

# Vladislav Davidzon. From Odessa with Love: Political and Literary Essays from Post-Soviet Ukraine

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Odesa's Many Frontiers

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**Vladislav Davidzon. *From Odessa with Love: Political and Literary Essays from Post-Soviet Ukraine*.** Foreword by Simon Sebag Montefiore, preface by Peter Pomerantsev, Academica P, 2021. xviii, 322 pp. \$29.95, paper.

**W**hen encountering a book on Odesa, one expects, as a rule, to find within its pages explorations of history, literary heritage, mythology, and the like. The present-day city of Odesa in Ukraine is often discussed in the context of stereotypical and well-known themes, such as cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism. Vladislav Davidzon's collection *From Odessa with Love: Political and Literary Essays from Post-Soviet Ukraine* is a break from the expected. Its title very aptly speaks to its contents. This is a book about Odesa comprising the reflections of a person who has assimilated himself into the life of a country not his own and who describes his feelings and observations to an external audience from the vantage point of a privileged internal inclusivity.

This collection contains the contemplative writings of a traveller to Odesa who, at the same time, is not merely a guest there. For Davidzon, Odesa is a component part of his family history. But a reader will not find in his book motifs characteristic of the viewpoint of members of the so-called third generation who seek to find answers to questions regarding their past family identity. The author calls the defined period that he spent in Odesa a "leap of faith" (2)—he and his wife decided that it was important for them to actually reside in Odesa, not just to stay there for a few days. Peter Pomerantsev notes in his preface (xvii–xviii) that Davidzon is in certain ways a *zeitgeist*—a spirit functioning within a today that is "out of joint" (xvii). If in our present-day world it seems "normal" to move from Odesa to New York, Davidzon chose to do the opposite. For Pomerantsev, the author has single-handedly combined disparate ideas that seemingly cannot coexist.

The essays in this volume are quite short. They are not unlike postcards dispatched while on the road—impressions of a moment, or more specifically, *this very* minute of life. The texts do not always revolve around Odesa; sometimes the city is not even mentioned, or it is mentioned only in passing (see, for example, the essays about Isaiah Berlin [253–57] and Kharkiv mayor Hennadii Kernes [275–80]). But they were all written at a juncture when the author was observing the outside world from within his inner sanctum in Odesa. The author developed an internal perspective on the city while solidly gazing on it through his external optical prism. This is what makes *From Odessa with Love* so unique: the reader is able to envision Odesa and Ukraine as if stereoscopically. Davidzon, in assembling the collection, added short initial abstracts to his essays—written from the general perspective of "today"—in which he occasionally admits his own errors and dashed hopes. But he has not rewritten his original texts.

In my opinion, *leap of faith* is a very meaningful metaphor for Davidzon's actions. A leap of faith is only possible when one has full confidence in the space that one is entering and one lets go of the need to know things in advance. Here, we have a strictly individual perspective moulded through a free and unrestricted communion with an environment that transforms and changes due to catastrophic physical challenge. The "post-Maidan" Ukraine that serves as Davidzon's journalary base undergoes rapid and, in places, chaotic pendulum swings—from enthusiasm and hope to sadness and disenchantment. The author lives through this together with Ukraine, at times sensing elation, and at other times, retreating into detachment.

Reading this book in 2022, one comes to realize the unbelievable speed of the transformative processes in Ukraine after 2014. The essays here take the form of journal entries that capture momentary impressions. And they revive many bits of information that were quickly forgotten or were overshadowed by other events. This book would probably never have been written if Davidzon had not chosen to express his thoughts about his experiences in journal form. In 2018, an exhibit of Davidzon's journals was organized at the Odesa Bleshchunov Museum of Personal Collections. Since he was sixteen, Davidzon has been not so much writing journals but fashioning them (sometimes producing several, parallel journals focusing on different themes). These journals could sooner be called art books. They are not merely ordinary notepads containing jotted remarks and ruminations. Clippings, pictures, and texts intermingle, and they blossom into an intricate mosaic of the author's lived experience. Within the journal, one encounters episodes from private life punctuated by accounts of political events, and this creates an elaborate palimpsest of existence.

The collection *From Odessa with Love* resembles momentary impressions in diary form. We see, for example, the author's thoughts on the evolution of the police force in Ukraine (23–26), as well as his reflections on the string of explosions that occurred after 2014 (one of which damaged the Odesa home of pro-Ukrainian poet Borys Khersons'kyi [13–16]). We see portraits of the visit to Odesa of French intellectual Bernard-Henri Lévy (37–55), the opening of the Monument to Isak Babel' (Isaac Babel [199–200]), and so on. And the forgotten scandals surrounding actor Gérard Depardieu's pro-Russia position (71–72) and involving the cancellation of writer Svetlana Alexievich's appearance in Odesa (33–35) flow from the remote recesses of collective memory.

This boisterous environment is the subject entity of Davidzon's texts. If we consider here the titular question of Mark von Hagen's well-known article "Does Ukraine Have a History?," we see in Davidzon's essays a land where history *does* indeed exist. This history is often absurd and meanders along inappropriate or erroneous paths. Its development can grind to a halt or

continue in unexpected ways. But this most definitely is *not* a passive, provincial milieu with a fate that hangs on the whims of some external actor. In turn, the chapter on Ukrainegate (83–127) likely showcases the lacunae in the Ukrainian domestic agenda—in Ukraine, this topic was mostly suppressed by local power players. In Davidzon’s stereoscopic view, there is no desire to compare Ukraine with Russia—and this is important. Such reflex comparisons create scholarly pitfalls, even for many truly sincere and open-minded researchers. The Russian cultural-political space is certainly palpable in this collection, but it does not assume the form of the cliché constant backdrop against which processes in Ukraine can allegedly be better understood.

