

The Making of Psychohistory: Origins, Controversies, and Pioneering Contributors

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Chapter 1 – Introduction [excerpt from pages 1-5]

Although the organized field of psychohistory is a half century old, there is still no comprehensive history of it, to say nothing of the century of studies from the Freud circle on. As an Eriksonian participant-observer and scholar of this valuable movement delving into human motivation, I think it is incumbent on me to commit my experiences and knowledge to print before they are lost to time. This is a personal memoir of my experiences in the field since the late 1960s, as well as its history. I have been a “big tent” psychohistorian, open to all perspectives and welcoming all colleagues to meetings I have organized since 1976 and to the pages of *Clio’s Psyche*, the journal I edit.

Thoughtful people do psychohistory whether or not they realize it. Psychological assumptions underlie any assessment—or even comment about—history, human interaction, and society. We humans want to know why things happen. The psychological assumptions underlying these speculations are seldom well thought out or developed. Thus, all historians do a type of psychohistory without realizing it. Regrettably, academic historians as a group reject the field of psychohistory for a variety of reasons, including their suspicion of the new, dislike of psychoanalysis, uneasiness with the unconscious and irrational forces in others and themselves, and fear that their knowledge of human motivation will be exposed as inadequate. Highly speculative and poorly researched and thought-out psychobiographies have also hurt the reputation of our field. Applying a psychiatric diagnosis to a historical personality or president is sometimes passed off as psychohistory rather than dismissed as speculation or a starting point for

serious research. Working with the unconscious is difficult, and researching childhood and personality materials involves lots of hard work. As an author, editor, and organizer of meetings, my ideal has been to set a high standard for research, and avoid psychopathologizing the subject and even technical terminology. I have always rejected reductionism as anathema to good psychological scholarship. Psychoanalysts sometimes dismiss psychohistorical studies of historical personages on the grounds that there is not a living patient to get information from and to confirm or disprove the psychohistorian's assessment. Our subjects may not usually be alive, but their biographers are breathing human beings who both need to understand the countertransference they bring to their subjects and to deepen and broaden their understanding of unconscious processes and the complexities of human beings. Despite these resistances and difficulties, our field has developed an enormous literature and various methodologies, making for a level of professional competence and expertise not available to those who rely on their own amateur, unnamed psychohistorical assumptions.

Psychohistory has opened new realms of understanding. The integration of psychoanalysis and psychology generally, with the humanities and social sciences has enormously increased our knowledge of people's lives. In history graduate schools, professors were inclined to explain motivation by vague, amorphous references to economic, political, and social forces, whereas psychohistory provided insights into specific real life human complexities, emotions, motivations, personalities, and traumas. Psychohistory opened doors of understanding of behaviors that had been previously written off as meaningless. Patterns became discernable. Psychohistory provides a depth of understanding of the human propensity to have enemies and sometimes go to war against them not found elsewhere. Biographies written before Freud, psychobiography, and psychohistory were so much less revealing than those written today, which look into the minds of the characters. Innovative colleagues from numerous disciplines have created a major interdisciplinary accomplishment, which is usually labeled as psychohistory, political psychology, and applied psychoanalysis. I define psychohistory as an amalgam of psychology, history, and related social sciences. It focuses on the "why" of history, especially the difference between intention and actual behavior. Psychobiography, childhood, group dynamics, mechanisms of psychic defense, reactions to trauma, unconscious motivation, dreams, and creativity are primary areas of research. There are other, related definitions of psychohistory by distinguished colleagues.

The language of psychology has come to permeate modern consciousness, as indicated by the everyday use of terms such as anxiety, denial, ego, empathy, guilt, id, identity, masochist, narcissism, neurotic, obsessive-compulsive, paranoid, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), sadism, split personality, subconscious, superego, and unconscious. Laypeople read or hear about therapy and try to raise their children based in part on what some television psychologist has said. Given the ubiquity of psychological language, the concept of applying psychology to history and society becomes commonsensical. Thus, when the average person first hears the words "psycho" and "history" linked together, the question is: What is it? Then, the usual answer is: "Oh, that makes perfect sense. What a good idea!"

The spread of psychological knowledge can be illustrated by Richard H. Thaler earning a 1977 Nobel Prize in Economics for applying psychology to "economic decision-making." *Clio's Psyche* has published articles on psychoeconomics, including a 2009 special issue on the subject. The rational man model of human behavior is increasingly being supplanted by a more sophisticated understanding of human motivation based on the pioneering work of psychoanalysts, psychohistorians, and behavioral scientists. Psychological approaches to

knowledge in many disciplines are currently being stimulated by continuing discoveries in neuroscience, which validate much of the theoretical work of Freud and others. The endeavors of Nobel Prize-winning neuroscientist Eric Kandel are a good illustration of this. Naturally, it takes time for practitioners in the field to catch up with the latest cutting edge work.

