



Andrey Borisovich Zubov

The Russian Catastrophe

and Chances to Overcome It

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Introduction

Professor Zubov at Masaryk University

It is a great honour for me to give a brief introduction to this book by Professor Andrey Borisovich Zubov, who was born in Moscow in 1952. This prominent figure in contemporary Russian historiography, religious studies and political science enjoys an exceptional relationship with our university. Following the Russian occupation of Crimea in 2014, which Professor Zubov strongly criticized, Mikuláš Bek, the predecessor to our present rector Martin Bareš, offered him a teaching post at Masaryk University. At that point, however, the Russian scholar did not take up the offer. Although he expressed his deepest gratitude, he stated he would prioritize remaining in Russia for as long as possible and working on behalf of the liberal opposition there, which he did indeed do despite immense personal difficulty. He had to leave his university, the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, where he had held a prominent position, and he was stripped of all his other posts for disagreeing with the policies of the Russian Federation. For the enlightened reader this story provides more than one parallel with the experiences of the Czech writers and academics who were placed under significant pressure during the period of Normalization and often had to choose between the risks of staying in their country and emigration.

A milestone in the relationship between Professor Zubov and Masaryk University was reached in 2019 when the university decided to honour this courageous academic with the title of Doctor honoris causa, the highest award which can be conferred by a public university in the Czech Republic. In the laudation given by the then deputy rector Petr Dvořák at the presentation of the honorary doctorate, emphasis was placed not only on the academic work of the nominee in the field of history, but also on his interdisciplinary activities and in particular his original and critical approach towards post-1991 Russian history, which culminated in editing a towering work entitled *A History of 20th Century Russia* (incidentally, this book was published in two volumes in Czech by Argo publishers though it has yet to be translated into English). The laureate

then took the opportunity in his address to analyse the situation in Russia today within the context of the turbulent, painful history of the 19th and 20th centuries; he reminded us of Masaryk's project to help refugees from Russia after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917; and he expressed his profound commitment to democracy and respect for human rights.

From today's perspective his remarks concerning developments in other countries were also prescient: "Some of those 12 countries (of the former USSR) are now making strenuous efforts to free themselves from their communist past and turn towards Europe... These include Georgia, Ukraine, Armenia and Moldavia. Others have become paralyzed within a new totalitarianism, sometimes even harsher than during the Soviet era, such as in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Meanwhile, Slavic Russia and Belarus have mostly travelled the sad road from building a market democracy back to authoritarian despotism, where there is no protection of human life, property or political and civil rights... How to overcome this regression in freedom, how can Russia and Belarus, who are suffering under authoritarianism, return to Europe? How to help Ukraine transform from an oligarchical, semi-anarchistic country into a truly democratic and legal state?"

To a certain extent these questions were answered by the events of February 2022, when the Russian Federation attacked Ukraine and ignited a conflict which has accelerated the aforementioned processes. Russia and Belarus have adopted ever more authoritarian methods of government and have thus isolated themselves from the democratic world, while the embattled Ukrainians have turned towards a more Western understanding of the state and global and European structures (the EU and NATO). However, the beginning of Russia's unsuccessful invasion not only meant a sea change in European political thinking (for example, a few years ago who could have imagined Finland being a member of NATO with Sweden next in line to join this military alliance!), but also personal changes for Andrey Borisovich Zubov. That year he was also suddenly confronted with the idea of having to leave Russia, as staying in his homeland, where he was a fierce critic of Vladimir Putin, was becoming increasingly dangerous. Professor Zubov finally came to a decision. Following the announcement of partial mobilization in September 2022, he decided to leave his homeland. He would later justify this decision by stating that if he had remained, two paths would have been left open to him: silence or imprisonment. He refused to be silenced and so shortly before the closure of the Finnish border, under quite dramatic circumstances he crossed the border in his own car, travelling halfway across Europe to Brno, where Masaryk University offered him asylum and a position as guest lecturer.

Professor Zubov has been a member of the academic community of our university since the autumn semester of 2022, and in addition to his regular teaching he also participates in a large number of debates and discussions. Brno has also provided him with a kind of base from which he can also travel abroad – i.e., to places where he

can freely work, lecture, and explain his ideas and standpoints. In connection to this I would like to mention that in order for Professor Zubov to feel at home in Brno and Masaryk University, the management of the Faculty of Arts and the staff at the Centre of International Cooperation have been of great assistance. Without their help it would have been impossible to overcome many of the obstacles which stood in the way of fully integrating this Russian professor into our academic community.

I was personally moved by what Professor Zubov wrote for the university's Magazine M after his arrival: "Although in recent years I had been trying to offer private lessons in Russia, what truly fulfils me is lecturing freely to students. I am therefore immensely grateful to Masaryk University that I can now once more be in contact with students on academic soil."

The university community now has its disposal an edited version of the lectures he gave at Masaryk University's Faculty of Arts shortly after his arrival in the Czech Republic and Brno in the autumn semester of 2022. There was an unforgettable atmosphere at these lectures as they attracted people from both academia and the general public. It is also worth pointing out that Professor Zubov was under intense media scrutiny. These lectures were also unique because the professor could now openly discuss developments in his country and the destructive policies of its leadership – of course, as is his custom, he would incorporate the situation today within the deeper layers of history and historical memory.

I would like to stress how difficult it is for any academic to lecture on the history of their own country at a time when that country has gone to war with its neighbour, a war which not only threatens Ukraine but peace for the whole of Europe. Moreover, Professor Zubov's lectures are being given in a university which has hundreds of young students as well as teachers from Ukraine. And it is pleasing to note that Professor Zubov's qualities are demonstrated not only in his discussions with Czechs but also with his Ukrainian colleagues.

Following consultations with the author, Masaryk University Press decided to bring out this book in English. The reasoning was not only because the lectures were originally given in English but also because the text and the ideas which it contains could therefore be disseminated abroad, which is important for both Professor Zubov and for the development of Russian as well as European democratic structures. This book might even reach the democratically minded intelligentsia within Russia itself.

Jiří Hanuš

vice-rector of Masaryk University

28 September 2023