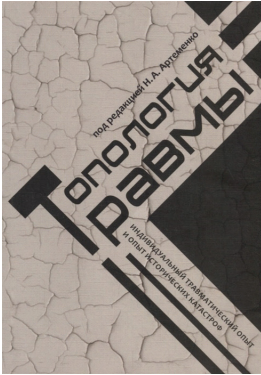


## BOOK REVIEWS

### A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY OF TRAUMA STUDIES



Natalia Artemenko (ed.) 2020. *Topologiia travmy: Individual'nyi travmaticheskii opyt i opyt istoricheskikh katastrof*. Collective monograph. St. Petersburg: Renome. 248 pp. In Russian.

The collective monograph titled *Topologiia travmy: Individual'nyi travmaticheskii opyt i opyt istoricheskikh katastrof* (The Topology of Trauma: The Individual Traumatic Experience and the Experience of Historical Catastrophes) comprises articles written by a group of St. Petersburg scholars. Trauma studies have deserved more interest in Russia today, so it could be expected that the key events in Russian and Soviet history will further provide topics for analysis in this field. However, an essential objective the authors put forward

in their work is not an inquiry into painful moments in the national past, but rather the examination of the theoretical foundations of trauma studies or, as it is formulated, “a comprehensive philosophical elaboration revealing the theoretical origins of those concepts, methods, and strategies which underlie this research direction”.

It might seem quite surprising that the authors do not put emphasis on the traumatic experience in Soviet and post-Soviet history, and rather prefer delving into Western examples. It could be due to the claimed theoretical bias of the issue, and we should accept the fact that trauma studies in Russia are still under development, and therefore the empirical material needs to be borrowed along with the theoretical apparatus. However, the articles represented in the monograph analyze not only the key concept of trauma studies, but also propose new ones; for example, the concepts of “creative repression” (A. Brodsky), “unfinished time” and “cataleptic consciousness” (N. Artemenko), and “the syntax of loss” (S. Troitsky). So, the authors do not simply borrow the terminology already developed within the Western humanities, but make attempts to elaborate their own analytic language, as well as an authentic vision of many issues, even when there seems to be a consensus on some issues in Western academia. Even though some of the proposed statements are contestable, such attempts might stir essential discussions.

The monograph comprises three parts, composed of articles written by different scholars.

As the title of the first chapter, “Cultural Traumatology: Posing a Question”, implies, it represents an attempt to clarify the notion of “cultural trauma”. This chapter comprises articles written by A. Brodsky, N. Artemenko, S. Troitsky, and K. Kapelchuk, who delve into a number of methodological issues, such as the problem of trauma representation in culture (Brodsky, Kapelchuk), the interrelation between trauma studies and psychoanalysis (Kapelchuk, Brodsky), and the issues of oral history (Artemenko).

The second chapter of the book, "Trauma and Construction in National Self-Consciousness", comprises three articles written by A. Brodsky, who considers the stated issue in terms of Jewish, Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian cultures. This part also embraces the work of A. Smirnov, who analyzes the relations between memory studies and the new history of French intellectual tradition.

The third chapter, "An Aesthetic Field of Trauma", embodies articles by S. Nikonova, A. Sidorov, and A. Novikova, referring to such various subjects as Kant's aesthetics, modernist literature and music. The book also gives an overview of the key publications in trauma studies, which is undoubtedly a major asset for a Russian-speaking reader wishing to study up on the field.

When discussing the theoretical sources essential to the authors, it is necessary, first of all, to mention the tradition of continental philosophy, especially the modern German philosophy (M. Heidegger, Th. Adorno, H. Arendt), as well as psychoanalysis (S. Freud, J. Lacan, S. Zizek). Also special mention must be made of the authority of V. Podoroga, a Russian philosopher, whose pioneering book, titled "The Time After", remains one of the most significant philosophical works on the traumatic experience and totalitarianism of the post-Soviet thought. At the same time, the authors delve into some ideas of American cultural sociology (J. Alexander, C. Caruth), German memory studies (A. Assmann), and French new history (P. Nora). Thus, we deal with a combination of rationalistic humanism, existentialism, fundamental ontology, psychoanalysis, and contemporary social and cultural studies, which does not remain consistent all through and, although this book is of undoubted interest, it comes across as certain heterogeneity.

The philosophical frame of the issue is set by the works of N. Artemenko, the editor of the monograph. Following V. Podoroga, who has elaborated the concept of "the time after", she treats trauma as the essential establishing moment for subjectivation, i.e., "trauma itself conceives a human subject". Thus, trauma is understood as a consolidating event, "that what creates us", and engenders "the experience of the Self becoming the Other". The uniqueness of the traumatic experience is related to the fact that such experience represents the impossible and, therefore, the forgotten, repressed, unspoken. It represents the main methodological problem of oral history dealing with a speaking subject, unable to express one's own traumatic experience. The idea of the specific traumatic temporality is another key aspect for Artemenko. The traumatic experience has a peculiar mode of being in time. It presupposes incompleteness, the continuity of time deprived of eventuality, the endless present. Trauma blurs the lines between the past, the present, and the future.

The themes of repression and oblivion persist in the book, especially in the works written by N. Artemenko, A. Brodsky, and K. Kapelchuk. The authors refer to Freudian psychoanalysis, which treats trauma as a condition necessary for a subject's existence. A. Brodsky, who elaborates his own vision of the trauma problem, also builds on a conception posed by Igor Smirnov, a Russian philologist and philosopher, as well as on the ideas of Soviet psychophysicists, namely, S. Davidenkov, a member of the Pavlovian school. Following Smirnov and Davidenkov, Brodsky underscores that trauma is a condition necessary for anthropogenesis; hence, it is of fundamental meaning for the human culture.

Posing the concept of creative repression, Brodsky contests the widespread political interpretation of trauma and the phenomenon of so-called social amnesia. He claims that, in order to perform its construction function, trauma does not need to be represented in culture explicitly. K. Kapelchuk adheres to this thesis in her article, talking of the importance of investigating trauma from the psychoanalytical standpoint, not in the order of the Symbolic, but in the order of the Imaginary. Brodsky argues that considering oblivion equivalent to the political oppression seriously simplifies the case. He suggests correlating trauma with the primordial principles of consciousness. According to Brodsky, trauma is a creative factor that produces a human subject, makes the subjectivation possible. He agrees with psychoanalysis as far as it claims that trauma should be searched for in the Unconscious, and this is the trauma that “launches the selection of meanings” as the basis for cultural identity. Thus, it is trauma that underlies the individual self-consciousness, as well as the collective (national) one. All of this enables us to speak about the fundamental significance of traumatic experience.

This review does not suffice to delve into every article in the collection in more detail. In summary, I would like to mention that the majority of the authors express a certain skepticism towards the mainstream direction in contemporary trauma studies, that is to say, towards the research focused on discourse analysis and identity policy. I cannot absolutely agree with the critique of social theory for reducing trauma studies to the ideology expressed in discourse and unnecessary politicization; in other words, for the lack of ontological depth, which makes it possible to discuss trauma in correlation not with a community but with a human subject. I believe that here we deal with the collision of two incompatible positions, leading us to the insoluble question of whether a human subject or a social structure is primary. Yet, it is beyond any doubt that a strive for philosophical reflection of traumatic experience is a significant endeavor; thus, the presented monograph is worth comprehensive reading and discussing.

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