite slogans (p. 127).

### POLITICAL LEADERS' PERSONALITIES

Minimization of the role of a leader's personality in scholarly essays on historical or political processes most likely has been related to the dominant role of the so-called "*rational actor*" models in international and domestic affairs. These models have continued to influence politicians and scholars since the middle of the last century (von Rochau, 1853). They supported the assumption that a political leader's decision making is logical and unaffected by psychological factors, especially within countries where democratic principles prevail.

One example comes from a dialogue between David Ben Gurion who is considered the "father" of the state of Israel, and the Israeli historian Yehoshua Arieli. Ben Gurion asked Arieli whether the personalities of political leaders were important in history. Arieli responded by saying that the answer depended on many factors such as the times, historical conditions, the social and political system, and, of course, the individual's stature in government; his answer was a qualified "yes." Ben Gurion, however, interrupted Arieli by stating that history is made by the nation, not by leaders (Malkin & Zhahor, 1992). In writing this paper we are taking Arieli's side in his encounter with the Israeli leader.

Examining and reaching conclusions about the personality organization of a political leader such as Putin from a distance raises serious questions. Early psychoanalytic writings on the lives of famous artists and historical figures primarily focused on interpreting the symbols they employed, such as those used by artists in their works, but they did not attempt to identify what accounted for the directions of their creativity. Later, when

psychoanalysis became better established, psychoanalytic writers began considering more than one causal factor when investigating an individual's artistic work, political ideology, or drastic constructive or destructive actions.

Knowledge gained through studying child development led to a focus on the actual life history of the biographical subject. Childhood traumas began to attract considerable attention. The biographer sought to know why this or that ego function overdeveloped or underdeveloped, how the ego mediated between different mental demands, and what kinds of defensive or sublimated adaptations to one's living conditions were made.

Erik Erikson (1958) changed the character of psychobiography and suggested that the biographer should focus on the adolescent years, a time when the person's horizons expand beyond family and neighbors to a wider social sphere. Later, historical situations in the life of a young adult, as well as midlife crises, were considered by psychoanalytic biographers in general (Bergmann, 1973).

In the late 1980s a group of psychoanalysts and psychiatrists formed a committee to study the psychodynamics of international relationships. The group met twice a year for five years and engaged in a dialogue both among themselves and with many others in various disciplines, including historians, political scientists, and former diplomats. They studied personality organizations of different political leaders, for example American presidents Woodrow Wilson, Richard Nixon, John Kennedy, and also leaders from other locations such as Anwar Sadat, Saddam Hussein, Slobodan Milošević. They wrote:

Leaders make decisions that cannot always be explained by conventional, rational approaches to domestic and international decision-making. When the individual psychology of a decision maker is "agitated" by external factors in the political environment, emotions and psychodynamic responses, whether acknowledged or not, can drastically influence decisions. On the other hand, decision-makers who have an "agitated" internal world may make decisions that attempt to affect or change the external world in order to find a "solution" for the leader's unconscious needs or wishes (Volkan, Akhtar, Dorn, Kafka, Kernberg, Olsson, Rogers & Shanfield, 1998, pp. 171–172).

One of the authors of this paper, Vamık Volkan, working with others and also alone, has written psychobiographies of the founder of the Turkish Republic Kemal Atatürk (Volkan & Itzkowitz, 1984); Richard Nixon (Volkan et al., 1997); Abdullah Öcalan, the founder of Kurdish Workers' Party [PKK] who started a campaign of terror in Turkey in 1984 (Volkan, 1997); and Slobodan Milošević, the Serbian leader after the collapse of the former Yugoslavia (Volkan, 2013). Research for all these books involved

interviewing individuals who knew the leaders and/or who knew the leaders' families. These accounts from actual observations provided very useful data.

Volkan and his co-authors used a *developmental* approach in writing a psychobiography. First, they examined information from the subject's infancy and early childhood, including the dyadic relationship between child and mother, the construction of the subject's unconscious fantasies, and the mother's (and other caretakers') unconscious fantasies about the child, all which influence the subject's formation of a sense of self. They also investigated the subject's early traumas, developmental arrests, early symptom formation and adaptation to the environment, growth-inducing experiences, the nature of the subject's Oedipal struggles and the crystallization of the personality organization during the adolescent passage. Second, they focused on the adult subject's internal responses to external events, attempts to change the environment to fit internal demands, activities in the service of maintaining self-esteem, affective expressions or affect control, sexual adaptation, choosing of mates, and responses to parenthood. Finally, inquiry was made into transformations of identity, regressions, and subsequent progressions in the reconsolidation of identity, mid-life issues, and reactions to aging and the approach of death. Thus, the subject's entire life is looked at developmentally through a psychoanalytic lens.

