



Choosing to Live, Choosing to Dream,  
Choosing to Survive

War and Peace in Ukraine

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### **Résumé**

Une lettre de Daria Dibrova, jeune institutrice confrontée à la guerre à Odessa suivie d'une lecture de la lettre à la lumière de l'histoire de l'Ukraine et de la clinique des traumatismes de guerre.

### **Abstract**

A letter from Daria Dibrova, a young schoolteacher confronted with war in Odessa, followed by a reading of her letter in the light of Ukrainian history and the clinic of war trauma.

**Mot-clés :** Traumatismes, Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud, Sigmund Freud, Guerre, Psychanalyse

**Keywords:** Trauma, Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud, Ukraine, War, Psychoanalysis

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# Choosing to Live, Choosing to Dream, Choosing to Survive

Carla Penna      Daria Dibrova

## Choosing to live

*Letter by Daria Dibrova, Ukrainian schoolteacher living in Odessa*

One frosty morning in January 2022 in Odessa I woke up with my heart full of indescribable feelings.

I felt tenderness and gratitude for everything I had, for the uniqueness of each moment and for the happy life I had been given. Our life was the best it could be : we were hard-workers making plans for our future. Nobody truly believed in the threat of war.

But in just one month, everything changed. I can still hear my mother speaking on the phone and informing us on one of the most terrifying things a person can ever hear : “the war has begun...”

Pain doesn't knock at the door of your heart before entering. It smashes it open and destroys what you have been building for years. That's the way of the war.

Some time after, we heard the first bomb explode. I felt powerless, it was like I was going insane. What did it mean for our future? Nonetheless we couldn't afford to give in to fury; duty called. As a primary school teacher, I learned how to use bomb shelters at school, how to protect children during an attack, and how to provide first aid. Schools had been closed, queues for gas stations were kilometers long, and supermarket lines were out of hand. We started stockpiling food and water to prevent shortages. My boyfriend

and I were living on the 17<sup>th</sup> floor of our building, pretty far from the safest place to be when bombs were launched over your heads!

Replaying in my head were the sounds of air alerts, of explosions, the never-ending clatter of luggages of people fleeing the city.

We felt uncertain, helpless, unsafe, and extremely resentful. Yet, we decided to stay in Odessa, to be with our family for as long as possible. After a week, we gathered our thoughts and got back to work. Those who had stayed in the city wanted to live, to work, to keep on going about their daily life. And so we did. Odessa wasn't a battleground, it served as a shelter for those who were forced to leave their city behind.

For every child I knew, school was a source of concern, but that was until that fatal morning of February 24<sup>th</sup>. Soon enough, what used to be an inconvenience became a safe place, a source of hope, defying the horror of the war.

My pupils were as stressed as I was, the war had made them mature too fast, they had become kids with adult eyes. But they still needed support and stability. We were all reminded of Covid-19, those terrible times that had taught us how important real life communication was. Soon, it became evident that schools needed to re-open, and many were given the go-ahead as long as they were equipped with a bomb shelter.

We never would have thought that life could go on, yet here we are after a year of war : working with what we have, helping each other as much as we can, and never losing hope for the future. In spite of everything, I have never felt so alive, and I deeply believe that love reigns above all.

Indeed, in April 2023, I got married to my longtime boyfriend. Both our families were incredibly happy to be reunited for this event, to witness the triumph of love against war. On this special day I will forever remember all the guests smiling, laughing, crying with joy –we were all feeling happy, invincible. We were the masters of our own destiny.

No matter what the future holds, I think the most important thing for us right now is to live this life, to hold our ground, here in Ukraine, the place where we belong.

## Choosing to dream, choosing to survive

*Analysis of the letter by Carla Penna, psychoanalyst and group analyst*

To Daria and those who choose to live in peace.

When I accepted the invitation to comment on Daria Dibrova's letter, I asked myself how to contribute to what is happening in the Russia-Ukraine war. How could I add something new that might interest Sens public readers? Initially, I thought I could share reflections on what I have been studying in the last twenty years and experienced in workshops in the Serbian Republic about traumatic experiences in groups and communities affected by the war of dissolution of the former Yugoslavia.

