Sleep No More: Nightmares in Emerging Nazi Germany

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Abstract

Charlotte Beradt collected hundreds of dreams she gathered in Germany between 1933 and 1939, hid them, and then sent them abroad. According to her *The Third Reich of Dreams*, people living under the totalitarian government of Nazi Germany had fears of listening devices picking up their own thoughts even when they were asleep, of having no walls, and of being condemned for talking in their sleep. The dreams reveal fears, insecurities, confusion, guilt, and lack of trust. Dream research has often been impaired because researchers were examining dreams during REM (Rapid Eye Movement) sleep, while many nightmares occur during non-REM sleep. The Beradt's study showed the advantage of retrospective accounts. Dreams of other trauma victims include the discovery of dead bodies and being killed oneself and often replicas of actual events. Such nightmares preclude the restorative function of sleep. Psychotherapy, however, using dreams from traumas when conducted in a safe environment, can be helpful and relieve patients from suffering.

Keywords

Traumatic dreams, Nazis, nightmares

Charlotte Beradt's *The Third Reich of Dreams*, first published in German in 1966, adds a new dimension to our understanding of Nazism's brutal power: The Nazis succeeded in terrorizing people even in their dreams. Beradt's work is a poignant and disturbing record of hundreds of dreams she gathered from people living in Nazi Germany in the years 1933 to 1939. Many people were afraid to speak openly of their dreams, and Beradt had to copy the dreams in code, hide them in the bindings of books scattered through her home, and send them as letters to various people in countries abroad. Despite these obstacles, she managed to compile a fascinating collection of dream reports. There were many dreams of Hitler, Goebbels, Goering, Himmler, etc.

A middle-aged male factory owner dreamed: "Goebbels was visiting my factory. He had all the workers line up in

two rows facing each other. I had to stand in the middle and raise my arm in the Nazi salute. It took me half an hour to get my arm up, inch by inch. Goebbels showed neither approval nor disapproval as he watched my struggle, as if it were a play. When I finally managed to get my arm up, he said just five words—"I don't want your salute"—then turned and went to the door. There I stood in my own factory, arm raised, pilloried right in the midst of my own people. I was only able to keep from collapsing by staring at his clubfoot as he limped out. And so I stood until I woke up". (Beradt 1968: 5)

In the Third Reich, the private lives of citizens were invaded even during their sleep so that people were no longer able to restore emotional strength by

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dreaming. This paper will report the themes and specific dreams when the Nazis gained control in Germany, largely from the 1930's as reported by Beradt (1968). Many dreams contained the themes of "no walls" of everything being known—for example of various listening devices—objects in their homes that had recorded everything and reported on them. Some dreams dealt with people talking during their sleep so that they were condemned. One person became so afraid even to dream that his dreams consisted only of rectangles, triangles, and octagons. Others' dreams were of being able to do nothing, not being able to speak when it came to their turn or watching a friend being attacked. Many dreams were about escaping to England to complain to their government. Some dreams were of accusations by acquaintances, such as being surrounded by the milkman, news vendor, baker, plumber, and chimney sweep. Many dreams dealt with the race laws of people being split into blonds and brunettes, with dark groups given names such as "The Disreputables" or "The Suspects". There were dreams of being tortured, of being under piles of corpses, and of women having sexual advances made by Storm Troopers. There were dreams of escape to faraway places, revenge, and victory for free thought. The dreams document the rise of totalitarianism.

The author can relate to these dreams because when the Taliban was taking women to a stadium to be shot in Afghanistan, knowing someone like her would be one of their victims, the author had a dream that she was lying down in a taxi hiding from them as she passed the stadium on her way to the airport. The stories were frightening, even though the author was in the US.

FEAR, LOSS OF PRIVACY

In an essay on the book, Bulkeley (1994) commented:

A number of the dreams reveal a profound sense of

insecurity, confusion, and guilt. The middle-aged housewife's dream of her oven betraying her to the Nazi Storm Trooper (quoted below) involves a common household object, and indeed an object symbolizing the warmth and well-being of the home, that has become a tool of systematic terrorization. (Bulkeley 1994: 120)

Beradt describes many such dreams in which objects like bedside lamps, desks, and clocks "turn traitor" and denounce the people who own them, reporting to the state the details of every secret transgression and crime. These people feel they can no longer trust anyone or anything; they can no longer relax even in the privacy of their living rooms or bedrooms.