Obviously, the degree of success that can be achieved in writing a psychoanalytic psychobiography through the application of this developmental approach depends on the availability of information about the subject. Furthermore, especially when writing the psychobiography of a political figure, it will be imperative for the biographer to have sufficient information about the political culture and conditions surrounding the subject and the political figure's ethnic, national, religious, or ideological large-group identity.

### **PUTIN'S BACKGROUND**

The authors of this paper never met Putin or any individual who had interactions with this political leader of Russia. We lack the information needed for in-depth analysis of his personality organization.

Putin was born in 1952 when his mother was 41 years old, and his father was also in his forties. His parents had lost two children before Putin's birth. One, Albert, died in infancy before WWII, while the other one, Viktor, died during the blockade of Leningrad (the Soviet-era name for St. Petersburg)

(Putin, Gevorkyan, Timakova & Kolesnikov, 2000). From September 1941 to January 1944 Leningrad was blockaded by the Nazis.

In January 2012, Putin briefly shared the story of his family's World War II experience on the war's anniversary while attending the annual wreath-laying at Piskaryovskoye Cemetery in St. Petersburg, a place where 470,000 civilians and soldiers were buried in mass graves (<https://ria.ru/20150430/1061653827.html>). He stated:

My parents told me that children were taken from their families in 1941, and my mother had a child (three-year-old Victor) taken from her—with the goal of saving him.... They said he had died, but they never said where he was buried (Barry, 2012, p.9).

Putin was his parents' third son, born about 10 years after Victor's death. He is the only child to survive. It is known that Putin visited Piskaryovskoye Cemetery most years to commemorate the horrible German blockade. According to experts' estimations, during this blockade, 600,000 to 1.5 million Russians died of starvation (Reid, 2011). We also know that in 2000, twelve years after Putin became the president of Russia, an organization called "We Remember Them All by Name" attempted to find where Victor had been buried in 1942. In 2014 this organization concluded that Victor was in one of the mass graves. We have no evidence indicating that Putin ordered this organization to find his dead brother's grave and perhaps remains. Putin (2015) himself wrote that people he did not know "on their own initiative" found documents concerning his brother.

In the book, *First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait by Russia's President* (Putin, Gevorkyan, Timakova & Kolesnikov, 2000), Putin speaks more about his family's experience during the Nazi blockade of St. Petersburg. He was told that once his starving mother had lost consciousness and was laid out by some government officials alongside those who had died of hunger. She was going to be transported for burial along with the corpses. Luckily, she moaned and thus was not buried together with the dead.

Putin's father was a war veteran who fought and suffered a leg wound caused by a direct grenade pelting by German soldiers. He lived all his life with shrapnel in his leg. In 2015 Putin revealed that the person who witnessed his mother's body next to the corpses and noted that she was still breathing was his father. He had just come from the hospital where he had received treatment. After he realized that his wife was alive, the government officials still suggested that he give them permission to transport her body, believing that she would die anyway before they reached the mass grave. Putin wrote how his father attacked the government officials with his crutches and forced them to return his wife to the family apartment. It was

Putin's father who saved Putin's mother's life. She lived until 1999 after losing her husband in 1998. There were other losses in Putin's family during World War II. His mother's mother was shot by Germans when they occupied Tver City, and it is reported that five of his uncles from his father's side and two (some say five) of his mother's other relatives also died during the war.

Putin (2015) wrote that his father did not want to talk about the family's war experiences. But as Putin was growing up, he would listen when his father and mother had conversations about what had happened to the family during the war. He recalled that sometimes his parents directly turned to him and included him in these conversations. He also noted that his parents did not hate the enemy and added that he, frankly, could not understand this attitude.

Putin (2015) describes his mother as a "gentle person." In the book, where he is referred to as the "First Person," he writes about how his father had beaten him with a belt when he was either of preschool age or as a student in a primary school. The reason for his punishment was that little Putin had gone out with his friends on a train away from his home. In the book Putin states that after this incident he lost his desire to travel without his parents' permission. However, we do not know if Putin as a child faced physical trauma or if this beating by his father was an isolated incident. At the time, this kind of punishment might have been considered a normal and acceptable method of childrearing.

We are aware of Polish journalist Krystyna Kurczap-Redlich's (2016) book about Putin and her claiming a *different* background for the Russian president. According to this author, well-known in Poland, Vovka (Putin) was born in 1950 after his mother had a love affair with a married man. The mother left the baby with her parents who were living near the Ural Mountains. She met a man from Georgia, married him and moved to Georgia. Initially Vovka (Putin) was brought to Georgia, but because the stepfather was a violent person, the child's mother sent her son back to her maternal grandparents. In turn the grandparents gave the boy to a family who were relatives living in St. Petersburg who had lost two children. Krystyna Kurczap-Redlich claims that Putin's biological mother, in her 90s, still lives in the Republic of Georgia and that she, the journalist, had visited her.

