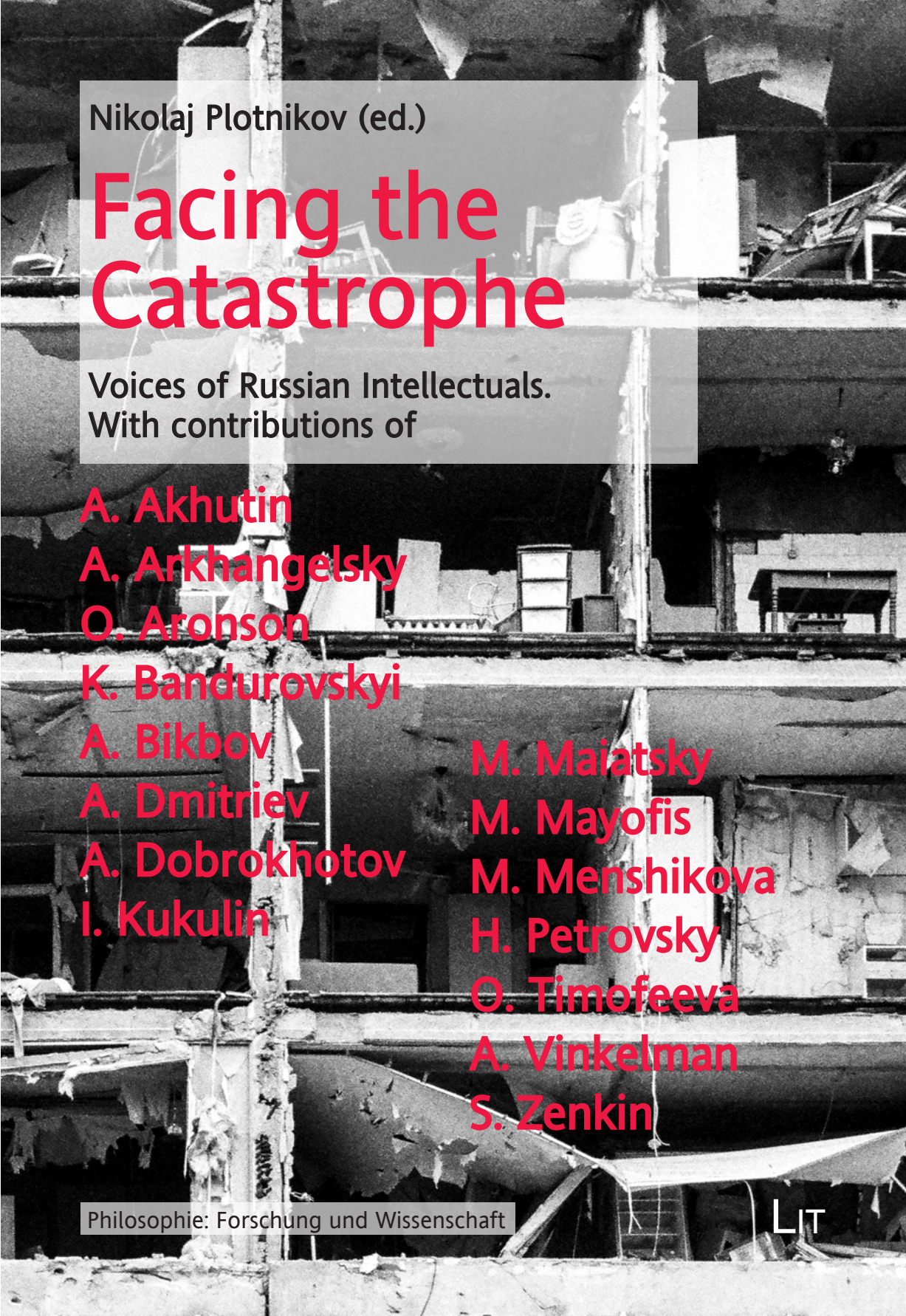




Nikolaj Plotnikov (ed.)

Facing the Catastrophe

Voices of Russian Intellectuals.
With contributions of

A. Akhutin

A. Arkhangelsky

O. Aronson

K. Bandurovskiy

A. Bikbov

A. Dmitriev

A. Dobrokhoto

I. Kukulin

M. Maiatsky

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H. Petrovsky

O. Timofeeva

A. Vinkelman

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Philosophie: Forschung und Wissenschaft

LIT

Originally published in Germany in its uncensored Russian version and now available in English, this volume presents a unique collection of essays by Russian-speaking intellectuals from Russia, Ukraine, and Europe. The book offers a profound analysis of the catastrophic war in Ukraine through philosophical, moral, sociological, and historical lenses. Although published abroad to avoid Russian censorship, the book has been banned in Russia for “discrediting the Russian armed forces.” This manifesto critically examines the origins and social impact of the war, and continues to engage a global audience and foster vital discussions about the conflict and its profound effects. The English edition makes these important insights accessible to a wider audience and enhances global understanding of the war’s complexities. It invites international readers to engage with the philosophical debates it presents, contributing to a broader discourse on peace, justice, and accountability in times of conflict.

