

Kant and “*tabula Russia*”

Vadim Chaly¹

Recibido: 02-10-2023 / Aceptado: 23-10-2023

Abstract. The article offers an attempt to understand the present state of Kant’s legacy in Russia on the threshold of the Tercentenary. An explanans is found in the metaphors of “*tabula rasa*” and “unplowed virgin soil,” first used by Leibniz in relation to Russia in his letters and memoranda addressed to tsar Peter I and other members of the Russian elite, which became the country’s “absolute metaphors to live by” up to present time. Several known and unknown episodes from the history of the reception of Kantian ideas, his followers in Russia, and the transformation of the urban environment of Kant’s life in Königsberg, as it was becoming Kaliningrad, are presented through the prism of this metaphor. Without hoping to make specific recommendations of any use from such metaphorical grounds, this study aims to emphasize the depth, interconnectedness, and basic, metaphysical tension of the relationship between Europe and Russia, which cannot be terminated at will by either side, or by a third party. In a situation where the sides are doomed to dialog, Kant, appropriated by Russia as its “subject,” occupies the unique position of mediator of philosophical understanding and peaceful action.

Keywords: Kant’s Tercentenary, Russia, Leibniz, metaphor, social imaginary.

Cómo citar: Chaly, V. (2023). Kant and “*tabula Russia*”. *Con-Textos Kantianos*, 18, 153-162. <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/kant.91754>

A September 6, 2023 news story on the Russian Ministry of Education and Science’s page states:

“The International Kant Congress will be held in Kaliningrad, the birthplace of Immanuel Kant, from April 22 to 24, 2024. Dozens of leading scientists from many countries of the world have expressed their desire to take part in it.

Russia is organizing this grandiose event to mark the 300th anniversary of the great philosopher, who can partly be called our compatriot – Kant accepted the status of Russian subject in January 1758 and, according to a legend, never renounced it until the end of his days. Kant’s teachings in the field of gnoseology and moral philosophy have a timeless significance, occupying a recognized place in the intellectual treasury of humankind. Some of his conclusions in political philosophy are also contemporary. For example, the thesis on the illegitimacy of colonial rule or the non-legal nature of the slave-owning order established in the New World after the discovery of America by Europeans” (Minobrnauki RF 2023).

This brief text reflects many of the features of the moment in which Kant, philosophy in Russia, and Russia itself find themselves – features that may seem new and contradictory at first, but which resurface time and again throughout the history of Kantian philosophy’s interaction with Russian culture and Russian authorities. One “absolute metaphor,” in Hans Blumenberg’s terms², given to Russian absolutism by Western rationalism more than three centuries ago, is particularly helpful in grasping these conditions. It is a metaphor of “unplowed land,” of a “blank slate” to which the bearer of rationality and its “innate ideas” has a *cultural mandate*.

Since the founding of Rus’, its rulers had to seek had to seek external recognition and legitimacy. At first, it was provided by the Byzantine Empire and adopted Christianity. In the XIII-XV centuries, the *jarlig* (license) to rule northeastern Rus’ was issued in the Mongol Empire. And since the XVIII century it was if not issued, then at least certified by European rationality: the government drew legitimacy (*auctoritas*), found power (*potestas*), as well as justification for building *imperium* from its allegiance to modern progress and its use of

¹ Institutional affiliation: Lomonosov Moscow State University, *Academia Kantiana* of Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University; email: vchaly@kantiana.ru

² “Metaphors can first of all be *leftover elements*, rudiments on the path *from mythos to logos*; as such, they indicate the Cartesian provisionality of the historical situation in which philosophy finds itself at any given time, measured against the regulative ideality of the pure logos. Metaphorology would here be a critical reflection charged with unmasking and counteracting the inauthenticity of figurative speech. But metaphors can also –hypothetically, for the time being –be *foundational elements* of philosophical language, ‘translations’ that resist being converted back into authenticity and logicity.” (Blumenberg 2011, 3)

science and technology. It appeared, in the words of the poet Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837), as “the only European” in the Russian and adjacent lands, to which the empire, according to this narrative, carried the light of culture and civilization. Recently this “only European” has decided to try to radically abort the European project and reinvent itself as “the only Chinese,” but, evidently, the “Chinaman of Königsberg” has remained on board as a subject of the Russian Empire, loyal to his citizenship, unlike some today.

This article begins with an exploration of the image of Russia as *tabula rasa*, proposed by Leibniz and dominating the imagination of Russian rulers, as well as enthusiastic and horrified spectators, right up to the present day. This “explanans” is then applied to the “explanandum” – the adventures of Kant and some of his followers in Russia. Few new “hard” facts will be offered here regarding the reception of Kant in Russian culture, which is well studied.³ So, in terms of methodology, this essay, somewhat unusually for Kantian studies, proceeds not by conceptual and textual analysis, nor by the logical construction of arguments, but by the study of metaphors (Blumenberg 2011 [1960]; Lakoff and Johnson 1980) and social and “sociotechnical” imaginaries (Castoriadis 1997 [1975]; Taylor 2003; Jasanoff and Kim 2015)⁴ – modes of thinking that in Russian history, and perhaps in history as such, have no less dramatic consequences than logical reasoning. The metaphor of *tabula Russia* allows to arrange known facts in a new pattern to enrich the understanding of the riddles and paradoxes of Russian Kantiana.