One of us, Jana Javakhishvili, read the Polish journalist's book and watched her recent video presentation. We also consulted with colleagues in Russia and concluded that at the present time we have no clear evidence to support Kurczap-Redlich's claims.

## RESCUE FANTASIES AND REPLACEMENT CHILD PHENOMENON

In psychoanalytic clinical practice we observe “rescue fantasies” in analysands whose families had traumatic losses. During their childhood and/or while going through the adolescence passage, such analysands had mothers (or other caretakers with mothering functions) who were depressed, who were missing, or who were not able to provide good-enough mothering. At the same time, these children or youngsters could not “reach up” to a father or father figure to find a nurturing object. Their unconscious fantasy of saving the mother from her depression and bringing her back to function as a mother is to induce an illusion of having a good mothering experience. The “mental content” of a rescue fantasy may lead to maladaptive or adaptive compromise formations during the individual’s adulthood (Abend, 2008; Arlow, 1969; Beres, 1962; Inderbitzin & Levy, 1990; Volkan, 1981, 2010).

A child’s developing rescue fantasies receive support if this child is perceived by his or her mother (or mothering persons) as a “replacement child.” A mother has an internalized formed image of her child who has died. She deposits, transgenerationally transports (Kestenberg & Brenner, 1996; Kogan, 1995; Laub & Auerhahn, 1993), this image into the developing self-representation of her next-born child, usually born after the first child’s death. The second child, the “replacement child” (Ainslie & Solyom, 1986; Cain & Cain, 1964; Green & Solnit, 1964; Legg & Sherick, 1976; Poznanski, 1972; Volkan & Ast, 1997), has no actual experience with the dead sibling or his or her image. The mother, who has an image of the dead child, treats the second one as the reservoir where the dead child can be kept “alive.” Accordingly, the mother gives, mostly unconsciously, the second child certain ego tasks to protect and maintain what is deposited in this child.

Replacement children develop personal ego functions to deal with what has been pushed into them. For example, replacement children will be preoccupied with the task of integrating the deposited image with the rest of their self-representation. These children may or may not succeed in doing so. If the task is successful, the replacement child will not exhibit psychopathology. If this task is not successful, replacement children may develop an unintegrated self-representation.

In the replacement child phenomenon, there may also be some depositing of the depositor’s injured self-image into the child’s self. Some adults may actively, but mostly unconsciously, push their own traumatized self- and traumatized object images, whether they are connected with a concrete loss or not, into developing self-representations of their children. The actual memories of the trauma belong to adults; children have no

experience with the trauma. Clearly, memories belonging to one person cannot be transmitted to another person, but an adult can deposit traumatized self- and object images as well as others, such as realistic or imagined object images that are formed in the depositor's mind as a response to trauma, into a child's self-representation. This process may or may not be a source of pathology depending on how the child handles what had been "deposited" by the traumatized adult into his or her internal world.

George Pollock (1975) gathered data on artists, scientists, and political leaders and pundits concerning their childhood experiences with death. He found that loss does not necessarily account for the creative act or the creative product, but the creative act may be given direction by childhood loss. Similar findings appeared in other psychoanalytic studies (see: Hamilton, 1969, 1979; Wolfenstein, 1973; Plank & Plank, 1978). Stanley Olinick (1980) wondered what makes a person pursue a career as a psychoanalyst. He wrote about how unconscious rescue fantasies play a key role in directing individuals to become psychoanalysts. Volkan (2010) concluded, as George Pollock had done, that rescue fantasies have pushed many individuals to search out leadership roles, including political ones.

What we need to keep in mind is that some leaders influenced by such a fantasy become *reparative* leaders who increase the self-esteem of their ethnic, national, religious or ideological large groups without hurting and destroying or oppressing another large group. Kemal Atatürk was a replacement child; his mother lost three children and her husband when her son was a child. Volkan and Itzkowitz (1984) describe in detail how the Turkish leader verbalized his rescue fantasy in words and deeds. He became the "savior" of Turks after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

Other political leaders become *destructive* leaders, even criminal bullies like Putin, who deliberately initiate inhumane actions and oppress and injure innocent people in order to raise primarily their own and their followers' narcissism (Volkan, 2004, 2020).

