



Equation, moralization and denial

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Abstract In this essay I offer *in vivo* meditations on the war in Ukraine both as a citizen witness and psychoanalyst, and I offer thoughts on how psychoanalysts might play a role during the current war and in the future in assisting Ukraine to survive and learn from the experience.

Keywords Ukraine · Ukrainian war · Russian aggression · witness to war · psychoanalysis and war

I would like to start with a personal observation that I have already shared with a few of my colleagues. I believe that it not only reflects well the state I am currently in but it could also be seen as a metaphor for being capable or incapable of maintaining the analytical framework in the current situation of the war in Ukraine. So, it was an April weekend morning. I am walking in a city. It is a peaceful west Ukrainian city with a rich history and an old town that resembles French or Italian ones. I cannot identify the city for safety reasons. It is peaceful in the sense that there are occasional air-raid sirens, but no one is reacting to them as the city has not been a target of air strikes or artillery shelling yet. I come across soldiers but they look somewhat alien to the overall picture. There are many refugees in the city, but in the downtown area they cannot easily be told apart from tourists. Everyone is out. Children are playing in the park, people lounge at restaurant terraces drinking Prosecco. I feel a pang of guilt for partaking in this peaceful life – the deaths and destruction seem to be happening somewhere in a movie. All of a sudden I can hear the sound of an airplane flying overhead. At that moment I was walking next to a family out for a walk. The mother rushed to cover her son, who looks about 11 or 12 years old. The airplane flies away. The boy is crying, he is inconsolable, it is

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obvious that he is ashamed. The peaceful life carries on but this refugee family was seized by terror.

How many years or decades will it take to heal the scars left by this war? Is it possible? My father was a Second World War veteran. Before his death ten years ago he would react angrily all the time to the loud ring of kitchenware in the dishwasher... But is it the right thing to do, to ask questions about what and how life will be afterwards? How will we choose and work through our traumas? Will we grow to learn forgiveness? Because nothing is over yet. Because there is another boy hiding now in one of Mariupol's basements or being raped somewhere in Ukraine by a Russian soldier. How can we stop that? What can we do? I think these are the only relevant questions at the moment.

I have mentioned that the story at the park is a metaphor for my work situation. How much denial is present in our efforts to engage in psychoanalysis in the current situation? Our colleague, Petro Garmish, volunteered to fight in the territorial defense force. At one of our meetings he said, "I cannot think about psychoanalysis right now, I have to think about soldiers in body armor that is so bad that it is more damaging than bullets."¹ Patrick Miller mentioned in our correspondence:

I was very impressed by one of your colleagues Petro Garmish. I shall keep as a powerful metaphor for future reflections about your current situation and the issues of training what he said about [inferior quality] bullet-proof vests: a poor quality vest is worse than no vest at all. What he described is the *reality* of his traumatic experience and the fact that it did not begin just two months ago, but eight years ago ... I think that Petro raised a very important topic that shouldn't be avoided, when he said: "I feel that psychoanalysis is not possible under the current circumstances." ... It touches upon at least two connected issues: denial of reality and omnipotence. ... In times of peace, and in democratic countries, we do not realize, because we are so blessed, that a lot of implicit and self-evident conditions must be gathered for the analytic method to be implemented. It doesn't mean that we cannot think analytically about circumstances that are not favorable to the practice of psychoanalysis, but doing analysis is something else. (P. Miller, personal communication, April 4, 2022)

I have to say that I accept Patrick's opinion. As he says himself, there are no simple answers here. How many times a day does every one of us think that we should be not here, in the consulting room, but somewhere else, doing something else, not psychoanalysis at the moment? How many times a day does every one of us look at a fighter jet flying over our heads—sometimes it is quite real, sometimes only in our minds—that drives us out of analytical listening? A patient of mine is indignant about mobilization. He experiences it as another overwhelming threat coming from inside, in addition to the one from the outside. It is connected with his family history, being thin-skinned, feeling the anxiety for his masculine identity,

¹ I want to thank all colleagues and participants in our meetings, who gave a permission to draw on their correspondence and commentaries. Personal correspondence quoted in this article is used with permission.



and subjected to a demanding internal organization, etc. Can I think about that in full while shutting off the voice of the superego? “You have to protect your own country!” Am I just like him by trying to engage in psychoanalysis?

