

Ukrainian Freud or Whence Ukraine in Psychoanalysis?

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Like most Ukrainians, I remember the exact time and moment when Russia dropped its first bombs on Kyiv. For me, it was an evening in February 2022, which was during the early hours in Ukraine. I watched the bombs on CNN, called and woke up my family in Kyiv (it was around 4 a.m. for them), listening with them for the first time to the explosions rocking Ukraine. But Russia's war against Ukraine formally began in 2014, after Ukrainians refused pro-Russian political control, and when Russia invaded both Crimea and Eastern Ukraine.

The most recent invasion has been especially sadistic, a term used by both Ukrainians and world-wide experts on human rights and animal right violations. Unarmed civilians, children and adults are killed, maimed, terrorized, tortured and raped, their possessions stolen, their lives destroyed, sending millions away from their homes. Moreover, Russians bomb almost exclusively the civilian targets, including schools, hospitals, theaters, museums, libraries, bridges, roads, zoos, farms, national parks ... everything. Russian military is destroying the environment, culture, people, nature and anything that has life. They destroy while declaring that they are on a "peace-keeping" mission to kill "Nazis" and to conduct a "special military operation" to supposedly "protect Russian speaking people" — a claim so preposterous for all of us who have been forcibly "Russified" and targeted by the Russian imperialism. I grew up in Kyiv where everything was Russian, where Ukrainians were minimized and mocked.

In the spring of 2022, my Ukrainian family members and friends barely escaped alive, while many of my family members and friends stayed in Ukraine for varied reasons. To see my home and my country destroyed — but also to see images of Bucha and Irpin, near where my family

lived and worked — was devastating. Mass graves with tortured bodies of Ukrainian civilians now fill every town that Russians occupied. Russian troops also left the country rigged with mines and explosives. Just a week ago, I read the news that in Kyiv region alone, explosive experts finished defusing 75 thousand (!) unexploded Russian devices. And for over a year Russians have been imprisoning Ukrainians in so-called “filtration” camps and then deporting them — millions of people, several hundred thousand of children taken from parents-- sent to unknown parts of Russia. This war is genocidal and terroristic in every sense of the word.

Much of the world has been horrified by this outright horrific war. Many people, nations, politicians, artists, athletes and activists have stood up with Ukraine and tirelessly tried to help end the war. Certainly, there were comments by Trump and Bannon about admiring far-right dictators like Putin. Leaders of many countries appear either fearful or beholden to Russia because of its policies of military, political, and energy terrorism. The United Nations have been ineffectual, using language of “conflict between” rather than “war against Ukraine” while maintaining Russian leadership roles in UN units like the UNICEF (Russia held UNICEF leadership role while Russia bombed Ukrainian schools and birthing centers).

My experiences with the psychoanalytic community’s response to this war also has been mixed. I think I expected that psychoanalysts, who know what violence and torture does to human life — many of whom also understand the impact of political violence, wars, genocides and oppression — would be the first to say no to war and Russian violence. I certainly felt support and solidarity in some circles and groups, often connected to my friends and colleagues, including at IFPE. There were organizational statements issued “against the war” and many discussions were held about general topics of “totalitarianism.” Several of my amazing

psychoanalytic colleagues were central in organizing key sanctions and strong responses to aggression.

However, in psychoanalytic circles, I discovered other discussions about how Ukrainians had it “good” because they “are white,” even as news of their murders, tortures, deportations and trafficking emerged in the media. I was sent pro-Russian propaganda on psychoanalytic list serves, including the notion that Ukraine “deserved” being attacked because it “asked for NATO.” I received personal notes from individuals informing me they funded pro-Russian “Marxist” groups or to invite me to pro-Russian “peace” events. I was told (by an editor of a supposedly progressive psychoanalytic online journal) that Ukraine had no history before the USSR, directly citing Putin’s anti-historic propaganda. I was “informed” that on one hand, Ukrainian language is merely a dialect of Russian, while at the same time that Ukrainians were supposedly using language and culture a “Russophilic” weapon against “Russian speaking minorities.”