I have at my disposal literature on history, psychoanalysis, group analysis, philosophy, sociology and critical theory exploring themes such as social trauma (Danieli, Yael 1998; Bohleber 2010; 2022), psychic transmissions of trauma (Abraham et Torok 1994; Bar-On, Dan, Ostrovsky, Tal, et Fromer, Dafna 1998; Pollak 1990; Felman et Laub, Dori 1992; Gerhard 2007; Frosh 2013), traumatic experience in the unconscious life of groups (Hopper 2003), social unconscious (Hopper et Weinberg 2011; 2016; 2017), inability to mourn (Mitscherlich et Mitscherlich 1975; Penna 2015), collective memory (Pollak 1989; Assmann, Aleida 2011; Figlio 2017; Penna, Carla 2020), psychoanalysis and international relations (Volkan 1997; 2004; 2006; Volkan, Vamik D. 2007; Volkan, Vamik D. 2013), politics of identity (Fukuyama 2018), nationalism, leadership (Kernberg 2020) as well as my own book on the history of the study of crowds, masses and large groups (2023). In addition, when the war began, the books of the American historian, Timothy Snyder (2010; 2018), an expert on Eastern Europe, helped me to understand some of the background of the conflict. Thus, it seems that I was prepared for the task.

However, when I received Daria's letter, intellectual knowledge seemed meaningless in the face of Daria's testimony. The sincere letter from the young woman who lives in Odesa – with just one “s” according to the Ukrainian spelling – filled my heart and my imagination. Daria doesn't seem interested in academic rants, politic-economic disputes, theories or speculations about Putin's motivations for invading Ukraine. Daria personifies (Hopper 2003) people of the whole world. Daria wants to live, love and work as a teacher with her students. Her wishes seem too thrifty to mention, however, what

Daria reminds us of what Freud defined long ago in (1914) as the essence of human nature – “Lieben und Arbeiten” (“Love and Work”). Love keeps us alive and invested in relationships with others. Work confers us a space in social life, allowing every single person to create and transform the world. Unfortunately, what seems so simple is a sophisticated achievement, especially in the times we live in.

History reveals that the twentieth century has left a legacy of great wars, totalitarian regimes and atrocities that bequeathed to the twenty-first century not only a new world map that redistributed Europe, but new countries following the reconfiguration of borders. Today, neoliberalism and increasing socioeconomic problems and ecological concerns have become an undeniable reality. Associated with the emergence of ethnic conflicts, neo-ideologies, fundamentalism, terrorism, racism, unemployment, and massive and forced emigration, this reality has been a source of global concern. Moreover, recently in the political scene, the resurgence of right-wing politics and populist nationalism in association with national identities left no doubt that in the fragmented and polarized social world, democratic leadership is being challenged by authoritarian leadership (Penna 2023). Indeed, and almost unexpectedly, after the spreading of World War II anxiety – for fear of the return of authoritarianism – and the strong mobilization of people for democratic causes, in the current political arena, fundamentalist thinking and “states of exception” (Agamben 2005) are again challenging the locus of human beings.

The debate also points to the transgenerational psychic transmission of traumas the populations experienced during the twentieth-century struggles. Psychoanalysis and group analysis have revealed that the psychic transmission of traumatic experience is difficult to work through/mourn, generating a cycle of repetition and enactments that remain present in the unconscious life of persons, groups and their particular social systems (Hopper 2003). In that respect, enactments of unmourned losses and non-symbolized traumatic experiences are leading persons, groups, and social systems to reproduce regression, pain, and violence at smaller or larger scales. Therefore, facing the unknown and haunted by twentieth-century unmourned traumatic experiences we see the Russian-Ukrainian war unfolding, a disconcerting and frightening reality for contemporary crowds.

Odessa/Odesa is the third most important city in Ukraine. It is a multiethnic cultural center and is the major seaport and transportation hub located in

the southwest of the country, on the northwestern shore of the Black Sea. In 2023, its historic city centre was declared by UNESCO World Heritage Committee, as a World Heritage Site, today in danger due to the war and the bombings of several buildings across the city. Odessa's/Odesa's history goes back to classical antiquity as a Greek settlement. The first registered mention of the Slavic settlement port of Kotsiubijiv which was part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, dates back to 1415. The region and the port became part of the Ottoman Empire in 1529, under the name Hacibey, remaining connected to it until the Ottoman defeat in the Russo-Turkish War (1787-1792). In 1794, Catherine the Great found the city of Odesa. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Odesa was the fourth-largest city in the Russian Empire. The strategic location of the town, made Odesa from 1819 to 1858, a free port, as well as a naval base during the Soviet Period. Today, Odesa ports host a significant major transport hub integrating with railways connected to Russia and other European networks by strategic pipelines (Herlihy, Patricia 1995 ; Richardson, Tanya 2008 ; Figes, Orlando 2011).