### **PUTIN'S ADULT LIFE**

It is beyond the aim of this paper to give detailed information about Vladimir Putin's adult life. Briefly, after studying law at Leningrad State University he worked as a KGB foreign intelligence officer for 16 years. In 1983, Putin married Lyudmila Shkrebnova, a stewardess for Aeroflot. From this marriage Putin has two daughters and two grandsons. Putin and his wife divorced in 2014, allegedly because of Putin's extramarital relationship with former Olympic gymnast Alina Kabaeva, with whom he reportedly fathered



four children. It is also alleged that Putin has another “secret” love child, a daughter. Without having detailed information about Putin’s love life and his many children, we have no idea if these issues are unconsciously connected to his fantasies about his dead brothers; we will not focus on these issues in this paper.

In 1996 Putin joined the administration of Boris Yeltsin, who was appointed as prime minister in August 1999. After Yeltsin’s resignation, Putin became acting president, and four months later was elected president and served two terms. In the period from 2008 to 2012 he served as head of the government of the Russian Federation while Dmitri Medvedev, strongly supported by Putin, became president for one term. In 2012 Putin was reelected president for the third time. And, as we are writing this paper, he is still the president of his country, after his election to this position for the fourth time in 2018. In 2020 changes were implemented in the Russian constitution allowing him to run in the elections in 2024 as well (Belton, 2020; Myers, 2015; Roxburgh, 2013).

After WWII and then the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly independent former Soviet states started to move toward democracy. This path brought many challenges—undigested totalitarian trauma and totalitarian inertia (Javakhishvili, 2014, 2018; Schmidt-Löw-Beer, Atria & Davar, 2015), a longtime tradition of corruption, socio-economic turmoil, inter-ethnic political tensions—many designed in the Soviet period based on the “*Divide et Impera*” [Divide and rule] principle inherited by Russia, which led to the wave of military conflicts, catalyzed by institutionalized identity divisions. Since 2000, under the rule of Vladimir Putin, democracy in Russia has gradually deteriorated.

Putin, as a replacement child, had an unconscious rescue fantasy. In order to support this conclusion, in the next section of this paper we will report data that illustrates how he, in his open statements and actions, has linked Russia—as well as the image of the Soviet Union—to the time and place where his family lived surrounded by the Nazis, experienced many losses and became preoccupied with burials and graveyards. Later we will describe Putin’s role in malignant propaganda that aimed to rescue and protect Russia and its being a special place.

## TIME COLLAPSE

In 2001 the “National Program of the Patriotic Education of Citizens of the Russian Federation” was created. Since then it has been carried out by two five-year plans (Government of the Russian Federation, 2001; Government of the Russian Federation, 2015). One of the aims of the program is to

educate preschool age kindergarten students about The Great Patriotic War. In 2015 during the 70th anniversary of the victory in World War II, kindergartens and schools countrywide staged plays about this war. In many Russian towns, kindergartens and schools still stage and perform such plays.

These events typically start when a teacher, often dressed in the military uniform of the 1940s announces the beginning of the play and informs the participants that they will find themselves in the past. Following this, children, also dressed in clothes from the 1940s, have a good time dancing to one of the songs with the lyrics: "It's 1941 and everybody is alive" Suddenly music and dancing are interrupted by the voice of Yuri Levitan, the radio commentator who announced the start of the war back in 1941, usually using an authentic recording of his voice. After this announcement the children, now dressed in military uniforms from the 1940s, act out preparations "to go to the front." Next is a battle scene. Some children "die" and some pretend that they are graves. Those who "survive" come back home, celebrating "The Great Victory." (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m2OM0v3wDlo> for the illustration of a typical play).

At different locations there are some variations in these plays. For example, in some, background voices explain certain things that appear on the stage, such as the red blood of children on the white snow. In other plays, children approach their mothers and hand them papers symbolizing letters families received during World War II informing them that their children had been killed. Also, children play the role of soldiers who did not die in battle but find out when they return home that their mothers had died. At the end of the plays children often state that they do not want war and that all they want is to live in peace. These plays are so widespread that the public can watch dozens of them on the internet. They are proudly uploaded by performers, parents, teachers and administrators. Besides these "educational activities," dozens of plays by professional adults and movies "for children and their parents" are being dedicated to The Great Patriotic War. There is also a book, *Children's Book on War: Diaries 1941–1945* (AiF, 2015) edited by a group of journalists from the newspaper *Argumenti i Fakti* (Arguments and Facts) owned by the Moscow government. Published in 2015, it includes stories of 35 Soviet children who experienced atrocities of war. Tragic details, particularly related to the death of family members, especially from starvation in Leningrad, are described. It is not clear whether these diaries are authentic or not.

Wearing 1940s-style clothing has become very fashionable in Russia. Since 2017 the modern military uniforms also have been replaced by military uniforms of the 1940s, now called "the winners'" uniforms. There are even military outfit stores for children, and they are very popular.