Davidzon’s musings shed light on certain specific underpinnings of the Ukrainian interior space that may not be obvious either to a person in Ukraine or to an outside observer. The author’s thoughtful wide-ranging reflections allow the reader to comprehend elements of inner political workings that are generally not readily discernable. In one instance, Davidzon forms the lens through which a reader can perceive Odesa as a miniature version of a nation (133). In another place, an examination of the life of the Odesa Philharmonic Orchestra becomes Davidzon’s instrument for providing a peek into the microcosm of Ukraine’s elite performing arts institutions (223–26). Although this collection pulsates with the interminglings of macrocosms and microcosms, its title shows that Odesa is the nucleus of the author’s literary intention. This Odesa so ardently adored by Davidzon becomes the canvas for the thoughts that he so lovingly colours onto the pages of his book. Again I find myself agreeing with Pomerantsev when he says that Davidzon represents a unique spirit of the times (*zeitgeist*) who can meaningfully channel the spirit of a place (*genius loci*).

It is significant that Davidzon’s Odesa is vibrant and alive and not dusty or antiquated. Those who have experience with texts on Odesa will immediately be able to appreciate the novelty of this book. The author underscores the fact that the predominantly Russian-speaking Odesa is truly distinct from other so-called Russian-speaking regions of Ukraine, like the Crimea or the Donbas (14). For Davidzon, it is self-apparent that in 2014, the “proudly Russophone Odessa” (15) could prevail against Russia-controlled separatist disturbances. The author himself was thrust amid the events of a head-spinning attempt to reset the political life of Odesa at a time when Mikhail Saakashvili was governor of the Odesa region; a separate chapter of the book is dedicated to this episode (see 129–65). It is in the abstracts leading off these essays that Davidzon comments on the dead end met by his hopeful expectations.

Davidzon combines his admiration for the literary portrayal of Odesa with his love for the actual modern-day bustling city in Ukraine. Relaxing and

reading Babel' in crowded, modern-day cafés on Deribasivs'ka Street, he muses on how Odesa is still the same as it was during Babel's time (5–11). This communion with the *genius loci* of Odesa, in my view, finds its reflection in the flavour of the author's descriptions of everyday experiences in the city. Davidzon's writings do not lack humour, nor is there an absence of the relaxed nonchalance and life acceptance for which Odesa is known. The mechanism that the author employs to depict his personal impressions of Odesa—a look from the outside reconciled and melded with an inner understanding—may at moments stir readers to laughter through tears. Take, for example, the following scene: The author attends a synagogue social where he learns about the harmonious local traditional Jewish way of life. While there, he is also introduced to heavily tattooed individuals with “problematic social pasts” and hears about a person who can “fix him up” with documents (9–10) Well, what can one say? During the Soviet era, sometimes the only path that Jews could take toward social advancement led them through a criminal milieu. Elsewhere, the author happens upon a real cowboy from Wyoming on the streets of Odesa. The cowboy then vanishes as suddenly as he appeared. Without missing a beat, the locals inform “New York dandy” Davidzon that they never saw a cowboy there (27–28). This is very amusing and precisely channels the essence of the *genius loci* of Odesa. The Odesan-Ukrainian tradition of laughing through tears is also exemplified in Davidzon's story about his meeting with a distant relative from Donetsk who tries to “convert” some Odesans, and Davidzon too, to her political beliefs. As one might expect, this leads to an hours-long word fight, amid which Davidzon and his wife are forced to flee (17–21). If one wishes to grasp the nuances of the relations between Ukrainians and their relatives from the temporarily occupied areas of Ukraine, then several of the essays in this collection are, simply put, must-reads. Davidzon does not try to fashion idealized portraits of everyday life. He describes the battle between political (very often criminal) clans in Odesa—the resulting tension makes it impossible for the economy to function normally. He also observes “commemorative” cataclysms in modern-day Odesa exemplified by brawls on Victory Day (which marks the end of World War II). And the reader becomes privy to the moment when Davidzon, though enamoured with Odesa, first decides that it is time for him to return home to the United States—after he is hit with an anti-Semitic remark (11).

Consumers of this collection should view it as the journal of an Odesa resident with experience abroad. It can be useful in precisely this capacity as a vehicle for those seeking to develop a firmer understanding about what is going on in Odesa and in Ukraine. If one looks for flaws and contentious points in the book, one will find them—a fair number—but one should keep in mind that the essays are subjective reflections on, and reactions to, the

surrounding environment. One can take issue, let us say, with the notion that the activities of the Party of Regions, which took over all business in Odesa, represented a continuation of a criminal past in Odesa. This conclusion is somewhat strange because Viktor Ianukovych has no historical relation to Odesa. The reader will inevitably come across some inaccuracies in the descriptions of the Odesa cityscape—for instance, in cases where the author shows a lack of experience with life under the Soviet system. In describing the Odesa cult restaurant Dva Karly (Two Karls), for example, the author comments on how its name stems from its location at the corner of “the streets once known as ‘Karl Marx’ and ‘Karl . . . Engels’” (x; my ellipsis). In actuality, the second Karl was Karl Liebknecht. But I will not make a major issue of this. I would also like to draw attention to the fact that the astionym *Odessa*, rather than *Odesa*, appears in the book—that the name of the city has been transliterated from the Russian, not from the Ukrainian. Writing “Odessa,” it seems, is simply habit for the author. In addition, his characterization of the space around him as “post-Soviet” is certainly not untrue, but the living spaces of Odesa and Ukraine are already defined by more than just their Soviet past.

Does the collection *From Odessa with Love* deserve to be recommended to readers? Absolutely—and they can consume its stories in Odesa and everywhere else.

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