Implied in many comments has been the notion that Ukrainians must have somehow “asked” to be attacked and maybe indeed are “Nazis.” The amount of Kremlin propaganda in books, articles, websites, Wikipedia and certainly here on list serves about Ukraine, has been eye-opening, although I assumed that psychoanalysts would not fall prey to it. The historical truth seems to matter little when people spout propaganda that supports their version of history or their chosen ideological stance.

Here I want to bring forward the notion of Ukrainian Freud. Ukrainian Freud? I was listening to a Ukrainian charity event, held in Western Europe, where in addition to pictures of beautiful areas of Ukraine before they were destroyed, the event leaders recounted famous people of Ukrainian descent, both. past and present: Stephen Spielberg, Dustin Hoffman, Andy Warhol,

Mila Kunis, Serge Lifar, Kazimir Malevich and so on. And then I heard the familiar name: “Sigmund Freud, Father of Psychology.” Ukrainian Freud? Living in Russophilic, Westernized and dismissive-of-Ukraine contexts, both in the USSR and then in the U.S., I barely heard that Freud’s family was from Eastern Europe let alone from Ukraine.

I discovered, however, that numerous efforts have been made to Russify Freud and to Russify psychoanalysis. A book by Rice (2017), entitled *Freud and Russia*, extensively discussed the “Russian origins” of Freud and his work with the “Russians.” Moreover, Rice’s published family tree of Freud’s family, going back generations to XVI c., with an exception of one small family line on Freud’s paternal side from Lithuania, were presented as “Russian.” In reality, every one of these locations were not Russian but Ukrainian: Western Ukraine, Southern Ukraine, Central Ukraine. None of Freud’s ancestors were from Russia proper but from the Russian Empire where Ukrainian and other groups fought against the occupation for centuries (Plokyh, 2021). Historian of world empires, including Russia, Sabol (2017) summarized that since origination of “Russia’s expansion... in fifteenth century” the country not only “colonized Ukraine, Poland, Finland, the Baltics, Siberia, Alaska, the Caucasus, and central Asia” but also acquired numerous territories through military conflicts with “Turks, Tatars, Chinese, Kazakhs, Bashkirs, Turkmen, Ossetians, and dozens of other peoples” (p. 4).

A long-standing Russophilic policy has been to mislabel “Russian,” and that Russians actively push to appropriate and promote themselves by erasing others — not just Ukraine but varied indigenous groups and nations it colonized. Moreover, Americans, with Russia’s aid, collapsed all the nations not just into the “Russian” empire but also the USSR (i.e., 15 supposedly equal Soviet republics) into just Russia. Among psychoanalysts, Rice (2017) is not the only scholar who is guilty of poor historical and cultural work, using “Russia” for decidedly

non-Russian locations: Ukraine is entirely absent in his entire work. So-called “Russian psychoanalysis” always includes key analysts like Wulff from Odesa or famous patients like the “Wolf-man” (i.e., Sergiy Pankeev, who also was from Odesa and who was raised speaking Ukrainian in a family of anti-tzarist radicals).

Moreover, Ukraine is present but only as the negative other. If the discussion turns to Jewish pogroms, then these are located in Ukraine. Whereas psychoanalysis in Odesa was “Russian,” but Jewish pogroms in Odesa were Ukrainian. For example, in a contribution on “Russian psychoanalysis,” called *Eros of the Impossible* by the Russian historian of psychoanalysis, Etkind (1999) calls everything Russian, including Russian psychoanalysis in Zhytomyr, until ... it is a story of pogrom, then the same Zhytomyr became Ukrainian. Certainly, Ukraine has had its own problems with anti-Semitism (but this process of discharging violence into Ukraine is what Russia has used to justify its violence).