It must be said that “Russia-understanding” has understandably become a condemned activity for many, giving way to “Russia-judging” or “Russia-denial.” But this attitude essentially mirrors the mistake of Russian absolutism, inspired by the dubious revisionist metaphor in question. Moreover, a deficit of understanding – and of understanding the importance of understanding – has brought us to where we are today. Spinoza repeatedly returned to the idea that understanding, unlike “derision, bewailing, blaming, or execration,” is the proper task of philosophy (e. g. TP, Ch. I, § 1). Kant warned us against judgments that are not based on the concepts of understanding and on intuitions, although some intuitions may prompt one to recoil. Thus, understanding remains the chief responsibility of philosophers, although for some it is only the beginning of responsibility.

Kant as an enigma - and a problem

Today, it can be difficult to understand why the Russian authorities courted Kant in such a way, why he received so much attention from top officials and state institutions. Part of the answer lies on the surface – and at the bottom of the sea. Any group that claims to be part of the global elite on behalf of a country wants to have international prestige. Kant, one of the world’s greatest philosophers, might seem a huge deposit of “soft power,” the appropriation of which creates opportunities for influence. The appropriation of Kant can be understood as part of the overall task of symbolically kidnapping or rescuing the “old Europe” supposedly lost by the West that has eroded and abandoned its values, primarily those of Christianity and the Enlightenment. The Soviet Union secured its claim to cultural hegemony by appropriating the Enlightenment in the form of Marxist ideology, which it presented as the most progressive achievement of Western – indeed, global – thought. The new Russia, too, is hastily going through ideological outfits in which it can appear attractive to the global discontent – and among them, first and foremost, to itself. Even in the quoted text, attempts to appropriate both progressive decolonial and reactionary traditionalist agendas at the same time are visible. Last but not least, the more concrete objective of strategic rapprochement with Germany has been a goal for many generations of Russian politicians – and has had its resolute opponents in national and other actors whose interests would suffer from such rapprochement. Kant was not only supposed to bless the Nord Stream with his authority, but in general to cement the geopolitical alliance of “German reason” and “Russian soul,” technology and resources, form and matter, now exploded. Kant’s name was given to the University of Kaliningrad in 2005, on the eve of the holiday, which bore which bore the name, unthinkable today, of “750th anniversary of Kaliningrad-Königsberg” and gathered the leaders of both states.

The scholars of the history of Kant’s reception in Russia identify its several phases and parties, which can only be briefly named here. The story begins with sympathetic interest of Russian visitors of Kant (e.g. Karamzin) and retellings of his ideas by German professors at Moscow University (e.g. Schaden). The French Revolution and the subsequent upheavals in Europe provoked a government reaction that affected Kant and his sporadic followers. The beginning of reforms after Russia’s defeat in the Crimean War coincided with the beginning of the neo-Kantian movement that influenced a number of Russian academic philosophers (e.g.

³ Among the most important are the books and articles by Nina Dmitrieva (2007; 2022a; 2022b), Leonard Kalinnikov (2005; 2008), Alexey Krouglov (2009; 2012a; 2012b; 2020a; 2020b), Nelly Motroshilova (2006), Thomas Nemeth (2017), Vladimir Zhuchkov (1994; 2005), as well as articles by Anatoly Akhutin (1990) and Sergey Chernov (1994). In terms of methodology, this essay, somewhat unusually for Kantian studies, proceeds not by conceptual and textual analysis, nor by the logical construction of arguments, but by the study of metaphors (Blumenberg 2011 [1960]; Lakoff and Johnson 1980) and social and “sociotechnical” imaginaries (Castoriadis 1997 [1975]; Taylor 2003; Jasanoff and Kim 2015) – modes of thinking that in Russian history, and perhaps in history as such, have no less dramatic consequences than logical reasoning.

⁴ *Tabula rasa* and “unplowed soil” qualify as key components of Russian “sociotechnical imaginaries,” which are “collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable [and undesirable – *V.C.*] futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology.” (Jasanoff and Kim 2015, 4)

Vvedensky, Lapshin). At the same time, throughout the 19th century, Kant was criticized “from the right,” from religious philosophy (e.g. Karpov), and “from the left,” from Marxism (e.g. Plekhanov). The First World War, which pitted Russia against Germany, provoked an emotional denial of everything German, including German philosophy (e.g. Ern, Vorotynkin). Soviet philosophy saw in Kant both one of the predecessors of Marxism and a class-alien ideologist of the bourgeoisie. Throughout Soviet history, the attitude softened; in 1974, celebrations took place on the occasion of Kant’s 250th anniversary, and what is now *Kantian Journal* was founded. The post-Soviet period lifted restrictions on research and publication, allowing Kantian philosophy to take a prominent place in academia. For now, this place remains, but the heterogeneity of the present Russian elite is reflected in the ambivalence of assessments of Kantian philosophy.