On May 9, the anniversary date of victory, the Russians have pompous parades besides the military ones. Big crowds take to the streets and march, carrying photos of their relatives who fought in WWII. Putin usually participates in the march called “Immortal Regiment” with a portrait of his father in his hands.

On November 29, 2015, when the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the “Great Victory” was celebrated, the Russian Governmental TV channel *Rossia* broadcasted that the grave of Emperor Oleksandr III (father of Nikolai II—the last one killed by the Bolsheviks) had been opened in order to compare Oleksander’s remains with the existing remains of Nikolai II. It was important to learn that both belonged to the same family so they could be buried together along with Nikolai’s children.

Normalization of necrophilia was observed in one Siberian town where a competition for grave digging took place. *The Moscow Times* (2020) published the story of this competition under the title: “Russian Gravediggers Defy Coronavirus to Throw Speed-Digging Contest”. Five teams from across the region descended upon a local cemetery to dig holes 2 meters long, 0.8 meters wide and 1.6 meters deep, with judges rating their performances. The winner was a young man from Tomsk who dug his grave in 52 minutes. Readers were informed that “new and more large-scale contests” will take place in the future.

## INVASIONS

Before focusing on Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, we will very briefly mention his involvement with other locations.

Chechnya has struggled for independence since Russia invaded the North Caucasus in the eighteenth century. After the collapse of the Soviet Union Chechnya declared independence (Republic of Ichkeria). Russian attempts during the early nineties to regain control in Chechnya that turned into the 1994–1996 Russian-Chechen war failed. The *unresolved Chechen issue* was a challenge that Yeltsin handed to Putin. In 1999 Putin reinvaded Chechnya. This invasion was preceded by explosions of several buildings in various towns in Russia, attributed to “Chechen terrorists,” though independent journalists wrote about their suspicions that Russian special forces caused these explosions (Eckel, 2019). Victory in this war became a “trademark” for Putin, as a strong leader who solved the Chechen issue.

Georgia was invaded by Russia for the first time at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1918 the country became independent while Russia was busy with its revolution, but on February 25 of 1921 Georgia was reinvaded and endured 70 years of totalitarian regime. As soon as Georgia

became independent again after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian-fueled inter-ethnic political conflicts unfolded in its two regions—Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (South Ossetia). As a result, these two regions declared independence and up to 300,000 Internally Displaced People (IDP) fled to the rest of Georgia. The conflicts became protracted and in August of 2008 developed into a five-day Russian-Georgian war. Following this war, Russia as well as her allies (Venezuela, Syria, Nicaragua, Nauru) recognized the independence of these breakaway regions. Since 2008, Putin has continued a so-called creeping occupation of Georgia via regularly moving the current “conflict border” (barbed wire) deeper and deeper into Georgia, in addition to other operations of a hybrid war (Bolkvadze, Chachava, Ghvedashvili, Lange-Ionatamišvili, McMillan et al. 2021).

As happened in Georgia, Ukraine suffered from Russian annexation since the 1920s. To suppress resistance of the population, in 1932–1933 the Soviet officials confiscated the entire grain supply from the population of the eastern and central villages of the country, closed the roads to restrict freedom of movement, and thus imposed an artificial famine which was named the Holodomor (Conquest, 1986; Marples, 2007). In Ukrainian, the word *Holodomor* means “to kill by starvation.” Approximately four and a half million people died during the Holodomor.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and Ukraine’s regaining independence, choosing the political course for Euro-Atlantic integration has evolved in Ukraine. In 2013, after pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich suspended political association and free-trade agreements with the European Union, protests known as the Maidan Revolution rose up, and Yanukovich was ousted from office. In response, in 2014, Russia invaded Crimea and started a war in Donbass, and Russian-backed separatists declared independence in Lugansk and Donetsk, the two largest cities in Eastern Ukraine.

On February 24, 2022, Putin invaded Ukraine, which created massive numbers of forced internally displaced people and associated refugee problems. These millions of individuals, as well as a huge number of persons in host places and host countries, will face anxiety and confusion accompanied by large-group identity issues, mourning and adaptations, as well as many difficult real-life issues (Akhtar, 2014; Varvin, 2021; Volkan, 2017). Meanwhile, Putin and his propaganda machine continue to “justify” inhumane actions. The “delusional” aspect—the inflammation of the Nazi period of history—is clearly visible when Ukrainians are labelled Nazis. For example, on Russian television the Ukrainians are referred to as “Ukronazis” and the attack on Ukraine is linked to de-Nazification. On March 1, 2022, all Russian schools had to conduct special social sciences lessons to

explain to children how they should think and talk about the so-called “special operation” in Ukraine; namely, they were taught to talk about it in terms of genocide and de-Nazification. To support these efforts, a propagandistic cartoon was produced and has been distributed widely (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oO3RY3Cv7Oc>).