Americans and Westerners know little about Ukraine’s history or its history in relation to Jewish communities, although they certainly hold onto misinformation, apparently common in psychoanalytic contributions. Among the significant events that served as background for pogroms was the Imperial Russian Pale of Settlement (Rowland, 1986; Mitchell, 2018). The Pale of Settlement was a formal policy, produced in XVII century and militarily enforced until end of the Russian empire, which forbid all but small minority of supposedly superior “good” Jews to live in Russia (proper) or relocating “beyond the Pale” (Plokhy, 2021; Rowland, 1986; Mitchell, 2018). Millions of Jews were forcibly relocated primarily into Ukrainian (as well as small sections of Poland, Moldova, Belorussia), and any perceived Jewish rebellions or threats to Moscow or St. Petersburg’s powers Jews were violently attacked by Russian military groups (Mitchell, 2018). Jews, forcibly moved and continually attacked in these Russian controlled

empiric territories, until late XIX century were surrounded by Ukrainians who were living enslaved to Russian owners. Jews were permitted to maintain their religious, cultural, linguistic and business practices, in contrast to Ukrainians, who were formally forbidden to write, teach or translate in Ukrainian language (Plokhly, 2021; Snyder, 2010). For instance, Horowitz (2021), in discussing the history of Russian-Ukrainian-Jewish experiences, notes that the discussion is marked by “self-contradiction” of this history as exclusively “Russian” and “Ukrainians are Russians” while using a narrative that “inevitably blames Ukrainians for violence against Jews” (p. 368). Citing a XVIII century Jewish historian Galant, Horowitz (2021) is among few scholars who recognized that Russian empiric policies of parallel oppressions toward Ukrainians and Jews, stressed that after the enforcement of Pale laws, Jews “found themselves... between a despotic [Russian] nobility, ignorant and without borders in passions and caprice, and the [Ukrainian] plebians, who are persecuted, forgotten, tortured and left to the whims of chance” (p. 368).

For instance, in his *Diary of a Writer*, Dostoyevsky (1919), a Russophile and anti-Semite (among other problematic ideologies), mocks Jewish individuals who decry the fact that “the Jew... has been restricted in the free section of the place of residence,” but declared that they should not be complaining about them because “twenty-three millions of the ‘toiling mass’ [predominately enslaved and indentured Ukrainians “in the Western border region and in the South”] have been enduring serfdom, which [is] of course, more troublesome than “the selection of the place of residence” (p. 641). Then Dostoyevsky proclaimed that in contrast to Russian “abolished landowners ... even though they did strongly exploit men, nevertheless endeavored — perhaps in their own interest — not to ruin the peasants in order to prevent the exhaustion of labor. ... [T]he Jew is not concerned about the exhaustion of ... labor; he grabs what’s his, and

off he goes” (p. 641). Dostoyevsky argued vociferously that “in the Russian there is no preconceived hatred of the Jews” while routinely comparing them to suffering of the [Ukrainian] “farmers.” He then insisted that, if the number of Jews and Russians were reversed and Jews outnumbered Russians,

Would they convert the Russians and how would they treat them? Would they permit them to acquire equal rights? Would they permit them to worship freely in their lands? Wouldn't they convert them into slaves? Worse than that: wouldn't they [Jews] skin them [Russians] altogether? Wouldn't they slaughter them to the last man, to the point of complete extermination, as they used to do with the alien peoples in ancient times, during their ancient history? (p. 645)

Freud (1928), who read this *Diary* before writing his essay, “Dostoyevsky and Parricide,” was accurate in highlighting that Dostoyevsky, rather than “becoming a teacher and liberator of humanity made himself one with the gaolers” and that “the future of human civilization will have little to thank him for” (p. 4553).

In contrast to Dostoyevsky and other similar voices of the “great Russian literature” that openly promoted Russia’s right to colonize and vilify groups (e.g., Pushkin, Solzhenitsyn), Western and psychoanalytic readers could turn to one of the truly great poets and writers — the symbol of Ukrainian liberation and independence from XIX c. — Taras Shevchenko. Shevchenko was a remarkable artist (e.g., his works are found in many top world museums), poet, activist and a Ukrainian liberation leader. He was born enslaved to a Russian owner in 1814, and died in exile/deportation in Russia in 1861, at age 47, just a few months before the Russian emancipation proclamation (i.e., end of enslavement of Ukrainians). His crime was writing and teaching in Ukrainian and promoting Ukrainian liberation from Russian occupation. Shevchenko continues to be one of the most recognized figures in Ukrainian history and present-day cultural psychic awareness. Every Ukrainian town has streets and monuments to him. The

main Ukrainian university is named for him. His image is on the currency His poetry is in many current Ukrainian anti-war pop songs and is graffitied in Russian-occupied territories. As late as 1980s, Soviet Ukrainians read much of his work via censored versions, or even secretly embroidered into towels. During the Soviet regime, merely appearing near Shevchenko's monument on March 9th (the day commemorating his 1861 death in Russian exile) meant that you could be sent to a Russian gulag — all the way through the early 1990s.