This ambivalence is evident in the recent events. On the one hand, Kant is quoted by Putin, a state-run university bears Kant’s name, and the preparation of his Tercentenary is ordered by a presidential decree and by the quoted announcement of the Ministry. On the other hand, the out-of-control grassroots vote by the residents of Kaliningrad to assign the name of Kant to the local airport as part of a top-down initiative to shape historical memory in 2018 provoked a “special operation” with the dousing of the Kant’s monument with paint and mobilization of the Baltic Fleet to vote for another, proper candidate⁵, while Kant scholars are routinely accused by pocket “patriots” of Russophobia. How to explain this inconsistency?

Leibniz, the tsar-“plowman” and his “virgin land”: an explanans

Archetypal for our problem is the story of Leibniz, who became not only Kant’s predecessor in the field of metaphysics, but also the founder of the role that the Russian state was prepared to offer to philosophy. More precisely, and remarkably, Leibniz himself volunteered for this role on behalf of philosophy, seeking the patronage of an absolute monarch to realize his universal vision. He welcomed the intentions of the young tsar Peter to force Russia along the European path and hoped that the country was “destined to become a mediating link between the two worlds, the Western and the Eastern” (Guerrier 1871, 2; cf. Guerrier 1873, 2). Leibniz nurtured plans of the unity of Christendom, of Greater Europe beyond the West, and he was interested in the possibility of using Russia’s resources in its construction. The age of enlightened absolutism in general was the “projecting age,”⁶ and Leibniz’s projects stood out merely for their universal scope and philosophical depth: the concept of “innate ideas” and fascination with deductive reasoning disposed him to envision his activity as the construction of rational schemes and the projection of these as forms outward, in one “direction of fit”: from-tsar-to-world. The matter on which the forms were to be imprinted also needed to be studied: in memoranda addressed to Peter, Leibniz advised to “make maps, record the peculiarities of dialects and customs, investigate trades, determine what the country produces and what it could produce” (quoted by Guerrier 1871, 18). The study of Russian *terra incognita* became one of the goals of the Petersburg Academy of Sciences, created at the instigation of Leibniz in 1724. Gottfried Achenwall is considered to be the founder of statistics, but its impulses were directed at Russia, its people, and other resources, already by Leibniz.

Most philosophically significant, however, is his assessment of the general properties of the object of rational state design as *tabula rasa*, which appears several times in Leibniz’s texts. In a letter to his friends and patrons in Wolfenbüttel about the news of the young tsar’s trip to Europe, the philosopher writes: “since the tsar wants to bring his country out of ignorance, he [Leibniz’s teacher Erhard Weigel (1625-1699), seeking to realize his pedagogical ideas] will find there *tabulam rasam*, as if it were a novelty to be plowed up, for the Muscovites lack any notion of science” (Leibniz 1993, I, 14:11).

Many years later, in January 1712, Leibniz wrote in the draft of a letter to the Tsar:

“Providence, apparently, wants science to go around the globe and now move to Scythia, and therefore chose your majesty as an instrument, since you can, on the one hand, from Europe, and on the other – from Asia to take the best and improve by appropriate measures what is done in both parts of the world; for in your state, everything that concerns science is still new and like a blank of white paper, and therefore you can avoid many errors that have crept into Europe gradually and imperceptibly. It is known that a palace that is built anew comes out better than one that was being built for centuries, often being subjected to corrections and changes” (Guerrier 1871, 134).

Many fair words have been said in support of Leibniz’s vision as enlightening, ordering, and promoting the best interests of Russia (Kurennoi 2004). He himself assessed it in this way, e. g., in the same letter to the tsar:

“... I have loved the sciences from my childhood, have been engaged in them and have had the good fortune, despite many distracting occupations, to make various very important discoveries, praised in the press by

⁵ See Chaly (2020).

⁶ Cf. Daniel Defoe’s *An Essay Upon Projects* (1697).

impartial and famous people. I have not found only a powerful sovereign who was sufficiently interested in it. I hope that I have found one in your majesty, for you can easily and almost without trouble and expense make the best arrangements in your vast state, and you show a willingness to do so. These magnanimous intentions of your majesty can contribute to the welfare of countless people not only in the present but also in future generations, to be of great benefit to the entire human race, especially to the Russian and all other Slavic peoples” (Guerrier 1871, 134).

However, even the best intentions of enlightenment have a downside. One must first give Leibniz what is due: in his explicit assessments and, apparently, in his implicit attitudes, there is no contempt for “backward” peoples, which is common in other authors of the era; he is not a defender of colonization. Of course, authors particularly sensitive to racism find it in Leibniz as well (Cook 2018; Harfouch 2017), but he was also one of the first great Western philosophers to argue for the juridical inadmissibility of chattel slavery (Jorati 2019). His fundamental principle of the identity of indiscernibles emphasizes the individuality of each concrete being in the universe and implies, albeit not developed by Leibniz himself (and certainly not by his regal followers who had no interest in such a doctrine), an ethics of respect not only for each member of humanity but also for non-human individuals (Marder 2014, 116). The case of Leibniz and his reception in Russia confirms that the dialectic of enlightenment lies deeper than personal beliefs and prejudices of the enlighteners, and that the development of their ideas does not always adopt the most desirable course and realize the best possibilities.