Here is another example. A female patient of mine did manage in this situation to start a relationship with a man in which she does not feel either masochistically depressed, or frightened, or arrogantly picky. Again and again she is discussing this relationship with me—the relationship, and not the war raging all around, the war that threatens her close ones as well. At some moments I am completely immersed in the intricacies of her affair, its associations with transference, her history ... but when I get out of it to the surface, I cannot stop thinking whether her determined avoidance of the war is a denial ... maybe this affair is just a retreat? Will the conversation about it bring her back to her problems, or are these merely my thoughts about the war that bother me? When I dare to raise this issue, the patient recalls the explosions in her hometown that woke her up. This is followed by the most depressing recollection of her childhood surfacing in our conversation. She recalls a village where her grandmother lives. The woman never smiled and used to look at the photo of her son, the brother of my patient’s mother, the boy who got killed by a Second World War mine. At that moment the patient’s affair starts to resemble a relationship of two children finding shelter in each other as bombs explode in the background. She recalled how at night her new partner sent her a photo of soldiers from Mariupol, not children but wounded men. He was crying. It shocked her. I suggested that this was exactly what she feared when we come to discussing the war—that we would simply start crying together. There were really tears in my eyes. I hope that it was better than the freezing of the patient’s grandmother, and as we knew it, the patient’s mother as well. That’s why, I think, she said “thank you” at the end of the session.

Denial. It seems that the denial of reality, external and internal, the denial of its significance or the extent to which it is real, is the fundamental human need. Winston Churchill’s statement that “war is mainly a catalogue of blunders” is often repeated by military experts. I think it is also a catalogue of denials. “We are not the ones committing war crimes,” so some Russians say, “those are Buryats, Chechens, ethnic or political foreigners...”; “the Ukrainians are killing other Ukrainians, or they are at fault in some sophisticated way—they have brought it on themselves by teasing Russia with its Westward strategies, for example...”; “the West is at fault—because of NATO expansion, because of failing to help Russia after the dissolution of the USSR...”; “NATO is behind all the atrocities in Bucha, Irpin, Trostianets, Kozacha Lopan, Mariupol, and, before that, in Tbilisi, Gori, Grozny, and Aleppo.” I cannot say that these ideas do not have any advocates in Europe because I know they do. Europe is tired of the war and of Ukraine. Landlords have run out of their charity resources for the refugees, banks have reinstated their transaction commissions, transport companies want to charge for tickets. Politicians talk about supplying Ukraine with weapons, but they come slower than they are used at the front line. Indeed, why is there any need for weapons if there are words about weapons? As well as words about peace—we are urged to accept the truce, reconciliation, and appeasement ... while our soldiers still protect us in faulty



armored vests. They protect us from Russian tanks and fighter jets modernized with French and German equipment.

Let me quote another excerpt from the letter of my friend and teacher Paolo Fonda:

War is prolonging and people, large masses, will unavoidably start to take emotional distance from it, as they are not able to keep such an emotional burden of fear, guilt, powerlessness. Some will reinforce splits and seek refuge in a sort of psychic retreats, saying that “we cannot do anything, that it is far away, that our country is not exposed to any threat” etc. It could start a period of “emotional neutrality”. This happened for the war in Yugoslavia. ... In Italy, so as in Western Europe, the idea that peace for us is normal, we are living in peace 70 years, etc. is rather dangerous, as it is denying reality, the fact that world is more and more globalized and interdependent, that everything concerns everybody. ... And it is very important to support and encourage those who are “aware,” who actively work to inform and support the “right part.” (P. Fonda, personal communication, May, 2022)

Once again I am thinking about an analyst as “annalist,” reflecting on Michael O’Loughin’s paper: “I hope you can consider taking on the role of annalists, curators of troubled memory for your country as it seeks to redefine its identity” (2022). Of course, it is not only about war fatigue, but also about denial, “turning a blind eye” as John Steiner (1985) puts it. Eventually, the Freudian principle of pain-avoidance/pleasure-seeking is omnipresent. But we also have to bear in mind Freud’s [1920/1955] conclusion that its limit is the absolute tranquility that the death drive brings us to.