Nikolaj Plotnikov is a philosopher and cultural studies scholar and Professor of Russian Cultural and Intellectual History at the Ruhr University Bochum. His research focuses on the analysis of the transfer of European ideas in philosophical, aesthetic, and political discourses.



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Edited by

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Preface to the English Edition

This book's destiny is unusual. In the early weeks of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, I invited several Russian intellectuals who were living in Russia, Ukraine, and Europe to express our condemnation of this criminal war, and to suggest our analysis of the reasons this war had become possible in the first place. These tasks resulted in this collective volume examining the emergent catastrophe in philosophical, moral, sociological, and historical perspectives. This volume has turned out to be the first philosophical manifesto against the war in Ukraine composed by Russian intellectuals in Russian after February 24, 2022, offering a philosophical interpretation and conceptualization of the anti-war position in the public sphere.

The circumstances of total censorship in Russia, where those who have publicly applied the word "war" to Russia's military aggression have been detained and imprisoned, forced publication of this book abroad to free it from censorship restrictions. The Soviet age of "tamizdat," when free press existed only "there," in the West, has returned. But unlike the situation of the Cold War and Soviet censorship, it is still possible in contemporary Russia to get access to free information from abroad. Lit, the German publishing house that has released this book, is allowing free access to its electronic copy so that people in Russia can read it without any restrictions.

When this anti-war manifesto by philosophers appeared, it led to an astonishing wave of support and solidarity. The book was downloaded and discussed in dozens of countries, from Australia to Canada. Both Russian opposition press in exile and European media offered a wide variety of comments on and reviews of this book. During public presentations of this book and discussions on it that took place in the Western Europe, a number of Russian intellectuals who had left the country in protest against the war conveyed their gratitude and solidarity to the book's authors and said this book had expressed their own thoughts and had become their support and compass during exile. It has helped many readers overcome their shock and stupefaction and find the words to express their rejection of the war and ideological justifications for this rejection. This collective volume represents different philosophical and political positions, and this diversity has motivated readers to compare arguments, to reconfigure their intellectual and moral optics while reading contributions by different authors and discussing them on social media and in the press.

However, as the download statistics show, it is in Russia where the largest number of this book's readers currently are. When this book was published, the authors who contributed to it got a number of requests from both acquaintances and strangers in Russia to send them a print copy of the book, which they wanted to have not only in electronic but also in paper format. Although readers in Russia could not publicly express their support for the position given in the book, they conveyed their solidarity with the authors' condemnation of the war in their correspondence with them.

The reaction of supporters of war and apologists for Putin's militarism was not long in coming. After the book's release in March 2023, the Russian media immediately launched an attack on the authors of the collection, some of whom were still in Russia at the time. The authors were declared "traitors to Russia's interests," "enemies," and "liberal Russophobes," and there were demands for dismissals and crimi-

nal prosecutions. In July 2023, State Duma deputy Andrei Lugovoi (the alleged killer of Alexander Litvinenko by polonium in London) wrote a denunciation to the General Prosecutor's Office of the Russian Federation, charging the authors of the collection with extremist activities and with discrediting the Russian army, demanding the authors to be found guilty and convicted for these offenses. The prosecutor's office limited itself to filing an administrative lawsuit against Lit publishing house and the editor of the collection, demanding that the collection be banned from distribution in the Russian Federation in both paper and electronic format. On October 3, 2023, the Tagansky Court of Moscow decided (without even holding a courtroom hearing and without the participation of the defendants) to ban the book. The decision repeats, word for word, the accusation from the prosecutor's office lawsuit against the authors of the collection of "discrediting the Russian Armed Forces and their peace-keeping mission in Ukraine." Although Roskomnadzor, the Russian media and Internet censorship agency, has blocked the book-related Internet addresses, including the publisher's website where the electronic version of the book could be downloaded for free, that version has already spread across the Internet, so that it is now available for free download elsewhere.