Nor does Leibniz himself always realize them. It is ironic and instructive that the thinker, famous for his criticism of Locke’s idea of the initial emptiness of individual mind, so easily and enthusiastically uses the image of *tabula rasa* in relation to a large and little-known country. After all, the “customs, dialects, and trades” which he urges to be collected do not come into his reckoning, nor are they the end or the basis determining future transformations. They are significant only as means or material – or obstacles – for what the sovereign, the sole subject, the bearer of innate ideas inspired, of course, by Leibniz himself, will decide to map out on the territory and its population according to science and for the greater perfection of humanity. The basic modernist metaphor of government as the construction of a new building according to a universal plan verified by science is already found in Descartes. But Descartes is ready, albeit reluctantly, to accept for a while, as his “provisional morality,” the presence of the old, contingent and irrational, and also limits the rational construction to his own private “plot.” Leibniz, on the other hand, is filled with innovative enthusiasm and good intentions, is unable to recognize the value of the old, and considers the whole of Europe, at the very least, as his plot.

This, in the terminology of Descartes, *prejudice* towards the traditionally accumulated “is” and the *precipitancy* in implementing the “ought” which is brought from outside, become the dominant attitudes towards Russia among external, even the most benevolent, actors, as well as among the internal state actor and a significant part of the intelligentsia during the following centuries up to present day. It would be wrong to once again display the same prejudice and precipitancy and immediately mark this feature with the label of “colonialism,” whether external, “internal” or “double.”⁷ This can be more discreetly called “political rationalism” or, in more modern terms, “political constructivism” in the sense that the form, structure, theories, ideas that pretend to be “innate,” universal, but in fact depend on history and particular context, are prioritized over the domestic “irrational” content, way of life, over the polyphony of autochthonous cultures, which is ignored or suppressed by an overbearing effort in the name of some abstract and largely imaginary higher end also borrowed from the exported “hard core.” The concrete existence is sacrificed to an abstract projective essence.⁸

Leibniz does not sense the inbound dangers of statism, and his optimism about absolute power knows no doubt: the more powerful the monarch, the less resistance his will meets, the more perfect the world he will be able to build as its “single professional architect” (Descartes) if he adopts the science proposed by Leibniz.⁹ At the extreme, the tsar appears in the quasi-divine position of the creator of the world *ex nihilo*, possessing full knowledge of his creation, owning its “universal characteristic” or, as another recent metaphor has it, “civilizational code.” In such a view, Russia appears not as a mere complement to the European world, not as a dark periphery to the clear center of the self-enlightening European monad. It will surpass it, because in Russia there is no tradition to resist the innovation. The Russian world, *pax Russica*, built over the *tabula rasa* in such an optic looks like the best of all possible worlds – and therefore must become real. This is an approximation of how Russian imperial construction is born out of the spirit of Western science – and not merely out of irrational

⁷ The doctrine of “internal colonialism” views Russia through the prism of “autocolonization”: the center pursues a colonial policy towards the periphery, just as European empires oppressed overseas territories. “Double colonialism” adds to this that the elite running the center is itself colonized by the West, which directs its actions, especially the extraction of resources from Russia, in its own interests.

⁸ Yaron Ezrahi in his works connected “empiricism, induction, and visibility” to the rise of democracy and “modern commonsense realism” in the Anglo-American context (Ezrahi 2012, 104). This suggests that “the clash of civilizations” we are experiencing may, among other things, be a “clash of epistemologies”.

⁹ “... it is well to consider that order and harmony are also something mathematical and which consist in certain proportions: and that justice being nothing else than the order which is observed with regard to good and evil of intelligent creatures, it follows that God, who is the sovereign substance, immutably maintains justice and the most perfect order which can be observed” (Leibniz 1988, 4-5).

impulses and autochthonous myths, as it is often implied today. Russia is not alone in this construction; it has been influenced and supported by Europe, serving mutual interests, and this long and formative past is not conveniently undone by merely cutting off the relations.

Russian history shows how the dominant metaphor of centralized construction from scratch, of the heroic “plowing of the virgin soils,” has become “the metaphor to live by” (Lakoff and Johnson) or the chief “sociotechnical imaginary” (Jasanoff and Kim) – in the Petrine reforms and subsequent political projects of tsarism, in the practices of the Bolsheviks and Stalinism, in “perestroika” and the attempted quick post-Soviet “transit,” as well as in current efforts to construct a contradictory situational assemblage of tsarist and Soviet meanings by postmodernist techniques.¹⁰ “When you chop wood, chips fly” – this Russian proverb became a leitmotif of Russian modernity, often heard from Lenin¹¹ and Stalin, among others. Plowing, the “permanent revolution,” became the main occupation, dominating over other processes that would be described by metaphors of sowing, tending the sprouts, harvesting, and finally “drinking tea with jam” and enjoying the fruits of labor.¹²

From Leibniz’s *tabula Russia* there is a direct path to “Russia is an icy desert where a dashing man wanders” – the most famous statement of arguably the most famous Russian conservative politician Konstantin Pobedonostsev (1827-1907), who, at the end of the 19th century, tried in vain to save the collapsing tsarist regime – and found no support for it in the institutional void, either inherent in the country (as per Leibniz) or, on the contrary, arising from immoderateness and adventurism in the race with the West, which had burned up the unappreciated resources of tradition. Nihilism, a concept introduced by F.H. Jacobi (the “young Kant” of the Internet), found a wide circulation in Russia’s “icy desert,” providing a rare case of a successful reference of a Western concept to Russian reality.