In one of his speeches after the invasion of Ukraine Putin stated that

The disintegration of our united country was brought about by the historic, strategic mistakes on the part of the Bolshevik leaders and the CPSU (The Communist Party of the Soviet Union) leadership, mistakes committed at different times in state-building and economic and ethnic policies. The collapse of the historical Russia known as the USSR is on their conscience. (Address by the President of Russian Federation, February 21, 2022. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>)

He also has made many remarks illustrating his imitation of Joseph Stalin. Comparing himself, as well as competing with, Joseph Stalin calls to mind Putin’s exaggerated self-narcissism. One wonders if he has a wish to be more well-known and important than Stalin or other Soviet leaders.

Volkan (2004, 2013, 2020) has written about destructive narcissistic leaders’ “glass bubble fantasies,” their “living” in an isolated kingdom from which they watch others behind a glass enclosure and divide outsiders into two categories: those who adore them and those who do not. This plays a key role in how such a leader creates a severe political/societal division within his or her country and portrays another country as an enemy. In their own environment they hurt and sometimes destroy those who do not adore them. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Volkan (1991a, 2013) interviewed Stalin’s two private interpreters, Valentin Berezkhov and Zoya Zarubina. They told him two stories about Stalin’s private life, including how he burned people with his cigarette when he did not like their comments. In the clinical setting we observe how an individual with narcissistic personality organization responds to an event that threatens the person’s grandiose self. He or she becomes anxious and intent upon finding new ways to protect the grandiose self. One wonders how COVID-19 might have threatened Putin’s “First Person” identity.

#### **MALIGNANT POLITICAL PROPAGANDA AND DESTRUCTIVE RESCUE FANTASY**

When we first heard the news about the occupation of Ukraine, we recalled how after the collapse of the former Yugoslavia, Slobodan Milošević, with the help of some Serbian academicians and the Serbian Orthodox Church, re-enflamed the shared “memories” of the Serbian Battle of Kosovo that took

place in 1389, the Serbian “chosen trauma”. A chosen trauma is the shared mental image of an event in a large group’s ancestors’ history in which the large group suffered a catastrophic loss, humiliation, and helplessness at the hands of enemies, plus an inability to mourn these losses. The word “chosen” does not mean to imply that a large group “chooses” to be victimized by another large group and subsequently lose self-esteem. It does, however, recognize that the group “chooses” to psychologize and dwell on a past traumatic event and make it a major large-group identity marker, a chosen trauma or a chosen glory (Volkan, 1991b, 1997, 2013, 2014, 2019, 2020).

As the six-hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo approached, the remains of the Serbian leader Prince Lazar who was killed during the Battle of Kosovo was removed from its grave in the north of Belgrade. The remains were placed in a coffin and taken over the course of the year from one Serbian town to another where they were received by huge crowds of mourners dressed in black. Again, and again during this long journey, Lazar’s remains were symbolically buried and reincarnated, until they were buried for good at the original battleground in Kosovo on June 28, 1989. Thus, Milošević and his associates, by activating the mental representations of Lazar and the Battle of Kosovo, along with the peak emotions they generated, first encouraged a shared sense of victimization followed by a shared sense of entitlement for revenge. This led to genocidal acts in Europe at the end of the twentieth century.

When Milošević was seven, his favorite uncle, an army officer, put a gun to his head and killed himself. When he was twenty-one, his father did the same thing. His mother killed herself when he was in his early thirties. He married his teenage sweetheart, Mirjana Marković. Mirjana’s mother, a Yugoslav partisan during World War II, “was captured by the Nazis, tortured, surrendered crucial information, was released, and then was executed by the leader of her partisan group, who happened to be her father” (Mailer, 1999, p. A25).

Putin, like Milošević, had a background of traumas related to deaths and rescue fantasies. Milošević’s interest in reincarnating Lazar’s remains reminded us that Putin was a replacement child and of his investment in graveyards. Their similar political propaganda—short-lasting in Milošević’s case and long-lasting in Putin’s—are linked to the psychology of their internal worlds. Before them, Adolf Hitler (1925–1926) understood the power of political propaganda, devoting two chapters to its proper design and execution in *Mein Kampf*. To illustrate its aim he said, “The art of propaganda lies in understanding the emotional ideas of great masses and finding through a psychologically correct form, the way to attention and hence to the heart of the broad masses” (Hitler, 1925–1926, p. 180).

Volkan (2013) described seven steps of malignant propaganda. Both Milošević and Putin followed these steps.