As of this moment, despite many struggles, psychohistory may not have gained respectability in all but a few history and psychology departments at major universities, but in other departments and medical schools there have been a fair number of contributors. Today, clinicians of various backgrounds, and especially psychoanalysts, form the largest group attending the meetings of the International Psychohistorical Association (IPA), the Association for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society (APCS), and the Psychohistory Forum. Whatever their background or location, those doing psychohistory and political psychology have provided invaluable insights and methodologies for biographers, scholars generally, and the general public to use. Serious biographers use our insights, sometimes denouncing Freud and psychohistory in the process. Thus they have their cake and eat it too. As the Pulitzer Prize-winning best-selling historian Barbara Tuchman wrote in 1975, “All good history is psychohistory.” Colleagues who read this volume will see how it showcases the work of the pioneers of psychohistory and my half-century in fostering the field as a midwife of psychohistorical knowledge and a scholar in my own right.

My role is as an advocate, creator, editor, historian, organizer, and researcher of psychohistory. I discovered psychoanalysis and psychohistory in the 1960s while teaching at Temple University in Philadelphia and immediately read all of the studies I could find. In 1971 I became a founding faculty member of Ramapo College, a well-respected public liberal arts institution in northern New Jersey, and I started teaching psychohistory. I became affiliated with the Institute for Psychohistory in 1975, where the following year I co-founded and ran its Saturday Workshop Seminars. In that year I also attended the first national psychohistorical conference and the International Psychohistorical Association, of which I became an officer and would go on to hold most offices, including its presidency. In 1982 I founded the Psychohistory Forum, which holds Saturday Seminars in Manhattan and at international conferences. As an organizer of meetings, I have always been open to all different approaches to psychohistory. My editorial service has been on *The Journal of Psychohistory* and as founder and editor-in-chief of *Clio's Psyche*, which I created in 1994. *Clio* has had a double-blind refereeing system for more than two decades, an aspect of the journal of which I'm very proud. In 1976 I began my career as a presidential political psychologist and psychobiographer; I have made presentations on every president since Ford, and I have written forty-three related articles and chapters of books, including three on Donald J. Trump. The largest number of my hundreds of other publications have been on the contributions and lives of my colleagues, dreams, historical methodology, psychobiography, and teaching psychohistory. For over two decades I have been specifically researching this book, which is structured as follows.

The organization of *The Making of Psychohistory* is partly chronological and mostly topical. Professor Rudolph Binion's poem “Psychohistory” was written initially for the compendium of the best articles in *Clio's Psyche*—it does a good job succinctly explaining in 100 words what psychohistory is about. In this introduction, my goal is to explain the purpose of this volume and to give you a sense of who psychohistorians are and what we do. Below I will explain it chapter by chapter.

“My Exuberant Journey” represents my introduction to psychoanalysis and psychohistory so the reader can understand how and why I fell in love with psychological history that I had not

been taught while earning a doctoral degree in modern European history. I move on to “The Early History of Psychohistory” to help the reader understand that this method of understanding did not begin with the creation of organized groups beginning in 1966 and blossoming in the 1970s, but rather has a history that extends for more than a century. In “Resistance and Perseverance,” I spell out the decision made by academic history and psychology departments to reject a method of inquiry that was capturing the imagination of so many young and some not so young scholars, and then go on to point out the perseverance of determined and talented colleagues in creating a vast literature.

Next, in “Comparing the Early Freudian and Psychohistorical Movements,” I describe and explain the early psychohistory done in the Freud circle and in the more than fifty years before the creation of specific psychohistorical and psychological institutions. There is considerable comparison in this chapter of the two leaders who started organizations with the initials IPA: Sigmund Freud and Lloyd deMause. The founder of *The Journal of Psychohistory* is included not because he is the best known and respected of the modern proponents of psychohistory, but because he is its most vocal advocate and institution builder, and the person I know best.

Our lives start in childhood and perhaps the most important thing that psychohistory did for historians was to emphasize the importance of early experiences. Consequently, I move on to “A Psychohistorian’s Approach to Childhood and Childrearing.” In choosing outstanding contributors to the field, I have focused on colleagues who have been specific advocates of psychohistory, even though one of them preferred the term “psychological history.” Consequently, my next two chapters are on Lifton, deMause, Volkan, Gay, Loewenberg, and Binion, all of whom I’ve had the opportunity to meet and work with.