The described metaphysical inclinations and metaphor-driven attitudes are manifested in the phenomenon of “from-state-to-people” coercion, evident to many leading Russian and foreign historians from different epochs and parties:

“... the pursuit of a man, of labor and industrial power in a vast, but poor and deserted state becomes an essential occupation of the government: if someone left, he is to be caught and attached to his place so that he could work, make a living and pay” (Solovyov 2013 [1863], 13:18).

“An indispensable concomitant of a political system which made such extreme demands on society was an apparatus of control. [...] The more the state asked of it, the more society practiced evasion, and the state [...] had to engage in systematic manhunts” (Pipes 1974, 108).

“Russia’s rulers invariably look to the state as their instrument to manage or close the gap with the West. They impose coercive state-led modernization to try to beat Russia into being more competitive, while also trying to undermine Western power, unity, and resolve” (Kotkin 2022).

If “much of early modern European statecraft seemed ... devoted to rationalizing and standardizing what was a social hieroglyph into a legible and administratively more convenient format” (Scott 1998, 3), then in *tabula Russia* this “social hieroglyph” was denied recognition altogether. And this, of course, caused alienation, resistance, and evasion of “matter” from “form,” which further entailed a variety of social, political, semantic (language not “reaching up to reality”¹³), and other problems. The resistance and evasion of mobilization usually provoked escalation of state efforts. This self-replicating vicious circle forms the core of Russian imperial autopoiesis. This is what consumed the Russian subject Immanuel Kant, the hero of the explanandum.

Friedrichsburg fortress

The Friedrichsburg fortress was built in the middle of the 17th century on the outskirts of Königsberg to bring the motley post-Hanseatic trinity of the then commercial and craft towns of Altstadt, Kneiphof, and Löbenicht into the Prussian absolutist state framework. Subsequently, the fortress served as a landmark, a

¹⁰ E. g., *Virgin Soil Upturned* became the title of a monumental novel by Mikhail Sholokhov (1905-1984), depicting the Soviet efforts at rural collectivization. The fact that Sholokhov uniquely became a laureate of both Nobel as well as Lenin and Stalin prizes in literature points towards unanimity in acceptance of the titular metaphor on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

¹¹ E.g. “Let the lap-dogs of bourgeois society, from Belorussov to Martov, squeal and yelp about every extra chip that is sent flying in cutting down the big, old wood. What else are lap-dogs for if not to yelp at the proletarian elephant? Let them yelp.” (Lenin 1972, 262)

¹² ““What is to be done?” - asked an impatient young man from St. Petersburg. - What is to be done? If it is summer, peel berries and make jam; if it is winter, drink tea with this jam.” – Russian philosopher Vasily Rozanov (1856-1919) famously wrote this in 1918, denouncing the revolutionary zeal of the time.

¹³ The difficulties of unreflexively applying the concepts of the Western lexicon to grasp the Russian condition can hardly be overestimated. “Nation,” “state,” “citizen,” “parliament,” “democracy,” and other “basic historical concepts” have rather specific meanings and habitats, and the difficult historical-semantic work of calibrating their meanings for Russia has not yet been done. In the absence of this work and due to lack of understanding of its necessity, these and other concepts often turn into empty slogans and ideologems that foster the flow of superficial judgments and invectives, again vainly aimed to plow the Russian soils.

spatial regulative for the walks of the critical Kant, which were subordinated to a strict temporal order. The cultivation of a character made up of strictly selected, fixed and observed maxims as human's only path to freedom, understood as domination over the mechanism of nature, echoes the construction of fortresses to ensure state sovereignty over territories and their populations. Again, one may recall Descartes, who outside of philosophy and science was a military engineer and an admirer of fortification as a way of organizing "clear and distinct" life in strict geometric order over the motley and slurring of tradition.

The young Tsar Peter, who arrived incognito in Königsberg in 1697 to begin his acquaintance with Europe, was also fascinated by fortification. Yes, he visited the colorful mores of the three old towns, bearing the Hanseatic republican imprint, and talked to the magistrates, but he spent most of his month in Königsberg in the fortress, firing a cannon. The bombardier's diploma, given to Peter by a Prussian colonel, was Russia's ticket to modernity – and an indication that for its leaders, the choice between cannon and butter was inherently biased in one direction. Russia's first modern fortress, built at Peter's behest on Kotlin Island to protect the new capital he had established in defiance of nature in the marshes, was copied from Friedrichsburg (Kretinin 1996). While Kant tried to become sovereign over his own time, over the temporal order of his experiences, Peter established an empire that did not recognize natural contingencies and spatial limits. Now we are witnessing that the "window to Europe" he cut through three hundred years ago is being hastily patched up on both sides, and "fortress Russia" is trying to take control over all, even the slightest, movements that occur inside its walls. Kant is kept inside.