Shevchenko was an inspiration to numerous people and causes worldwide, including to radical Yiddish translators and to the U.S. Civil Rights movement. One of the most remarkable historical facts — and entire conferences were dedicated to this — was his intensely close friendship with the first Black Shakespearean actor, Ira Aldridge. Two men, who shared no language, were described as profoundly connected about their experiences of enslavement, oppression and resistance through visual arts and music.

Shevchenko's remarkable poem, the *Caucasus* (1845), gives voice to his and fellow Ukrainians' experiences of Russian occupation, violence and their justifications, which occurred over 150 years ago:

*[Russian occupiers say]: We're civilized! And we set forth
To enlighten others,
To make them see the sun of truth....
Our blind, simple brothers!!
We'll show you everything! If but
Yourselves to us you'll yield.
The grimmest prisons how to build,
How shackles forge of steel,
And how to wear them!...
All [Russian] emperors could drink their fill,
In widows' tears alone they could
Be drowned together with their seed!
The sweetheart's tears, in secret shed!
Unsolaceable mothers' tears!
The heavy tears of fathers hoary!*

*Not streams, but veritable seas...
Of blazing tears!
O damned by God, O [Russian] hypocrites,
O sacrilegious ghouls!
Not for your brother's soul you care,
But for your brother's hide!...
And off your brother's back you tear
Rich furs for daughter's pride.
A dowry for your bastard child,
And slippers for your spouse.
And for yourself, things that your wife
Won't even know about!...
[Russian Orthodox] Temples and chapels, icons and shrines,
And candlesticks, and myrrh incense.
And genuflection, countless times
Before Thy image, giving thanks
For war and loot and rape and blood,-
To bless the fratricide they beg Thee,
Then gifts of stolen goods they bring Thee,
From gutted homes part of the loot!...*

Written in exile almost two centuries ago, Shevchenko calls to Ukrainians with words that these days appear as graffiti in Russia-occupied territories:

*Keep fighting — you are sure to win!
God helps you in your fight!
For truth and freedom march with you,
And right is on your side!*

Prohibiting Shevchenko was not only an obsession of the tsars and Russo-Soviet leaders. It was common in Russian, pro-Soviet psychoanalysis that took up the Russian imperialist cause of discrediting him. For example, Moscow-based psychoanalyst Haletsky (1926), over 65 years after Shevchenko's death, discussed the Russian obsession with explaining Shevchenko and published a lengthy contribution on Shevchenko entitled, *Psychoanalysis of Shevchenko's Personality and Creative Contributions*. In it, he claimed that Shevchenko was not really interested in Ukrainian liberation but used his supposed "love" for Ukraine as a replacement for the early loss of his mother and his supposed problems with romantic attachments:

All of the frustrations of his introverted feelings Sh. [Shevchenko] displaced on Ukraine, in the same manner as he expresses these toward his female objects of desire. Ukraine, thus, becomes for Sh. a living presence. He loves it [Ukraine] with the same tenderness and devotion as the feeling he wishes to pour into it all of his frustrated unrealized longings. Sh. adores Ukraine in the same undifferentiated way as if it were a “mother object” or as an unattainable young woman, whom he couldn’t obtain over his entire lifespan. In Sh.’s soul, mother and Ukraine became one and the same; in relation to both, Sh.’s soul responds affectively as if they are identical. (p. 640).

Shevchenko is absent in the West. Like Ukraine and Ukrainian culture, he is erased or Russified.