*The first step* refers to enhancing a shared sense of victimization within the society by reactivating or inflaming a chosen trauma or a past shared undigested trauma. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of Estonia, Volkan and his interdisciplinary team conducted an unofficial diplomatic dialogue series that took place over several years between influential Estonians, people from Boris Yeltsin's government in Moscow and leaders of Russian speakers in Estonia (Volkan, 1997, 2020). During these dialogue series, when Russian delegates from Moscow perceived a "threat" from Estonians, such as being disliked or considered "barbarous" by their former Soviet subjects, they would bring the mental representation of their chosen trauma to the negotiations, as resistance to listening sincerely to Estonians' concerns. The Russians' chosen trauma referred to their suffering at the hands of Tatars and Mongols in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Putin, unlike Milošević, did not focus on a chosen trauma, but on an undigested trauma of the World War II period.

*The second step* is creating a time collapse that mixes up the image of a past "enemy" with the present devalued opposing large group, whether inside or outside the country. Above we described the time collapse in Russia.

*The third step* focuses on presenting the political leader as an omnipotent "savior" of his own large group while continuing to devalue the opposing large group and dehumanizing it.

*The fourth step* refers to elevating large-group identity to be more important than individual identity, through education in schools and other means. Below we will briefly describe what we mean by "large-group identity."

Personal identity provides an inner sense of persistent sameness for an individual (Erikson, 1956). Large-group identities are articulated in terms of commonality such as "we are Catalan; we are Lithuanian Jews; we are Ukrainian, we are Sunni Muslim; we are communists, we are white supremacists in the United States." Large-group identities that develop in childhood are the end-result of myths and realities of common beginnings, historical continuities, geographical realities, and shared linguistic, societal, religious, cultural, and ideological factors. Belonging to a large group is a natural phenomenon in human life.

Large-group identity also manifests when individuals are adults. Some religious cults and terrorist organizations truly represent large groups that evolve during adulthood. For members of religious cults or terrorist organizations, the investment in their core large-group identities that had developed in childhood, drastically changes. These individuals exaggerate

selected aspects of their childhood large-group identities by holding on to a restricted special religious or nationalistic belief. Sometimes they become believers of ideas that were not available in their childhood environments. In short, they give up sharing overall sentiments with people who had the same core childhood large-group identity but who have not made their specific new selections.

*The fifth step* is to generalize a sense of “we-ness” (large group narcissism) that is contaminated with an *entitlement ideology*; the members of the large group feel entitled to regain what their ancestors’ lost decades or centuries ago.

The Serbians’ entitlement ideology is known in the literature as Christoslavism. Greeks call their entitlement ideology “Megali Idea” (Great Idea). In the United States there is a delusional entitlement ideology of White Supremacy.

Above, we wrote about the unofficial diplomatic dialogue series that took place in Estonia and how the suffering of Russians at the hands of Tatars and Mongols in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was remembered during these meetings. Referring to these events, a Russian delegate, a well-known person connected with the Russian government, began describing how Russia is entitled to occupy the lands of Others, but, unlike Tatars and Mongols of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, it would be a nice protector of Others. Addressing the Estonian delegates, he loudly declared that Estonians should not complain about being included in the Soviet Union. He stated that Russians are special people and they are the protectors of Estonia (Volkan, 1997, 2006). The present-day’s Russian entitlement ideology is to maintain “Russkiy Mir” (Russian World) as well as “Eurasionism,” a position that Russian civilization does not belong in the usual “European” or “Asian” categories but instead to the larger geopolitical concept of Eurasia (Kudors, 2010).

The *Russkiy mir* concept was elaborated upon by a group of Russian scholars (Pyotr Shchedrovitsky, Yefim Ostrovsky, Valery Tishkov, Vitaly Skrinnik, Tatyana Poloskova) in the 1990s in an attempt to respond to Russia’s crisis of national ideology. It assumes that the Russian world is the social totality associated through language, traditions and history. According to the concept, Russia has a unique mission to protect *Russkiy mir* in Russia and among compatriots abroad, meaning former Soviet people as well as Russian-speaking minorities. In 2007 Putin, co-operating with the Russian Orthodox Church, created the Russkiy Mir Foundation. The aim of this foundation, which is a government-sponsored organization, is to promote the Russian language and culture worldwide, and form the Russian World as a global project (Kudors, 2010).



Another ideological concept that shapes a national idea of Putin's Russia and feeds entitlement ideology is related to Russian historian Lev Nikolayevich Gumilyov's (1912–1992) geopolitical concept called "Eurasianism," which tells us that Russian civilization is unique and special, and it does not belong in the European or Asian categories. According to Gumilyov (1990), the Russian ethnos is a "Super-ethnos," which has to oppose catholic Europe's threat to Russia's integrity (Clover, 2016).

*The sixth step* of malignant political propaganda is creating a societal preoccupation with the large group's psychological borders through an obsession with physical borders, such as Putin's wish to expand present-day Russia's physical borders.