Pyrotechnics and fortification

When in 1758, sixty years after Peter's Great Embassy, the modernized Russian army came to Königsberg, the new authorities treated the young Privatdozent Kant with ambivalence. One side was expressed by Andrei Bolotov (1738-1833), a young lieutenant, a petty officer then and a major scholar in the future, who frequented the lectures of the Königsberg professors. His sphere of interests included ethics and religion, and in his search for knowledge he encountered the Wolffians, to whom magister Kant seemed to belong. He is not mentioned in Bolotov's remarkable memoirs, but there the Russian author bemoans Wolffianism as a doctrine that turns "a good Christian ... almost always into a bad one, or more often into a deist and malbeliever" (Bolotov 1870, 1:984; cf. Krouglov 2009, 59). Kant the tempter, Kant the devil, Kant the "pillar of evil against God" with his heresy of self-legislating reason has been a target of criticism for many Russian religious thinkers (*Schwärmer*) ever since.¹⁴

However, the other side of Kant's potential also showed itself immediately: during the four years of Russian occupation, Russian officers took lessons from Kant. But it was not ethics and metaphysics that interested them, as we would perhaps wishfully think, but pyrotechnics and fortification, which Kant taught them along with mathematics (Krouglov 2009, 21-24). The power of modernity proved stronger than the fear of its temptations, and attempts to appropriate pyrotechnics and fortification without letting in the autonomy of critical reason and republican freedom have been the essence of Russian modernization right up to the present day.

Two centuries later the achievements of pyrotechnic – Allied bombs in 1944 – burned the center of Königsberg, and the Soviet assault in 1945 overran its considerable fortifications. The ruins of its center were removed by Soviet workers under the direction of the Communist Party, a single architect, to build a city of the future, named after Stalin's associate. And in the void in the place of Kanter's house, where Kant spent most of the "silent decade" to crush the old metaphysics, a monument to Soviet Baltic sailors appeared: a torpedo-carrying destroyer speedboat. A philosophically inclined tourist stopping here cannot help but think of the cruel irony of the *Weltgeist*.

Philosophy as a House of Soviets, and philosophy as a "curative bath"

Let us linger on this empty place in today's Kaliningrad. It offers a good perspective for a "metacritique" of how Kant and modern rationalism in general have been used in Russia. The abandoned House of Soviets rises here on the former "king's mountain" as a monument to the "purism of reason." Built next to the cellars of a medieval castle – which, let's not forget, was itself built on the remains of a Prussian settlement named Twangste – and abandoned at the end of the USSR, the House of Soviets symbolizes both the daring and the implosion of the Soviet version of the modernist project of centralized control over life. It resembles the notorious Panopticon and, indeed, is a direct successor to the Bentham brothers' project, which in fact began in Russia, in the service of count Potemkin (Bartlett 2022).¹⁵

¹⁴ Alexey Krouglov provides a multi-page selection of such epithets and metaphors (Krouglov 2009, 487-97).

¹⁵ Interestingly, the first Russian translation of Kant's *Groundwork*, made in 1803 by Yakov Ruban (1760?-1807?), was dedicated to Admiral Nikolai Mordvinov (Krouglov 2009, 114), who was an important friend and patron of Samuel and Jeremy Bentham. Kant, Russian admirals, "Potemkin villages," and panoptic projects – this kaleidoscope has a long history.

Life filled the high-rise buildings surrounding the House of Soviets, though not in the way the “single architect” had planned: a strip club opened in the basement of the palace, where Soviet citizens were supposed to register marriages, and a run-down bookstore began selling luxury furniture. The central tower of the panopticon has remained dead for nearly forty years, continuing to provoke controversy far beyond the city’s limits (Kramer 2021).

For more than eighty years, the spot from which Johann Georg Hamann warned Kant and his co-thinkers against the abuses of reason has also remained empty. The son of a Königsberg physician and keeper of the public baths, who first tried to become a great guitarist in London – two hundred years before Jimi Hendrix, – Hamann settled in his father’s house by the river and began to preach philosophy as a therapeutic procedure, a “curative bath,” denying it the right to erect grand theories – one hundred and eighty years before Ludwig Wittgenstein. Two hundred years before the building of the House of Soviets on king’s mountain, Hamann indignantly criticized the enlightened despot Frederick, the foreign “architects,” like Voltaire, who had his ear, and the Berlin-Babylon they were building.¹⁶ He also warned that philosophy, if it serves pyrotechnics and fortification and is paid by the kings, cannot claim autonomy, impartiality, and universality for its teachings (Sparling 2011, 31).

The House of Soviets can be thought of as a monument to complications of Cartesian dualism – as a machine, a *res extensa*, into which mind, *res cogitans*, never entered. Or to Kantian universalism taken to its extremes – as a concrete model of the *Critique of Pure Reason* with an entrance lobby of sensibility, corridors and offices of understanding, and a meeting hall of ideas of reason, which bring to order the incoming flow of perceptions. Only one way of organizing experience is possible, one point of view, one perspective “from everywhere” – that from the concrete tower in the center. Here sits the awe-inspiring legislative reason, shaping the only possible language for relevant descriptions of acts and generalization of maxims, and so on. But life-in-itself, unrecognized and unrecognizable to the view from the central tower, reminded of its own laws, proclivities, inclinations, predispositions, appetites, meanings, and ends, proving to be more complex – and eventually cracking the superimposed structure. The House of Soviets failed because it ignored the complex underbelly of the past, and also proved redundant in its effort to force a reductive centralized scheme upon the world. But the lesson, it seems, went unlearned.