Let me mention another form of denial. The Pope asks a woman from Ukraine and a woman from Russia to have a joint prayer for peace. The International Psychoanalytic Association sympathizes with both parties to the “conflict.” The American Psychoanalytic Association asks me to make a co-presentation with a colleague from Russia on the topic of trauma. If this is not denial, what is denial then? We receive suggestions that Russians are to be invited to these meetings to promote reconciliation, to embark on the journey to the depressive position at full swing. Let me ask a question: Does a moralizing use of psychoanalytic categories represent another form of denial? The notions no longer function as a microscope that allows us to see things that used to be invisible before they turn into blind spots. People who we used to consider the same as us, not “brothers,” as this word has been longed ago devalued by Putin’s propaganda, but neighbors who have turned out to be dangerous demons. Don’t we have many reasons to be wary of them? Aren’t there many reasons to call them to account? Let me cite two more quotes. One is from a letter by Ewa Modzelewska, I have mentioned it at the first meeting, and it referred to a seminar being held a foreign colleague in Russia.

I know that there are a lot of brave, upright people in Russia. I am totally aware of the highest price of courage in Russia nowadays. But there are also millions of people who do not want to recognize the responsibility of Russia for this inhuman war. In this context, the idea of organizing this kind of



seminar just now seems dubious. (E. Modzelewska, personal communication, March, 2022)

It is also very painful for our Ukrainian colleagues. I will quote a fragment of a letter from one of them: “Give us time to bury our dead and mourn for them.” The second quote is from an interview with Iliya Novikov, a Russian lawyer who enlisted in the Ukrainian army.

I understand that in Russia there are lots of people, maybe millions of them, who experience this war as their personal moral drama ... I understand that they can be tormented morally, that they can lose their jobs ... But now I am simply not ready ... You know, there is no need to play God. There is no need to make an appearance that a person has enough compassion, sympathy, and understanding for everyone. It’s not enough. Each corpuscle, each photon, each atom of your compassion that you allocate to a person in Russia, the one who is tormented morally because his country did what it did, you do that at the expense of those people who are bereaved at the loss of the loved ones, whose homes have burnt down, those who are hiding in basements of Mariupol at the moment. (Speaking in Latynina, 2022, my translation)

I believe that these words of a soldier and a lawyer hold more psychological truth than many speculations of my colleagues.

It seems that I can endlessly cite examples of denial and avoidance. A psychologist from one of the former Yugoslavian countries teaches us how to help victims of sexual violence. “Each war is accompanied by that,” she says. “UN peacekeepers in the former Yugoslavia used to frequent brothels. What can it be other than violence?” Really? Are those things comparable in the first place? A fourteen-year-old boy was raped for hours in front of his tied-up mother; women had their teeth knocked out so that it was safer to rape them, on the one hand, and visiting a brothel, on the other? Is this a research into the manifestations of violence or a simply rendering it banal and trivial?

One of the obvious dangers of denial is its congeniality to the work of propaganda. Modern propaganda is organized in a strange way. To some extent it resembles Freud’s analysis of witticisms. It has (almost) stopped promoting some major idea or narrative. It preaches only one message: there is no truth. You can look at the problem from this angle, or that angle, there are many opinions, and all of them are right in their own way; there is no need to limit the freedom of information, on the contrary, there is a need to multiply interpretations. Then the primary process gets switched on: the masses will chose the interpretation, regardless of how far-fetched and controversial it may be, that suits their primitive impulses and protects them from any knowledge of the painful reality. Can the psychoanalytic epistemophilia resist this?

In his book *Auschwitz and the Gulag* (2017), recently deceased philosopher Valery Podoroga remarked on an interesting paradox. We all know very well a slightly altered quote by Adorno about the impossibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz. There is experience after which it is impossible to talk, and all the attempts to understand this experience easily turn into avoidance, as it is shown in



the quotes from Primo Levi and others in O’Loughlin’s (2022) paper.² But the other side of this statement is that all our modern philosophical, artistic, political discourses, and to some extent the discourse of psychoanalysis, are in the language after Auschwitz—the paradox of speaking about the unspeakable, and thinking about the unthinkable. In my personal view, the recurrence of the massacre in Europe that we experience today has, of course and fortunately, not reached the scale of the previous one, but it could well be possible that the contact with that horrible experience was broken because of denial and oblivion. And this is the reason the image of an analyst as annalist-chronicler is very close to me. *Come and See* is the biblical name of Elem Klimov’s (1985) movie on the events of the Second World War in Belarus. The same title could be used for Serge Loiko’s (2022) *Mariupol diary*, which tells the story of the war through the narrative of a boy from Mariupol and illustrates better than words alone our situation today.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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² The text of Michael O’Loughlin’s 2022 presentation to a meeting of the Friends of the Ukrainian Psychoanalytic Society is to be published in *Divan, journal for psycho-analysis and culture* (in Swedish).



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