A middle-aged housewife dreamed:

A Storm Trooper was standing by the large, old-fashioned, blue-tiled Dutch oven that stands in the corner of our living room, where we always sit and talk in the evening. He opened the oven door and it began to talk in a harsh and penetrating voice. It repeated every joke we had told and every word we had said against the government, I thought, "Good Lord, what's it going to tell next—all my little snide remarks about Goebbels?". But at that moment I realized that one sentence more or less would make no difference—simply everything we have ever thought or said among ourselves is known... (Beradt 1968: 45-46)

Bulkeley (1994) believed that in this way their dreams reveal the loss of just those qualities she thinks are crucial to a viable, transitional space and thus to a healthy, creative life. Without trust and relaxation, a person is "not able to achieve the resting state out of which a creative reaching-out can take place" (Winnicott 1971: 55); without privacy and the ability to "keep secrets", people do not have the freedom to engage the forces of their own personal worlds in their social and political activities, and so can express only anxious "reactions" rather than genuinely personal actions (Winnicott 1986: 157).

A German woman dreamed:

I was talking in my sleep and to be on the safe side was speaking Russian (which I don't know, and anyway I never

talk in my sleep) so I'd not even understand myself and so no one else could understand me in case I said anything about the government, for that, of course, is not permitted and must be reported. (Beradt 1968: 52)

The most striking dream of this type, showing how state-produced fear and insecurity can destroy transitional spaces, is the dream quoted above, in which the dreamer speaks in her sleep in Russian, guaranteeing that the government would not understand her but also that she would not understand herself anymore. The fears of this woman have led her to adopt such extreme defensive measures that her own creative play no longer makes sense even to herself.

An example of the sense that there were no longer any walls is as follows:

It was about nine o'clock in the evening. My consultations were over, and I was just stretching out on the couch to relax with a book on Matthias Grünewald, when suddenly the walls of my room and then my apartment disappeared. I looked around and discovered to my horror that as far as the eye could see no apartment had walls any more. Then I heard a loudspeaker boom, "According to the decree of the 17th of this month on the Abolition of Walls...". So disturbed was the doctor by his dream that he wrote it down of his own accord the next morning (and subsequently dreamt he was being accused of writing down dreams). (Beradt 1968: 21)

An example of the sense that one's mind was being read is the following:

I was sitting in a box at the opera, dressed in a new gown, and with my hair beautifully done. It was a huge opera house with many, many tiers, and I was enjoying considerable admiration. They were presenting my favorite opera, *The Magic Flute*. When it came to the line, "That is the devil certainly", a squad of policemen came stomping in and marched directly up to me. A machine had registered the fact that I had thought of Hitler on hearing the word "devil". I imploringly searched the festive crowd for some sign of help, but they all just sat there staring straight ahead, silent and expressionless, not one showing even pity. The old gentleman in an adjoining box looked kind and distinguished, but when I tried to catch his eye he spat at me. (Beradt 1968: 25)

The fear of one's thought being monitored is also apparent in this dream:

In the middle of the night the telephone rang. A dull voice (corresponding to the expressionless faces we have encountered in previous dreams) said merely, "This is the Monitoring Office...". I knew immediately that my crime lay in what I had said about not finding pleasure in anything, and I found myself arguing my case, begging and pleading that this one time I be forgiven—please just don't report anything this one time, don't pass it on, please just forget it. The voice remained absolutely silent and then hung up without a word, leaving me in agonizing uncertainty. (Beradt 1968: 37)

The intensity of the fear experienced is evident in this dream and action:

"I dreamt I awoke in the middle of the night to discover that the two cherubs that hang over my bed were no longer looking upwards but were instead staring down at me. I was so frightened that I crawled under the bed" (Beradt 1968: 50). "I was telling a forbidden joke, but as a precaution was telling it wrong so that it didn't make sense anymore" (Beradt 1968: 51). The man who dreamt this also dreamt he sent deaf and blind people out to see and hear things that were forbidden; in this way, he could always prove they had actually seen and heard nothing, but he had forgotten all the details of this obvious dream-farce.

The idea that the English might save them was apparent in this dream:

I am at the post office, standing at a window at the head of a long line of people. The clerk refuses to sell me stamps because no one who is against the system may buy stamps. An Englishman comes up. Instead of going to the end of the line, he comes right to the front, before me, and tells the man at the window what I ought to say but don't dare: "It's simply amazing the way people are treated in this country. I shall certainly report about it in England". (Beradt 1968: 58-59)

The shame of those who did not refuse to cooperate is apparent in this dream of a doctor:

Storm Troopers were putting up barbed wire at all hospital windows. I had sworn I wouldn't stand for having them bring their barbed wire into my ward. But I did put up with it after all, and I stood by like a caricature of a doctor while they took out the window panes and turned a ward into a concentration camp—but I lost my job anyway. I was called back, however, to treat Hitler because I was the only man in the world who could. I was ashamed of myself for feeling proud, and so I began to cry. (Beradt 1968: 62)

Bulkeley (1994) saw the dreams reported by Beradt as examples of the society developing what Winnicott considers to be the False Self. The social impact on the dreams is obvious—There is no need for a psychological interpretation of the person. The terror invades the place that Winnicott (1971) had called the transitional space between inner and outer reality. Bettelheim (1968), in comments at the end of Beradt's book, suggested that dreams did not have the restorative function they normally have. His ideas are supported by recent research.