Physical geography and biopower

The analogies between the House of Soviets in Kaliningrad and the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the Politburo and the transcendental subject may seem too frivolous and Hamannesque, so let’s back it up with some historical substance. It is known that in his final decade Kant became a member of the Petersburg Academy of Sciences. The document on his acceptance is dated July 28, 1794 – the day Robespierre lost his head. Although Kant entered the Russian service according to the Gregorian calendar, the question remains: how could this “Robespierre of the intellect” (Heine) be useful to the Russian state at a time when there was no word more terrible than “revolution,” even if it was “Copernican”? The answer is given by Kant’s recommender Johann Gottlieb Georgi. Born in 1729 and being in the Russian service since the late 1760s, Georgi turned from “Johann Gottlieb” to “Ivan Ivanovich” by the 1790s. He was known as an indefatigable researcher of Russia’s territories and population, the author of the four-volume *Description of All Peoples Inhabiting the Russian State, their Everyday Rituals, Wont, Clothes, Dwellings, Exercises, Amusements, Creeds, and Other Memorabilia*.¹⁷ That is, as an active participant of Leibniz’s project to develop and rationalize *tabula Russia*, one of the agents of state expansion. His works were among Kant’s sources on Russia in his physical geography (e.g. PG 9:200) and anthropology (e.g. V-Anth/Mron 25:1272).

In what capacity was Kant known to Georgi? Indeed, he was known as a philosopher: “being widely acquainted with higher mathematics, natural history in its entirety, the theory of aesthetics, etc., he preferred the field of speculative philosophy” (Klado and Raskin 1956, 372). However, Kant is most interesting and understandable to Georgi and the academy as a promising specialist in that very field practiced by the recommender: “The ‘physical geography’ on which he has long been working will no doubt increase the fame of this aged philosopher” (Ibid.). It does not matter what philosophical and political convictions you hold, as long as you keep them to yourself and actively help the state to extract resources from the territory and population.

Needless to say, this economy has changed little. The rationale for celebrating Kant’s Tercentenary on the ministry’s website, like Georgi’s recommendation, contains general phrases about Kant’s contribution to

¹⁶ “If Königsberg was a relatively humble East-Prussian port city – though it could boast of its Albertina University and Kant – to an active religious imagination like Hamann’s its name undoubtedly carried overtones of Zion, i.e., “the mountain of the king”; and it was from here, rather fittingly, armed with a sense of providential commission, that he conducted his lifelong literary campaign against the Enlightenment, as embodied in the “enlightened” despot of Sans Souci, Frederick the Great, and his court of “enlightened” architects and master builders, the “pyrgotects,” of Berlin-Babel.” (Betz 2012, 104)

¹⁷ *Beschreibung aller Nationen des Russischen Reichs, ihrer Lebensart, Religion, Gebräuche, Wohnungen, Kleidung und übrigen Merkwürdigkeiten* (1776-1780).

philosophy, but also ends with specifics – a description of the benefits Kant can bring to the state actors today. The irony is that while Georgi suggested putting Kant at the service of Western rationalization (some would say colonization), the contemporary document, on the contrary, presents Kant as a critic of Western colonialism. The latter, although being a correct assessment of Kant’s arguably mature views (e. g. ZeF 8:358ff), omits Kant’s much-discussed racist statements within that very physical geography, including his not-so-famous remarks on the inferiority of Russians.¹⁸

J.W.L. Mellmann and the ethical community

Problems begin if one turns to stating one’s beliefs publicly, and not in an esoteric way (Strauss). This is illustrated by the dramatic story of Johann Wilhelm Ludwig Mellmann (1764-1795), the first Kantian in Russia. Mellmann came to Russia in 1786 to teach ancient languages and literature and became a professor at Moscow University in 1792. In 1795, for propagating Kantian doctrine on religion in the classroom, Mellmann was dismissed, investigated, spent three weeks in prison, was declared insane, expelled from Russia, and died within days after entering Prussia, less than a hundred kilometers from Königsberg (Krouglov 2012b; Nemeth 2017, 23-26).

In his testimony, which deserves a closer reading, Mellmann, in a simple-minded and straightforward manner, indicates his commitment to Kant’s philosophy in its newest and, in his view, most profound expression, as presented in the *Religion*. He speaks of the necessity of trusting the conscience of others for the mutual maintenance of good in the human community, and that people “are all my friends, because in all there is at least a disposition to good, but my enemies are such as I am my own enemy in consideration of the inclination to evil” (“Delo ob I. V. L. Mel’manne” 1863, 97). Mellmann declined the proposal to cease publicly expounding these dangerous ideas, citing the obligation to speak only the truth, and added: “Oh! If this yes, yes, or no, no, and what is over this, comes from evil, were accepted in general in all human actions, in public and private life, even between states and others in respect! This I desire, as one who prays after Kant (if this is to be called a prayer), and Kant is a repeater and inspirer of the word of Christ and the Scriptures of Christ in the name and according to the commandment of God” (Ibid.). These and other striking passages read as if taken straight from Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*. Mellmann, a person certainly worthy of all sympathy, was found to have lost his mind and to be unfit for the role of a university professor who, being paid by the tsar, cannot afford to say what he thinks directly.