The English release provides an opportunity to take a retrospective look at the last two years since the book was prepared for publication and to reveal how the view of the catastrophe has changed. In general, this change can be summarized as follows: after the beginning of Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, the authors asked themselves the questions "How did it happen?" "How did the war become possible?" and "What kind of responsibility do the authorities and the society bear for unleashing this war?" In other words, the war was seen as mediated by certain previous factors: the political regime, social and historical processes, moral, ideological or psychological attitudes, the inactivity of society, etc. Therefore, the authors' attention was focused primarily on analyzing these factors and understanding how they together led Russia to the catastrophe of the war. This approach inevitably turned out to be an attempt to rationalize reality in order to find and express the meaning of what had happened, however terrible it was.

Now, almost three years after the beginning of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, this senseless and criminal war has become a new reality displacing previous life and, regardless of all external causes, shaping its own terrible logic, subordinating politics, economy, society and culture to it, and turning them too into consequences of the war. In Russia, forced participation in this experience of permanent violence, combined with the total commodification of war as a profitable investment, is leading to the disintegration of the elementary moral foundations of society. And in Ukraine, the Russian army's daily, methodical destruction of civilian infrastructure and the killing of civilians make the prospect of ending this war of attrition increasingly vague and uncertain.

As has now become obvious, the war led to a radical rupture with the entire previous development of Russian society, destroying and rendering meaningless the political and cultural experience of the post-Soviet generations. And this rupture makes it impossible not only to think of returning to the previous state, but even the very attempt to consider the war a consequence of certain causes and states that preceded it.

Therefore, the intellectual agenda is no longer “How did this war become possible?” but rather “How can this war be stopped?” and “What will its consequences be for people in Ukraine and Russia?” At the moment in Russia, any public call not even for peace, but only for a ceasefire, is declared a crime and prosecuted. The state of affairs is such that only a heavy military defeat of Russia or the collapse of its tyrannical power for some other reason can break this logic of war and put an end to Putin regime’s incessant chain of war crimes. This is not a question of philosophical reflection, but a question of political will.

And yet the question “What will happen afterwards?” at least opens a horizon for conversation about scenarios of the transition period, of its conditions and priorities. This conversation will be difficult, because for any conscious citizen of Russia, it will be inextricably linked to an awareness of responsibility before the people of Ukraine for all the evil that the war unleashed by Russia has brought to their land. But it is necessary as the first step on the way for Russian society to acquire its own subjectivity in political communication.

And this conversation brings us back to the questions the authors of this collective volume reflect on: questions about the moral meaning of guilt and responsibility, about the nature of historical continuity with the Soviet and imperial past, about the nature of tyrannical power, and about ways of resisting and overcoming it. The articles in the present book will likely serve as a starting point for this much-needed conversation about the future, or about a new social contract for Russia, the kind that will be based on the principles of freedom and justice.

I would like to thank Brad Damaré for improving the English version of this book.

Nikolaj Plotnikov
Bochum, January 15, 2025

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NIKOLAJ PLOTNIKOV

Foreword

The Angel of History depicted by Walter Benjamin in his “On the Concept of History” stands frozen with his eyes staring, his mouth open, and his wings spread. His face is turned toward the past. He cannot avert his glance from the worldwide tragedy unfolding before his very eyes. “Where *we* perceive a chain of events, *he* sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.”

We cannot know what the Angel of history now beholds and which catastrophe is now being revealed to his eyes. What we can see is only the infinite stream of tragedies, damages and death caused by the war of aggression against the people and state of Ukraine initiated by the Russian government on February 24, 2022. We see only the endless chain of crimes committed by the aggressor army. We become witnesses to how the war has deprived millions of civilians of their homes, forcing them to leave their native lands. We witness how the life project of two Post-Soviet generations is being distorted by this war while also stealing their future, and how it is tearing apart the fabric of human connections, ruining families, breaking up communities, sowing enmity between peoples.

In this chaos of events, we try to find some coherence and to make out the contours of the catastrophe that has occurred. How did it become possible, and who is responsible for it? What are its consequences? And what kind of catastrophe is this one? What name can we call it by, and which words can we use to express the sense of what has happened? All previous concepts appear to be absolutely inappropriate, since all the previous diagnosis and predictions have proved wrong.

In order to give sense back to these concepts, it is necessary to subject them to radical criticism and discard all those that have clearly revealed their intellectual failure. It is necessary to dismantle all historical, political and philosophical myths – such as “traditional values,” “unlimited sovereignty,” “uniqueness (*samobytnost*),” “Russian civilization,” “empire,” “Great Russia,” and dozens of other large and small myths of national superiority that turned out to be both the discursive justification for Russia’s military aggression and for the imperial arrogance that is currently becoming the cause of its inevitable defeat.