As a college professor I love teaching and my students, which explains the placement of the next chapter, “My Journey as a Psychohistorical Teacher.” Readers should note that throughout the book I have interspersed the personal with the professional as a way of both telling my story and of humanizing a field that would be a mistake to present abstractly. After all, the essence of psychohistory is that we have brought real, live, complex, flesh-and-blood persons center stage into the historical arena while professional historians have been inclined to focus on broad movements and factors. We dare to probe irrationality in individuals and groups rather than simply declaring certain individuals to be crazy and groups to be consumed by unruly emotion.

In “My Role in Creating and Nurturing Postgraduate Psychohistorical Education,” I present my philosophy as a midwife of psychohistorical knowledge as an organizer and editor. Although I started graduate school in the Department of Political Science at Rutgers University, I never expected that I would become a student of the presidential candidates and presidents. That this happened is but one of the many extraordinary opportunities I’ve had as a psychohistorian working to understand my society and its leadership. This opportunity has created many predicaments, which I cover in “The Dilemmas of a Presidential Psychohistorian.” There’s no more powerful person in our contemporary world than the American president, which is one of the reasons I have devoted so much time and attention to the exhausting job of following our presidential aspirants and those who succeeded in the period from 1976 to the present.

In “Finding My Voice with Halpern, deMause, and Ullman,” I spell out my struggles in being powerfully influenced by three strong individuals. To me, it would not be fair to the very numerous colleagues I’ve worked with if I didn’t mention some of them, thus “Builders of Psychohistory.” Finally, in “Concluding Thoughts,” I provide some additional insights on the

field and my motivations for performing the roles I have. Of course, I also summarized some of my main points. My hope is that these introductory comments will help the reader have an understanding of the organization of the volume....

Chapter 2 – My Exuberant Journey [excerpt from pages 10-11]

As a young historian teaching at Temple University and as a graduate student writing my dissertation in the 1960s, I found psychoanalysis to be, like history, focused on origins and turning points. While historians tended to minimize the role of individuals, psychoanalysts are specifically concerned with them. As I devoured books on the unconscious and read all the psychobiographical studies of famous individuals available, I quickly became a psychological historian. My study, like that of many others drawn to the emerging field of psychohistory, was and is on childhood, collective fantasies, creativity, dreams, group dynamics, mechanisms of psychic defense (coping mechanisms), psychobiography, psychopolitics, psychoanthropology, and trauma.

Alexander and Juliette George's *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House: A Personality Study* (1956) inspired me because of its insights and the fact that it reserved the psychological concepts for the afterword. Inspired by the work of the Georges, psychoanalytic insight without pathologizing the subject or introducing technical terminology became my mantra. Erik Erikson's *Young Man Luther* (1958) thrilled me because it brought in the emotions and turning points in the life of the originator of the Protestant Reformation, although I had doubts as to just how good a historian the author was, as pointed out by Reformation scholars.

Robert Jay Lifton's much more factually based books, including *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* (1968), inspired me to learn by interviewing subjects as well as probing documents as I was taught to do in graduate school. Frank Manuel's *A Portrait of Sir Isaac Newton* (1968) excited me because it showed how a scientific genius could create a new paradigm and yet be obsessed by the old paradigm of Biblical studies. On the other hand, speculative volumes such as Abraham Bronson Feldman's *The Unconscious in History* (1959) made such broad, unsubstantiated generalizations based on theory rather than evidence that they left me cold and were skimmed rather than read.

My journey to psychohistory was based partly on accident, personal need, an intellectual movement, and a societal milieu. The accident was that I was teaching with a historian of ancient Rome named Sidney Halpern at the Ambler campus of Temple University who had incredible insights based on wide reading of the psychoanalytic literature, some analytic training, a profound sense of the role of the unconscious in human affairs, and, not least of all, his brilliance. The personal need was that I was facing crises in my marital and personal life that could benefit from therapy, although at the time I did not consciously know this. I only knew that I had writer's block on my dissertation and that my new friend Sid Halpern would listen as I spoke about my research and then tell me what he heard. Only then did my ideas seem to be worthy of writing down. He also suggested various psychoanalytic readings, which I devoured.

The societal movement was a veneration of Freud, Erikson, and psychoanalysis, with the latter glorified in some Hollywood movies. Finally, the intellectual movement was a growing literature in applied psychoanalysis and a sense that psychohistory might become the next "big thing" in history. The call to younger historians to apply psychoanalysis to history as "the next

assignment” by Harvard Professor William Langer in his 1957 Presidential Address to the American Historical Association seemed to be becoming a reality....

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