Certainly, slavery and later genocide against Ukrainians by the Russo-Soviets are absent from historical accounts or psychoanalytic texts. In fact, I suggest that many Western works that mention Ukraine mention no history of Russian genocides, occupation or violence toward Ukraine. The Holodomor, or Murder-by-Starvation – a genocide of Ukrainians perpetrated by Russo-Soviet state under Stalin in 1932-1933, which is responsible for deaths of estimated five to ten million Ukrainians, is almost never noted (Applebaum, 2016; Snyder, 2010). There are pictures, witness accounts, some accounts of journalists who covered these events (who were then murdered by the Soviets), and extensive records of the Soviets themselves. For example, in the summer of 1933, in the land that is called the “breadbasket of the world,” nearly 28 thousand (28,000!) Ukrainians a day were dying from forced starvation.

My ancestors were among those who were starved. My great-grandfather was sent to the infamous Solovki Gulags where he was tortured and executed. I know that in the lives of most Ukrainians these mass traumas and generational forms of violence are common. This war to erase Ukraine and Ukrainians is one among many in centuries of such Russian violence.

According to legal scholar Rafael Lemkin (1953), the progenitor of the term “genocide” who was active during the Nürnberg trials, Soviet genocide against Ukrainians was definitively a purposeful genocide by Russia against Ukraine. Russia, past and present, has worked hard to

have it erased and denied (Applebaum, 2016; Snyder, 2010). People in the West certainly knew about it – Orwell (author of the *Animal Farm* and the 1984) in his very public essays decried and fought against Soviet oppression in 1930s and 40s, specifically naming the starvation. Journalist Gareth Jones, before he was kidnapped and murdered by Soviet NKVD, tried to publish his direct witness accounts in the U.S. and Europe (a film version of this history is shown in the 2019 film *Mr. Jones*). Other intellectuals who identified with Stalinism, like W.E.B. Du Bois (1953) praised Stalin as a “great man” who protected the “revolution” by murdering “rural bloodsuckers” (online). The Holodomor and mass starvation, the Gulags, deportations, and other Soviet atrocities were known in the West. Yet the silencing of this mass trauma and its repetition in this and other aggressions of Russian against Ukraine are perpetuated.

Varied forms of negative social memory have been described by psychoanalytic scholars, specifically in relation to perpetrators, who engage in minimizing and justifying acts of social violence and mass trauma such as the Holocaust (Bohleber, 2007; Laub & Lee, 2001). Psychoanalytic scholars have used Russia’s denials of Stalinist terrors, stressing collective defensive social impulses that lead to rationalizations and disavowal of perpetrator guilt, result in cultural frameworks that lead to destructive political realities (Bohleber, 2007). Bohleber highlighted that various defensive forms of unconscious repudiation of historic guilt in perpetuating social violence leads to problematic, culture-wide, transgenerational issues. These result in not just avoidance of responsibility but possibly repetition compulsion in future generations to reidentify with the aggressor. Orwell (1942) stressed that leftist intellectuals and those identified with movements such as pacifism during wars of aggression and genocide are psychologically drawn to sadism and totalitarianism. In his words in such cases, “pacifism is fascist.”

Laub & Lee (2001), just like Bohleber (2007), note that massive psychic social traumas evoke varied aspects of death instinct in ways that impact individual and social forms of knowing, memory, repression, and projections. Laub & Lee (2001), writing about the post-war creations of “good” Nazi images in relation to denial of both direct and indirect forms of perpetration, specifically relies on active distortions of history and misrepresentations (e.g., “good” Germans reconstructed as “Hitler’s victims”). “Good” Russians, past and present, is a common strategy in the promotion of Russophilic attitudes that deny that Russia, marked by culturally centered narratives of their messianic specialness coupled with special victimhood, is engaged in openly justifying atrocities (and has been for centuries and more recently in Chechnya, Georgia, Syria).