However, it is not just the mountains of discursive garbage nourishing the Russian political and intellectual elites’ imperial hubris (which in turn is now awakening the forces of revenge, as in the classic plot of antique tragedy) during all these Post-Soviet decades that have hindered this conceptual criticism. This criticism has also been stumbling in the public usage of concepts. In the Russian public sphere, it is prohibited to call things by their proper names – war by war, aggression by aggression, crime by crime – and those who dare to do so are stigmatized as “foreign agents” or subjected to direct repression. And this impossibility of free speech in Russia is not at all an external linguistic barrier that trains us, as in the old days of tsarist and Soviet censorship, in the ability to use “Aesopian language” between those who are “in the know.” It blocks our very ability to think clearly about these publicly unnameable phenomena and contributes to their displacement to the periphery of consciousness. Intellectual activity in Russia is deprived of its most important foundation – the possibility

of a free exchange of opinions in the course of communication without coercion or violence – and is replaced by public acclamation that can only praise the tyrant and his aggression. But the work of criticism must be articulated in order to be accomplished. While free expression is impossible in today's Russia, some discursive space of freedom must be created, by an effort of solidarity, in any part of the world free for a public intellectual position that can be published in Russian and expressed without regard to censorship or self-censorship.

This kind of solidarity effort was made by the authors of this collective volume who responded to a suggestion to formulate a common understanding of the catastrophe now unfolding. The authors are currently in Russia, Ukraine, and various countries in Europe and America – in spaces separated by increasingly impenetrable borders. But beyond these borders we are united by the conscious necessity of conducting a critical analysis of basic concepts. Without this critical analysis it is impossible to express precisely what is happening and to outline the contours of the catastrophe, much less to find new ways of speaking about ourselves, about our languages and thinking, our culture and history. Without such a critical analysis it will be impossible to establish a new foundation for a renewed space of free public discourse.

In the history of Russian public thought, there is nothing new in the solidarity of critical intellectuals expressing their public position within the framework of an uncensored collection of articles responding to major historical upheavals and declaring some important aspects of understanding modernity. A whole tradition of intellectual manifestos like this emerged during the revolutions and catastrophes of the 20th century: idealists and Marxists, liberals and socialists, émigrés and dissidents. Collective volumes like *Problems of Idealism*, *Free Conscience*, *Vekhi* (Signposts), *The Intelligentsia in Russia*, *From the Depths* and *The Kingdom of Antichrist*, *From Beneath the Boulders*, *Self-Consciousness* and others shaped a paradigm of philosophical expression that is both a conceptual analysis of modernity and a public action by intellectuals who, through their critical words, declare a civic position in a situation of growing or already overwhelming unfreedom.

The authors who have contributed to this collective volume, and who represent three generations of Russian culture in the humanities, came together in their awareness of historical continuity and in order to convey the philosophical and historical sense of the unfolding catastrophe. In spite of the differences in approaches used and themes discussed, the authors agree in formulating a common understanding of a catastrophe whose main cause could be defined as a *mental isolationism* dominating the Russian political establishment and those parts of society supporting it. "Isolationism" implies not only a mindset of social solipsism and total self-fixation, but also the social discourse and practice of excluding the Other. The authors of this volume develop this common understanding in three ways: as an *ethical, social, and anthropological catastrophe*. The point of connection between the corresponding three parts of this volume proves to be an analysis of this isolationist complex as a mixture of superior attitude, feelings of suffering an imaginary offense, and a demonstration of national distinctiveness. The components of this complex have taken shape and continue to nourish the pervasive *ressentiment* that has become the defining motive for Russian military aggression.

As has already been described by such classical scholars of *ressentiment* as Nietzsche, Scheler and Sartre, this phenomenon includes not only affects like offense or

the wide psychological spectrum associated with hate and enmity, but also a social habitus, or a set of values and norms, techniques of power and control over minds, a matrix of political behavior, as well as a peculiar type of violence practiced by a subject experiencing *ressentiment* towards others. These heterogeneous social practices and techniques are bound together by *the dominance the past holds over the present*. This dominance blocks consciousness of reality and constructs a custom-made world out of nostalgic myths, phobias, animosity, a thirst for revenge and a feeling of injustice. "The man of *ressentiment*", as Nietzsche calls him, exists in different time and space, destroying any reality that fights back against his phantom image of past insult.

