

Title	Russia as a patient for negative psychoanalysis
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Publication date	2022-08-29
Original Citation	Reshe, J. (2022) 'Russia as a patient for negative psychoanalysis', Studies in East European Thought, 74(4), pp.601-604. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11212-022-09497-8
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.1007/s11212-022-09497-8
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Download date	2026-10-28 04:10:17
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/13655

Russia as a patient for negative psychoanalysis

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Abstract

This paper brings together the late Freud's concept of the death drive and Dostoevsky's vision of primordial suffering in order to analyze anti-Ukrainian and pro-Ukrainian trends in today's Russia. The paper encourages embracing the suffering that the death drive entails, instead of escaping it through the narrative of Russia's 'greatness'.

Keywords: Death drive, Ukraine, Russia, Dostoevsky, Negative psychoanalysis

In his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Sigmund Freud presented his new, pessimistic understanding of the human psyche. While earlier Freud considered the desire for pleasure and profit as the key principle guiding humans, his new approach instead placed self-destructive aspirations in this central place. Current common sense and conventional psychology are consistent with the early, more optimistic Freud. They tend to assess negative effects and mental suffering as an abnormality in need of treatment or fixing. Because of their underlying positive orientation, they are not able to incorporate the later Freud's assumption about the death drive at the core of the human psyche.

Dostoevsky anticipated Freud in his attempt to think beyond the pleasure principle. The primacy and constitutiveness of suffering in Dostoevsky's anthropological perspective are reminiscent of Freud's concept of the death drive. Dostoevsky considers suffering as a primary affect that reacts to the initial trauma that precedes and determines the subject. The humanity of Dostoevsky's subject does not consist in striving for pleasure and profit but rather in enduring suffering. In the *Notes from the Underground* (1864), Dostoevsky writes, "Suffering [...] is the sole origin of consciousness [...] Consciousness, in my opinion, is the greatest misfortune for man, but I know that man loves it and will not exchange it for any kind of satisfaction whatsoever" (Dostoevsky 2014, p. 44). Dostoevsky's characters represent

different forms of human tragedy; they are permanently suffering, inherently sinful, and guilty.

Contemporary psychoanalytic thinker Todd McGowan (2013) defines the death drive not only as a key driving force of the individual but also as a driving force at the core of sociality. Suffering, similar to the consciousness of the subject, is neither inside the subject nor outside, but on the threshold of separation into oneself and the other, it precedes and determines both subjectivity and sociality.

In the history of psychoanalytic thought, it was not uncommon to associate the death drive with hostility, aggression, anger, and rage. However, relying on McGowan's view, one might claim that the primary manifestation of the death drive is instead expressed as self-sacrifice, concern for others, the pangs of remorse, and other prosocial forms of self-destruction. It is the other that causes us our suffering; genuine social bonds are inevitably painful. For most of our lives we are dealing with this pain either by learning to endure it or struggling to escape it. From this perspective, hostility and aggression are rather a manifestation of an attempt to escape the suffering that sociality entails. The other turns into the one who is blamed for our suffering, the one who needs to be punished or subordinated, instead of being supported and understood (which implies the ability to endure social pain). The other is seen as an enemy, not the fellow human being with whom we are connected through the shared tragedy of our existence.

Let us assume that Freud, Dostoevsky, and McGowan are accurate in their perception of humans as self-destructive and tragic creatures. If the death drive really lies at the heart of the subject and constitutes society, the difference between the various forms of how we relate to each other should be assessed from the perspective of how we deal with our death drive: Either we are escaping it or embracing it.