*In the seventh step* an entitlement ideology turns into dehumanizing the "enemy," revengeful actions, thus allowing mass killings and other inhumane actions to be committed.

The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, a body of the United Nations, was created in 1993. The Tribunal tried Milošević on charges of 66 counts of crimes against humanity: genocide in Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo during the 1990s. Milošević conducted his own defense in the five-year trial which ended without a verdict. He died in prison in The Hague on March 11, 2006. We finished writing this paper 50 days after the invasion of Ukraine began. We have no way to predict how this human tragedy will end and what Putin's future will be.

## NOTES

1. Vamık Volkan, M.D., was born to Turkish parents in Cyprus. Before coming to the United States in 1957 he received his medical education at the School of Medicine, University of Ankara, Turkey. For eighteen of his thirty-nine years at the University of Virginia, Dr. Volkan was the Medical Director of the University's Blue Ridge Hospital. In 1987, he established the Center for the Study of Mind and Human Interaction (CSMHI). CSMHI applied a growing theoretical and field-proven base of knowledge to issues such as ethnic tension, racism, large-group identity, terrorism, societal trauma, immigration, mourning, transgenerational transmissions, leader-follower relationships, and other aspects of national and international conflict. A year after his 2002 retirement Dr. Volkan became the Senior Erik Erikson Scholar at the Erikson Institute of the Austen Riggs Center in Stockbridge, Massachusetts for ten years. Dr. Volkan was an Inaugural Yitzhak Rabin Fellow at the Rabin Center, Tel Aviv, Israel; a Visiting Professor of Law, Harvard University, Boston, Massachusetts; a Visiting Professor of Political Science at the University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria and at Bahçeşehir University Istanbul, Turkey. He worked as a Visiting Professor of Psychiatry at three universities in Turkey. In 2006, he was Fulbright/Sigmund Freud-Privatstiftung Visiting Scholar of Psychoanalysis in Vienna, Austria. In 2015, he became a Visiting Professor at El Bosque University, Bogota, Colombia. Dr. Volkan holds Honorary Doctorate degrees from Kuopio University (now called the University of Eastern Finland),

Finland; from Ankara University, Turkey; and the Eastern European Psychoanalytic Institute, Russia. He was a member of the Working Group on Terror and Terrorism, International Psychoanalytic Association. He was a Temporary Consultant to the World Health Organization (WHO) in Albania and Macedonia. He received the *Nevitt Sanford Award*, *Elise M. Hayman Award*, *L. L. Bryce Boyer Award*, *Margaret Mahler Literature Prize*, *Hans H. Strupp Award*, and American College of Psychoanalysts' *Distinguished Officer Award* for 2014 and *Gradiva 2021 Best Book Award*. He also received the *Sigmund Freud Award* given by the city of Vienna, Austria in collaboration with the World Council of Psychotherapy and the *Mary S. Sigourney Award* for 2015. The Sigourney Award was given to him for his role as a "seminal contributor to the application of psychoanalytic thinking to conflicts between countries and cultures," and because "his clinical thinking about the use of object relations theory in primitive mental states has advanced our understanding of severe personality disorders." He also was honored on several occasions by being nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, with letters of support from twenty-seven countries. Dr. Volkan is the author, coauthor, editor, or coeditor of sixty-two psychoanalytic and psychopolitical books, some of which have been translated into Turkish, Finnish, German, Serbian, Spanish, Chinese, Portuguese, Russian, Japanese, and Greek. He has written hundreds of published papers and book chapters. He has served on the editorial boards of sixteen national or international professional journals, including *The Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, and was the Guest Editor of the Diamond Jubilee Special Issue of *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 2015. Dr. Volkan continues to lecture nationally and internationally.

2. Jana (Darejan) Javakhishvili, Ph.D., is a professor of psychology at Ilia State University, Tbilisi, Georgia. Since 1995 she has been working in trauma research, training and treatment. She has been engaged in the field of conflict transformation as a facilitator for peace building processes in Georgia and the South Caucasus since 2002. She is specialized in working with individuals, families, groups, and communities, who are traumatized by military conflicts and displacement, natural disasters and terrorist attacks. Those include Georgian internally displaced persons, refugees from Chechnya, Beslan tragedy survivors, military conflict-affected populations in Ukraine, survivors of political oppression in Belarus, etc. Her research interests concern mental health of war- and political oppression-affected populations. She is a Past President of the European Society for Traumatic Stress Studies – ESTSS (2019–2020). Since July 2021 she is serving as a board of trustees' member of the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma Europe (DCE). She is on the editorial board of the *European Journal of Psychotraumatology (EJPT)*.

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