In ethical terms, isolationism constructs its own morality, the morality of *ressentiment*, which is characterized by the complete absence of ethical subjectivity. All consciousness of one's own guilt and responsibility is blocked, and instead all evil is externalized in the image of an outside enemy, who is demonized and appears as the main subject of action. The "evil" enemy is set as an antipodal contrast to the mirror image of the "good" self, who lacks any capacity for ethical self-reflection. In this image of the "good self" all ethical categories are naturalized and nationalized: all these "traditional values," "our truth," or "the native Russian sense of justice" are presented as naturally or even genetically given properties of the Russian people or "Russian civilization", which require no individual ethical effort but at the same time guarantee the moral immunity of the entire nation against an evil inherent only in the "enemy." This consciousness of collective innocence and goodness is also the basis for a sense of one's own moral superiority over others, expressed in a complete refusal to obey universal laws and rules, but accompanied by continuous lamentations about the prevalence of "double standards."

Consequently, isolationism turns out to be merely a hidden form of the will to power and domination. At this point, the ethical aspect of the existing catastrophe meets its sociological aspect. This isolationist reasoning and legitimizing of the war of aggression finds its social and political implications within a system of power inaccessible to any social control or public criticism, a system created on the sly amid talk of "sovereignty" and "sovereign democracy." This is self-contained power that has no inner or outer normative regulations, neither parliamentary nor political, neither legal nor moral, neither economical nor religious. None of these normative orders has real independence from the system of power, and consequently none has the capability to really limit this power. There are only atomized individuals who resist it and whose attempts to form any basic civil solidarity are constantly being nipped in the bud. The consolidation of the population around the authorities has been achieved through the image of an external (and existential) enemy that is a never-ending construction of the media, and the fight against this enemy is used to justify the total abolition of political competition and elimination of any form of democratic pluralism. On the one hand, the images of past victories and former greatness, stolen and insulted by external enemies, has become the main fuel for maintaining the energy of isolationist *ressentiment*. On the other hand, this energy is consolidated around personalized power represented by the figure of a national leader and "father of the nation," to whom all the population's aspirations for justice, a justice suppressed by that very system of power, are addressed.

This essentially tyrannical model of governance has its counterpart in the political-economic behavior of Russian imperialism. Being unable to withstand the competition of global capitalism, it returns to the invading practices of the early colonial era, plundering and exploiting conquered territory to the fanfares of adherents of “geopolitics.” The will to expand and capture colonies is not at all contradicted by mental isolationism, but rather is based on it; one typical manifestation of that isolationism is the metaphysics of a specifically “Russian space” that supposedly has no fixed boundaries. But the lack of certainty is, according to the teachings of classical metaphysics and classical psychoanalysis, a characteristic of nothingness or death, which knows no difference and no boundaries.

At this point, we can see the *anthropological* dimension of the catastrophe in which Russia’s tyrannical regime has plunged Ukraine, Russia, and a whole world affected by the war’s near and far consequences. The dominant mental isolationism has led the authorities and society to a consistent rejection of all universal norms and humanist values. To stand for “universal values” in present-day Russia means to become a victim of public hate and humiliation at best, and of criminal prosecution at worst.

The philosophical categories that are required only for the goals of confirming the myth of Russia’s civilizational exceptionalism are themselves becoming isolationist. In this transformation of philosophy, existing cultural differences related to historical variability are sublimated to the metaphysical heights of the “Russian civilizational uniqueness” myth, or are essentially endowed with a new sense of some eternal cultural-genetic code of the Russians. The “metaphysics of the Russian thing” invented by Alexander Dugin is only a final product of an intellectual decay originating in the morbid, decades-long search for a “distinct Russian philosophy.”

The demonstrative rejection of philosophical universalism adopts several arguments from cultural criticism and postcolonial theories while portraying ideas of human rights and personal freedom as tools of Western colonial expansionism. Talk about the inapplicability of universal humanistic principles to the assessment of the political and social situation in Russia or Eurasia due to their “cultural specificity” makes them de facto akin to authoritarian dictatorships from all over the world, because the discourses of these dictatorships use the arguments of cultural relativism and particularism in order to immunize their own position against both internal and external criticism.

That’s why the only way out of this catastrophe and the only way to overcome its consequences are to recognize the fundamental intellectual failure of isolationism and to begin its consistent criticism and dismantling. Russia needs a new Enlightenment that discovers the meaning and value of intellectual, political, public, and social universalism anew. However, this kind of Enlightenment should include a reflection on its earlier defeat in Russian intellectual and cultural history.

The wind of progress has carried off Benjamin’s Angel of History, leaving the victims of historical catastrophes behind in the past. But as the witnesses and participants of the history, we have no right to forget the victims of the catastrophe being perpetrated against Ukraine before our very eyes. Our moral subjectivity is defined by our awareness of these victims and our duty to remember them, now and forever. No future is possible without this awareness and without this duty.

Bochum, December 1, 2022