

Academic Dialogue Against the Background of War

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This essay considers calls to boycott working with the Russian academy after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Against the view that such a boycott would prevent Western academics from working with their Russian colleagues to counter Kremlin propaganda and to co-produced Western-Russian research that may benefit everyone, I argue that the Russian censorship and policing of the academy combined with Russian ideology means that there are currently no conversation partners for Western academics within the Russian academy.

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A recent issue of *Aeon* featured an article entitled, “The Missing Conversation”, with the subtitle, “To the detriment of the public, scientists and historians don't engage with one another. They must begin a new dialogue” (Daston 2024). The article amounts to a conversation between the famous scientists and historians of science, Professors Lorraine Daston and Peter Harrison. What is their conversation about?

As it turns out, one reason for their discussion is the question: Would a boycott of Russian scientists be an effective protest against the Russian invasion of Ukraine? This is not the only question—there are several others, and all of them lead to the article's main topic: scientists and historians have stopped communicating with each other. Both Professors believe that now is the time to resume the dialogue.

As the conversation between Daston and Harrison begins, they discuss whether to boycott Russian science after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. They note that historical precedents (Gordin 2022) suggests a boycott can undermine Russian science and limit the disinterested exchange of academic ideas that otherwise have the potential benefit everyone. They also

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note that boycotting Russian science can serve as an act of moral disapprobation, but then go on to say that this act is unlikely to have any impact on the current Russian regime or the course of the Russia-Ukraine war. And the implication of Daston and Harrison's discussion seems to be that Western academics should try to work with their Russian colleagues to help Russian academics counter the false historical narratives propagated by the Kremlin and to ensure that Russian scientific discoveries continue to benefit humanity.

While reading the article, I realized that I agree with Daston and Harrison's main claim that the dialogue between scientists and historians must be resumed. But what about the dialogue between Western and Russian academics?

Any Western scientist who attempts to take such a dialogue seriously will learn that Russian scientists have long been incapable of conversing with historians and their history due to state censorship and policing. What is more, historians could show Daston and Harrison that Russian scientists, despite having a financial and organizational monopoly over research in their country, lost the ability to cultivate meaningful exchanges with their international counterparts in Soviet times.

As things currently stand, Russian authorities continue the Soviet trend of censorship and policing by shutting down dialogue inside their country with those whom the authorities recognize as "foreign agents", i.e., people who the regime deems as untrustworthy. We learn about this curtailing of academic freedom and research almost every day. For example, the well-known journal *Logos*, which, before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, was widespread and published articles by famous academics on topical philosophical issues, has now removed an "unsavory colleague" from its editorial board and the works of "controversial" authors were removed from the online archive of the journal along with the search history.

Similarly, the widow of the Russian dissident philosopher and logician, Aleksandr Zinoviev, recently accused the entire Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences of activities hostile to the Russian state. In fact, Zinoviev's widow went so far as to call the Institute "the last refuge of scoundrels, traitors, foreign agents, Russophobes, and extremists" who "fool the Russian people and the country's leadership," and she added that philosophers and scientists in the Russian Academy of Sciences should be tested for their loyalty on a lie detector and that the disloyal should be "denazified".

From the point of the outside observer, it looks like the philosophers and scientists at this formerly respected research institution are doing what they can to cling to decency with their last strength. But perhaps it is precisely because they keep silent that a suspicion arose that they do not support the

“general line of the party,” as it was once customary to say in the Soviet era. Threats only postpone the actual punishment of those who do not openly support the conquering policy but who equally do not express protest against the carnage that Russia is carrying out in Ukraine. This technique has been known since Stalin’s time: to consistently punish everyone.

The censorship, policing, and possibility of being label a “foreign agent” by the Russian regime suggests that Western academics who seek to initiate a dialogue with their Russian colleagues could put the safety and security of those colleagues at risk. Of course, here we are talking about Russian academics who may implicitly or quietly be critical of the Russian authorities, but any Western academic who wishes to engage with the Russian academy must also consider the extent to which the Russian academy supports the Russian regime.

“Well, why do you need your independence? Did we have such a bad time together?” the famous Russian philosopher, Vladislav Lektorsky, asked my boss, the Ukrainian philosopher, Myroslav Popovych (1930-2018), when they were having dinner at Lektorsky’s home in Moscow in the early 2000s. Lektorsky asked his questions in the middle of a heartfelt conversation, over a glass of wine, in a sincere and well-meaning way. So, it seems like Lektorsky really did not understand the growing divide between Russia and Ukraine and why Ukrainians fought for freedom and won it in 1991.

Lektorsky is now very old, but he still has his wits about him. He works and he occasionally answers journalists’ questions. He does not publicly justify Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Yet he also does not publicly condemn Russia’s intentions to conquer Ukraine. Perhaps Lektorsky still hopes that we will be together again in a “single and indivisible” state, and everything will go as before, when, in his opinion, we had such a good time together.

Lektorsky’s views in the early-2000s and possibly his views to this day are clearly rather tame when compared with Russian nationalists, ideologues, and imperialists, like Aleksandr Dugin, who actively work to produce and promote Russian propaganda. Or consider those academics who prepared their fearless leader for an interview with an American television propagandist: the historical data voiced in Putin’s interview with Tucker Carlson was impressive with its blatant, almost comical, illiteracy and ideological involvement (Sauer 2024).

With that said, I would like to remind my Western colleagues who want to foster academic dialogue with the Russian academy that there are no conversation partners left in Russia. Daston and Harrison have a noble idea, i.e., working with Russian academics to counter the Kremlin’s narrative and further human understanding, but this idea appears to be based on an inad-

equate understanding of the current state of the Russian academy. In Russia, this dialogue is inhibited to great extent because the official racist ideology towards Ukraine distorts history, turning the latter into a propaganda tool about “brotherly nations” and ancient friendship and the alleged involvement of Muscovy in Kyivan Rus, as Mykola Raibchuk (2022, 2023) details in his recent work about Russian historiography.

There is, however, one point on the Russian question with which I agree with Daston and Harrison. The Russian regime is not particularly invested in the flourishing of Russian science. So, even if there were conversation partners for Western academics in Russia, it is unlikely that a Western boycott of the Russian academy will seriously impact the course of geopolitical events. And ultimately, it is only through the defeat of the Russian army and the dismantling of Putin’s regime and the latest Russian empire that Western academics will be able to work with their Russian colleagues to revise Russia’s current account of history and to co-produce academic and scientific research, generally.

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