The fragment of Odessa/Odesa's history points to its political-economic importance, however, it also displays how the city and certainly other important regions in contemporary Ukraine, were throughout history, controlled and manipulated by Empires and powerful interests. The brief reflection of centuries of history and disputes that never ceased to occur in Ukrainian lands reminds me of Walter Benjamin –who inspired by Paul Klee's drawing *Angelus Novus* reflected on the Concept of History.

There is a painting by Klee called “Angelus Novus” depicting an angel contemplating and fixating on an object, slowly moving away from it. His eyes are opened wide, his mouth hangs open and his wings are outstretched. This is exactly how the Angel of History must look. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it at his feet. Much as he would like to pause for a moment, to awaken the dead and piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Heaven, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which

he turns his back, while the heap of rubble in front grows sky-high.  
What we call progress is this storm. (1969)

Especially in the last decades through the huge technological development achieved by humankind, we became used to the idea of History as ceaseless progress pointing towards the future. However, Benjamin's allegory about the Angel of History connects us to the ruins and fragments of an almost forgotten chain of past events that we name History. Benjamin reminds us – in our blindness regarding the current psychosocial suffering (Penna 2023) and our “omnipotent confidence” (Hinshelwood et al. 2020, 13) in the progress – that history is a “pile of rubble” from a single and continuous catastrophe.

In this sense and mirroring the Russian-Ukrainian war is impossible to deny Benjamin's words regarding the catastrophe that the conflict poses to both sides. The omnipotently imagined development for the twenty-first century will need to pay attention to war destruction and to the 20 million people who have left Ukraine to seek refuge in other countries. Nearly 8 million refugees are harboured in neighbouring countries and across Europe. In addition, estimated 6 million people remain internally displaced people in Ukraine. Approximately 17.6 million people will require humanitarian assistance in 2023.

The unimaginable number of refugees and displaced people, including millions of children reminds us of Daria's profession as a school teacher. I wonder where is Daria now? Where are her students? Are they still attending school? However, the damage warfare conflicts inflict on persons and their social tissue, as well as the long-term traumatic consequences for populations, is immense. Human rights violations imply severe attacks on humanness, leading to a devastating experience of dehumanisation with profound effects on the psyche. Research finds higher levels of post-traumatic conditions in refugee populations, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety disorders, depression, somatic (bodily pain) and psychotic disorders (Varvin 2021). The traumatizing experiences of refugees may also disturb personality and relational functions, as well as affect and somatic regulation. They interfere in the basic systems of attachment and trust, resulting in a narcissistic imbalance and a blow to hope for future achievements (Varvin 2021). Indeed, the situation of the refugees implies different levels of loss : family, cultural, and societal portraying a serious challenge to psychotherapists and for generations to come.

After World War II, the Frankfurt School's studies revolve around ideologies, forms of totalitarianism, and the danger of mass manipulation. Such studies investigated Nazism as a "frightening manifestation of the collapse of Western civilization" (Jay 1973, 142). In that respect, the ghost of Auschwitz, which Adorno introduces in *Education after Auschwitz* (1947), seemed to guide much of the Frankfurtians' efforts. They saw in education for autonomy and in the development of the power of reflection as key instruments to the development of civilization (Penna 2023, 71). It seems that almost eighty years after Adorno's (1947) essay, the contemporary world failed in the promotion of education for autonomy and in the development of an ethical attitude that fosters mature citizenship and concern for the different "other". We remain revolving around fundamentalist thinking, extreme nationalism, polarization, violence and processes of exclusion. We daily witness the consequences of these processes that culminate in the Russian-Ukrainian war decimating the lives of so many and impeding people like Daria to live, love, work and educate.

As Daria does, many people daily choose to exist, to resist, to dream, and to survive. Thus, taken by the "storm blowing from Heaven" and in the company of the Angel of History, amidst catastrophe, we move irresistibly driven into a hopefully more responsible future for humankind.

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