The unique transcendental subject (and its property)

What if Leibniz is right, and Russia is a *tabula rasa*, an “icy desert” of savagery (*Rohigkeit*), the order for which can only be imposed from the outside, and only rigidly? Such an admission is unthinkable and punishable towards anything else today, but it seems almost compulsory towards Russia in its present condition. In this exceptional case, it might seem necessary and therefore possible to increase the pressure, the compulsion to truth, the exclusive bearer of which is the order-imposing subject. The subject is in its right not to see and listen: there is no one qualifying as a peer, no independent facts to be considered, and *objective attitude* is the only stance possible with regard to plain matter, *hyle*.

However, the attempts to establish the dictatorship of an absolute subject inside Russia have been repeated more than once and have, so far, invariably led to failures – palace coups, revolutions, regime collapses. The claims of the absolute subject time and again turned out to be disproportionate to its limited ontological status and epistemic capacities, while “matter” found enough form and autonomy to resist and evade, although hardly enough for more. Attempts to impose a proper order by force from outside have also failed repeatedly.

So, what is to be done?

Even those who believe that Leibniz is right would have to agree that today, Kant, “swallowed” as he is by *tabula Russia*, offers a unique chance to reach Russia to *both* understand it and try to influence at least some of its various parties with words – not only by *logos*, but perhaps also by *myths* and *new, better metaphors and imaginaries*. Kant is in a peculiar position of influence that is not external, alien and therefore likely to be rejected, but internal, and also belonging to “the intellectual treasury of humankind.”

¹⁸ E. g. “There is a certain age where the immaturity of the understanding ceases, but there also exist people who are lifelong immature. Thus someone said of the Russians that they will never be masters and teachers of the sciences, but are only good apprentices; they would, however, always have to get the teachers from foreign countries. True, they could become masters in mathematics, because there [things] proceed according to precepts, but not in other sciences.” (V-Anth/Fried 25:542; Kant 2012, 104) To be treated fairly, Kant’s racism should perhaps be viewed in the larger framework of his beliefs and speculations about the natural (i. e. contingent, empirical) development of reason: he does not seem to provide humans with any exceptional or privileged status among other beings endowed with reason (e. g. NTH 1:359-360). From this, taken alone, regardless of “pure moral metaphysics,” might follow that should a super-intelligent being, natural or artificial, become aware of our human-populated planet, it could also deem it a *tabula rasa* in need of plowing and subsequent proper cultivation.

Russians are deeply divided regarding the course now chosen for them and their country. For many, including those occupying positions of power and influence, anti-Westernism and the policy of confrontation, attempts to reconstruct outdated Soviet and imperial forms by the heirs of Stalinism and Tsarism do not correspond to their understanding of Russian interests and human values. The very fact that Kant is not excluded from the plans, and Russian state actors, as best they can, are trying to gather philosophical forces to celebrate the Tricentenary, testifies to the significance of their own European identity. The current anti-Westernism of the elites is dictated by resentment at not being recognized as equals by their Western “partners” no less than by sober calculation (indeed, the calculation here is questionable in terms of both empirical evidence and logical coherence). Another object of grievance for the ruling group is the small but important “enlightened urban class” within the country, which did not support the regime and generally expressed, particularly in 2011-2012, doubts about the legitimacy of the ruling elite. A state of exception creates opportunities for suppression of this part of the population. Kant maintains contact with those Europeans and semi-Europeans who remain inside Russia and therefore retain some possibility of influencing its condition – and for this reason remains a target for those parties whose interests and beliefs are threatened by dialogue.

What can Kantian philosophical influence be? Perhaps it could take the form of a patient, yet firm, reminder that Kant-1, who called by the high name of “categorical imperative” the demand to submit to any contingent authority that happened to have power, forbade not only revolutionary actions, but also doubts about the origins and necessity of one’s contingent political condition, thus offering a flattering and handy “transcendental deduction” to authority, any authority whatsoever – goes together with Kant-2, reformist, republican, moral personalist, empirical fallibilist and perspectivist, proponent of the regulative idea of perpetual peace and ethical community, who not only praised Frederick, perhaps somewhat superficially, but at the same time essentially gave the “logical egoist” monarch an ultimatum on behalf of reason and its public, and so on.¹⁹ How accessible and effectual this possibility is given the present reality, to what extent “Kantian imaginaries” are capable of motivating political action, whether the Kantian link or “pipeline” will persist beyond or even up to April 22, 2024, is utterly unknown in the fog of war, just as much else is today. But even a chance of peace is worth a mass.

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¹⁹ This Kant-2 strongly resembles the one being envisioned by Robert Hanna (2017).

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