



Andrey Borisovich Zubov

# The Russian Catastrophe

and Chances to Overcome It

MASARYK  
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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





## About my lectures

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On March 1, 2014, as Putin was preparing to annex Crimea, the website of the daily newspaper Vedomosti published my column entitled 'We've seen it before'. The reaction was immediate. I was quickly expelled from the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO University), the very institution from which I had graduated long ago in 1973 and where I had been a professor of philosophy and religious studies since 2001. After my resignation, I received messages of support and offers of collaboration from many universities and academic centres around the world, but not from Russia. From that moment on, all formal possibilities for research or teaching in my home country were closed to me. I wasn't surprised, I knew what I was doing.

One of the first letters came from Mikuláš Bek, then Rector of Masaryk University in Brno. Dr Bek proposed me a professorship at this famous Czech University and invited me to continue my academic career there. I thanked him but refused, as I had done with other similar offers. I believed that even if I was deprived of the right to carry out my work in Russia, I should stay in the country to help it overcome the growing authoritarianism of Putin's regime and find the path to democracy and peaceful coexistence with all nations. To this end, I changed my rule of staying out of politics and decided to run in the 2016 parliamentary elections. After an expected defeat, I joined the People's Freedom Party (PARNAS), of which I am still vice-president.

The invitations to leave the country and teach in the 'free world' kept coming. But it was not until 2022, when Russia launched a full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine and Putin's authoritarian regime was unmistakably evolving into a totalitarian dictatorship, that with a heavy heart I made the difficult decision to accept. Although I was very reluctant to go abroad, it was becoming increasingly dangerous to stay in Moscow. Many of my friends and colleagues had already been silenced, and some had

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1 Андрей Зубов, „Это уже было,“ Вестомости (March 2014). Available at <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2014/03/01/andrej-zubov-eto-uzhe-bylo>

been imprisoned. My fate would probably have been the same. So I accepted with gratitude the invitation of Dr Martin Bareš, the new rector of Masaryk University.

I was asked to give a series of lectures on Russian history, which I did, uniting them under the general title of the 'Reasons for the Russian Catastrophe of the 20th Century and Possibilities To Overcome It'. I believed then, as I do now, that it is an essential topic to study in order to try to answer two closely related questions:

1. Why in the twentieth century, after the Bolshevik coup, Russia has been a constant source of aggression, from the attempted conquest of Ukraine and Finland in January and February 1918, to the brutal war against Ukraine, which began in February 2014 and has been going on ever since, taking a more heinous form every day?
2. Is there any hope that Russia can change radically, stop being an aggressor and become a peace-loving democratic nation like the EU and NATO countries? And if there is (I'm sure there is), what should Russia and the world do to make this vision a reality?

I tried to suggest my answers in the six lectures I gave in Brno between October and November 2022 in English. The university later proposed to publish them as a short book. I agreed with enthusiasm, hoping that my texts would contribute to a better understanding of the processes that led to the war, and thus to the building of a more lasting peace once it is over.

Putin's bloodthirsty regime, which unleashed the war, should undoubtedly find itself in the dock of an international tribunal. But Russia, as a nation won't vanish, just as other nations that committed atrocities in the past - France, Germany, Austria, Turkey, Japan, Italy, etc. - didn't disappear from the map. In all previous cases, the peoples responsible for the aggressions have repented and, together with the world community, have found new, often painful and uncertain, but very reliable ways to a peaceful and dignified life.

I am sure that the Russian people are also capable of finding a path that will lead our country into a future where Russia will no longer be associated with aggression, perfidy, cruelty, lies, murder and insatiable thirst for domination over its neighbours, but will become a stronghold of democracy, economic prosperity and international peace, much like present-day Japan, Italy, Germany and France. I earnestly hope that the compilation of my lectures delivered in Brno, will contribute to this much desired purpose.

I would like to take this pleasant opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to those without whom these lectures and this book would not have been possible: Mikuláš Bek, the current Minister of Education of the Czech Republic, Martin Bareš, Rector of Masaryk University, Jiří Hanuš, Vice-Rector, and Irena Radová, Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy, who helped me to organize my academic work in Brno and made the publication of this book possible.

My English is far from perfect. In speech, emotions can help avoid ambiguity, but in writing, mistakes cannot be hidden. I would never have dared to present these lectures to you, dear readers, without the assistance of my friends Chris Rance, an English teacher at Masaryk University, and Anton Klevansky, a conference interpreter and translator.

Many will find these texts too superficial, full of common knowledge, others may view them as politically biased. I take full responsibility for any of their flaws. I have done what I could, and if my work contributes in any way to a better understanding of the tragic fate of my people in past and present centuries, I will consider my mission accomplished.

*Andrey Zubov*

Brno. July 2023