Why not to analyze from this point of view the two present contradicting trends in how Russians relate to Ukrainians – the anti-Ukrainian trend and the pro-Ukrainian trend? Relying on the previous considerations we can assume that the anti-Ukrainian prowar trend is, so to say, escaping the death drive. It is trying to flee the pathetic tragic truth about itself by covering it with the narrative of Russian greatness and glory. This official Russian attitude manifests hostility and aggression towards Ukrainians. Ukraine is seen as an enemy who deserves to be punished for not supporting the

narrative of greatness. The more Russia fails in Ukraine and the more embarrassing for Russia it gets, the more desperate it is in sticking to its compensatory narratives. This Russia manifests a dehumanizing approach towards Ukraine and itself. It is not able to genuinely recognize and hear the suffering of Ukrainians. This Russia is refusing to suffer and is escaping from the depression and trauma that its own realistic self-assessment would cause. This goes directly against Dostoevsky's claim that Russian people have the most profound need to suffer. This Russia is not self-destructive enough, despite the fact of the absurd sacrifice of soldiers for the sake of the country's glory. Russia behaves like it is immortal, showing the country's inability to see its mortality and vulnerability. It has become numb and cynical.

There is another Russia, though, which is rather a non-Russia within Russia, with citizens carrying a Russian passport, whom official Russia recognizes as not real Russians. Their existence is undesirable, they are either not noticed or they are noticed

Russia as a patient for negative psychoanalysis only to be equated with an empty place – through destruction, dehumanization, and humiliation. They are exiles within their own country. It might be said that they – each personally, as well as their forms of cooperation and solidarity – get in touch with the death drive. Their actions and cooperation embody or imply the risk of self-destruction. They feel remorse, they are eaten away from the inside by guilt and shame. They coincide with the awful, traumatic core of being human and find themselves in conditions where they cannot cover it up with a narrative of any kind of greatness. They genuinely acknowledge and feel the pain of Ukrainians and/or their 'non-Russian' comrades.

Dostoevsky was ambivalent about war. While providing arguments in favor of nonviolent resistance to evil, he also exalted war as the greatest manifestation of collective suffering for the common cause and brotherly sacrifice that restores dignity and leads to humanization. However, I do not think that Dostoevsky would have approved of Russia's war against Ukraine. It dehumanizes rather than humanizes. There are too many lies, too much hypocrisy, posturing, degrading cruelty, and numbness to the suffering of others, things that Dostoevsky despised the most. It is much more likely that the war that Dostoevsky would approve of today is the war within Russia

itself, the one against the official Russia, the war that is truly humanizing through unity in suffering. It unites not only Russians but also Russians and Ukrainians, as well as the rest of the world.

With this perspective in mind, let us first imagine official Russia as a patient of conventional (positively oriented) psychological counselling. Once again, conventional psychology, unlike negatively oriented psychoanalysis, cannot recognize the death drive at the core of the subject and sociality. It begins with the assumption that everything negative is unhealthy for the subject and should be necessarily fixed. Russia would be encouraged to cheer up, believe in itself, to accept and cherish its own uniqueness, assert its opinion, and effectively stand up for itself. Its possible suffering, depressogenic thought patterns, and shrinkage into despair and anxiety would be seen as a failure of counselling.

As a patient of (negatively oriented) psychoanalysis, Russia would instead be encouraged to embrace its death drive by cherishing the remnants of its negative prosocial affects and its self-destructiveness – in the form of remorse, repentance, self-doubt, and the ability to notice and share the pain of the other. This is consonant with the suggestion recently made by Sergey Radchenko in his article “Why Russia Needs to be Humiliated in Ukraine” (2022). He evaluates the outcome of the war as an obvious failure for the Russians. War in Ukraine has exposed the gaping hole in the narrative of Russia’s ‘greatness’ and revealed Russia as being “weak and pathetic”. He warns against the overly careful and respectful approach to Russia dictated by fear of Russians getting dangerous in their bitterness. His prescription for Russia’s ills is the following, “Russia needs proper humiliation. It needs a humble recognition of its diminished status, an acceptance of guilt, and a slow, painstaking effort to rebuild the trust of those it has wronged.” It is not the painless state that needs to be recovered, but precisely the lost ability to feel pain, and to deeply feel tragedy.

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