The silencing and minimization of horrors occurring in Ukraine also may play a role in processes that maintain or justify mass trauma. In relation to stories of survivors of atrocities themselves, specifically survivors of the Holocaust, Danieli (1984) discussed that silencing of such traumatic terrors, experienced by survivors and their subsequent generations, resulted in further perpetuation of trauma. She especially stressed that the responsibility for silencing should also be placed within the psychoanalytic field, where analysts’ counter-transferential reactions to massive trauma may lead toward prolonging historical denials. Living with the horrors of wars and genocides is profoundly difficult. I think of the early analysts who survived their own and their patients’ experiences of massive traumatic events, including the genocides and wars. In *Civilization and its Discontents* Freud (1935), writing about the anti-Semitic forms of violence throughout history, noted that when faced with experiences that require people “to feel our way into” atrocities, and when faced with “the most extreme possibility of suffering,” the most formidable defensive reactions arise in forms of prohibition of knowing, feeling or speaking

about historic and present day social violence (p. 89). Such patterns may be occurring in relation to witnessing atrocities in Ukraine.

Nevertheless, working to support individual and shared (global) responses against violence and its varied psychic assaults should seemingly be the heart of psychoanalysis. Even our short memory of this year, plus the long experience of one of the most violent military invasions to date in Ukraine, should be recovered and restored toward psychic and social action. Ukraine, as I argued here, has historically been a place of a massive memory gap as well. Freud (1914), in his writings on memory that are marked by repression and displacements, noted the importance of remembering and working through “gaps in memory” (p. 148) toward reconstruction of personal historical truth. In this vein, there are gaps in memory about Ukraine in psychoanalysis toward varied forms of “retroactive resignifications” and “retroactive attribution of new meaning” (Bohleber, 2007, p. 331), including in cultural and professional contexts.

Few efforts to call out Russo-Soviet violence toward Ukrainians have occurred in the past: British psychoanalyst Holder (1977) urged the international psychoanalytic and psychiatric communities to refuse to accept Soviet psychiatrists because they used extreme psychiatric torture on political prisoners — especially, she stressed, on the “Ukrainian nationalists.” Her review of their actions is described:

Much of this “treatment” is brutal; untrained guards are allowed to use physical violence. It also includes the widespread use of psychiatric drugs for non-medical purposes on healthy people. Sulfazin, for example, is rarely used in psychiatric practice in the West because of the extreme pain it causes. It induces a raging fever and leaves the patient screaming in agony for twenty-four hours. ... Then there is Aminazin, a toxic derivative of Largactyl which produces exaggerated muscular effects. A patient is injected with this and then confined to a wire cage one meter square and too small to stand up in and left to thrash about until

unconscious. The use of other depressant drugs such as Haloperidol and Trifluazine is also widespread. ... Many ex-inmates assert categorically that these drugs are deliberately administered as a means of punishing them and, by destroying their intellectual capacity, as a means of removing their ability to hold dissident opinions. (Holder, 1977, p. 109)

Instead of standing up to this abuse, Holder (1977) noted that, just as European psychoanalysis ingratiated itself with Nazism, global psychoanalysts routinely looked away from Russo-Soviet psychiatric violence toward Ukrainians and other political dissidents.

Outside of psychoanalysis, similar efforts were made by social critics, including George Orwell. Orwell's (1947) *Animal Farm* was translated into Ukrainian, with a full introduction dedicated to more than 200,000 Ukrainian (anti-Russo-Soviet) political refugees who lived in displaced-person tent camps in Europe after World War II. In this introduction, Orwell (1947) stressed that he viewed himself as a socialist and was active in radical social causes, but that the communist-based Soviet violence was "totalitarian propaganda" that hid its horrors behind their communist rhetoric. He wondered why the "common British" person, including British progressive intellectuals, chose to ignore Soviet atrocities:

The [British] man in the street has no real understanding of things like concentration camps, mass deportations, arrests without trial, press censorship, etc. Everything he reads about a country like the USSR is automatically translated into English terms, and he quite innocently accepts the lies of totalitarian propaganda. (online)

It is my hope that psychoanalysis today rejects these varied forms of propaganda, and challenges the gaps in historical memory about Ukraine so that the profession and its professionals re-commit to openly, publicly and fully standing together against the varied forms of violence, including a terrible war against Ukraine going on now.

Meanwhile, Ukrainians are fighting to survive. They are fighting to live in their own homes on their own land, to choose their own government, to hold onto their own values, to speak their own language, to have a free press and, most of all, to live free from occupation, torture and violence. They are fighting for their right to just be alive! Please support them.

Thank you! Dyakyu! Slava Ukraini!

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