According to the Threat Simulation Theory, dreaming has developed, and was maintained during evolution, because its function of rehearsing threats, is essential for survival. A study by Mathes and Schredl (2016) analyzed 1,612 diary dreams reported by 425 participants (mainly psychology students). The study results indicated that threats play an important role in dreams and, thus, support the idea that dreaming might have a function of rehearsing problematic or threatening situations. Levy and Finnegan (2016) took a similar but not identical position. They suggested that Freud's second view of dreams was that they provided a settling of traumatic events. Purves et al. (2001: 614) in *Neuroscience* stated:

"Despite this wealth of descriptive information about the stages of sleep, the functional purposes of the various sleep states are not known. Most sleep researchers accept the idea that the purpose of non-REM sleep is at least in part restorative".

Subjects awakened from REM (Rapid Eye Movement) sleep recall elaborate, vivid,

hallucinogenic, and emotional dreams, whereas subjects awakened during non-REM sleep report fewer dreams, which, when they occur, are more conceptual, less vivid, and less emotion-laden.

In more recent studies of dreams, about 65% are associated with sadness, apprehension, or anger; 20% with happiness or excitement; and, somewhat surprisingly, only 1% with sexual feelings or acts.

The apparent innocuousness of REM sleep deprivation contrasts markedly with the effects of total sleep deprivation. The implication of these several findings is that we can get along without REM sleep, but need non-REM sleep in order to survive.

Michel Juvet (1999) proposed that dreaming reinforces behaviors not commonly encountered during the awake state (aggression, fearful situations) by rehearsing them while dreaming, although no ideas are generally accepted. An advantage of Beradt's study is that the participants simply reported the dreams they remembered. Nightmares and sleep interruption are known to be common among those suffering from PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). But dream studies of holocaust survivors and survivors of war-related and natural disasters have usually awakened participants during REM sleep. They find that the survivors often do not recall their dreams and overall recall fewer dreams. As new research has shown, the dreams related to the traumas are often occurring during non-REM sleep. The survivors of the holocaust do report overall more dreams with a threat to existence than the non-survivors. In regard to the studies of dreams of combat veterans, their dreams were often replicas of actual events (Van der Kolk et al. 1984). "Among those who had killed other people, the dreams included being killed themselves, having victims demand explanation of the dreamer, and two separate selves, as with Lifton's 'doubling concept'" (Lipke and MacNair 2009). Those with severe trauma experience also replay horrific scenes such as discovery of dead/mutilated bodies and scenes of combat (Phelps et al. 2011). Working through dreams

of traumas in therapy, such as sexual abuse, however, when relaxed in a safe environment, can be helpful (Bogart 1993). Although there are these studies of people who have suffered trauma due to their past experiences, there appears to be no further research regarding those living in totalitarian societies. Obviously, people would be afraid to participate unless it was a retrospective study.

These studies show how the culture, not simply the personal, affects dreaming. The restorative function of dreaming during sleep is destroyed. “Innocent sleep. Sleep that soothes away all our worries, sleep that puts each day to rest. Sleep that relieves the weary laborer and heals hurt minds. Sleep, the main course in life’s feast, and the most nourishing” (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 2, Scene 2).

CONCLUSIONS

The dreams collected during the rise of the Third Reich demonstrate the terror many citizens felt, similar to the dreams by people who have already suffered a trauma, in some respects. These particular dreams reflect the insecurities of citizens living in a totalitarian state. More research needs to collect the dreams of people in combat, people held hostage (most likely retrospectively!), and those who endured the regimes of North Korea, Cambodia, etc. The dreams of those under assault in countries where people have emigrated (e.g. Syria) are also of especial interest. The importance of this research is that it shows that not fully conscious processes reflect the emotions in the bodies and thoughts in the minds of people under threat in ways that we may not even imagine if we have not felt such terror. But of more importance is how to help such people in therapy and support groups. Such research must expand beyond that of REM-sleep. To the extent that discussion of dreams adds to talking about the not-fully conscious experiences is of interest to clinicians.

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Bio

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