



“Time is our litmus test”: the philosophical world of Valentin Asmus

Guest editor’s introduction

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Valentin Ferdinandovich Asmus (1894–1975) came to be one of the most highly respected and eminent thinkers, teachers, and figures in the Soviet philosophical community. Many philosophers of current renown were his colleagues and students. In 2010, they published a book of memoirs filled with warm-hearted reminiscences and stories (Zhuchkov and Blauberg 2010).

Asmus was a part of that rare generation of Soviet people who could be justly called “the last intellectuals” of the Silver Age; in fact, their unique stature may be applicable beyond that Age. Asmus was born in the Russian Empire in 1894 and graduated from the philosophy department in Kyiv University (the department was established in 1917) amid the revolutionary events of 1919. The revolution broke out when he barely began acquainting himself with the achievements of the Silver Age. In 1919, he wrote his only anti-Soviet article titled “The Great Captivity of Russian Culture” published in the Kyiv weekly *Zhizn’ (Life)*. That article clearly manifests the idealistic elements in his worldview and strong influence of Nikolai Berdyaev’s philosophy of creativity. The article’s emotional anti-Marxist sentiment is also impressive. Yet ultimately, despite existing differences, Asmus decided against emigration. He continued his philosophical studies under clearly uncomfortable conditions. His further intellectual development took place in the Soviet era that defined his life and work until his death in 1975.

At the same time, his intellectual life and his personal development as a philosopher were largely determined by the atmosphere of St. Vladimir Kyiv University and by the influence of his peers and teachers: Alexei Gilyarov, Vasily Zenkovsky, and Evgeny Spektorsky. His gift was languages and systematization, something which attracted him primarily to logic and the history of philosophy. He studied works of

“Time is our litmus test” is a line from a poem by Yakov Kozlovsky, dedicated to Valentin Asmus (Kozlovsky 2010, pp. 142–143).

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German philosophers and psychologists, and greatly immersed himself in books by Russian thinkers widely published in *Put'* (*The Path*) journal. In university, he was introduced to the neo-Kantianism that dominated Russian higher education at the time. However, he also learned much about Husserl and Meinong from the lectures of Zenkovsky who taught psychology, and he also read works by Freud and Jung. He himself admitted that he had heard nothing about Marxist philosophy during his university years:

No one even engaged in polemics with it [Marxism]. It was simply “overlooked,” glossed over. Not a single lecture by Gilyarov, Zenkovsky, and later Spektorsky and Yakubovich as much as mentioned the name of the most notable Marxist philosophers; nothing was ever said of Marx, Engels, Plekhanov, Lenin, not to mention Lafargue, Kautsky, and others of lesser significance. (Asmus 2010, p. 322)

Asmus divided his biography into three periods: the Donbas, Kyiv, and Moscow periods. He spent his childhood in the village of Konstantinovka in the Donbas, in those very locations whose names today are known worldwide. Sadly, they are known not for their connections with the names of famous people who were born or lived there, but for the tragedy of a historical and existential rift between Ukraine and Russia, the geopolitical disaster that is felt so acutely by all of us.

Asmus's father was German, his mother was Russian. His father, Ferdinand Heinrich Wilhelmovich Asmus, never finished grammar school and went to work at the Belgian Works in Konstantinovka. Despite his lack of formal studies, he was well-educated and incredibly musically inclined. Asmus's mother, Pelageya Ilinichna Tishchenko, baptized her son into Orthodoxy. She was the family's head strategist. It was a model family, close-knit and very industrious. Asmus's German roots may have influenced his admiration for German philosophy, particularly for Kant, Fichte, Hegel, and neo-Kantians. At the same time, he loved Russian poetry and prose; he particularly adored Pushkin, Lermontov, and Russian symbolists, and most of all he admired Leo Tolstoy, who would become the subject of many of his important works. Back in his student years, in 1917, Asmus wrote a lengthy (lost) essay “Leo Tolstoy's dependence on Spinoza in his religious and philosophical views,” (Zenkovsky 1996) which was awarded the grand gold medal at the Kyiv University Competition in 1918. Throughout his life, he frequently subjected these two figures to philosophical analysis and comparison. As for his contemporaries, he particularly liked the poetry of Evgeny Evtushenko, Konstantin Vanshenkin, and Boris Pasternak.

Once he found himself within Soviet reality, Asmus changed his philosophical direction and his entire life sharply. He started out as an idealist philosopher, yet already in the early 1920s, he switched to Marxist dialectics and joined the motley ranks of a new generation of Soviet Marxist philosophers. At first, he wanted to follow in the footsteps of Abram Moiseevich Deborin (Ioffe), the most authoritative Soviet philosopher of that time. Soviet philosophy was just finding its feet, it had not yet dissolved into Stalinist dialectic materialism. Incidentally, Asmus had never become a Deborinite, ultimately settling for a less dangerous philosophical niche than the ideological traps and pitfalls of dialectic materialism. They certainly could not be fully avoided in a country as ideologically loaded as the Soviet Union, and several articles in this issue discuss this matter in detail.

His first Marxist book (Asmus 1924) on dialectic materialism as a new epistemological method was essentially a series of essays on the history of philosophy, offering an explanation and an interpretation of dialectics as an epistemological method and the essence of history; these essays were clearly dominated by Hegelian paradigms. Svetlana Klimova's article considers in detail the claims from the book and the fascinating discussions both émigré and Soviet press engaged in over it. The book earned well-deserved praise from Deborin, who served as chair of the philosophy department at the Institute of Red Professors since 1921 and as the Director of the Institute of Scientific Philosophy since 1924. In 1927, Deborin invited Asmus, a young and promising scholar, to move from Kyiv to Moscow. Additionally, from 1922 to 1931 Deborin was a member of the editing board, and in 1923 took the office of Editor-in-chief of the *Pod znamenem marksizma* (*Under the Banner of Marxism*) journal. In the 1920s, it was the main outlet of the emerging Soviet philosophy, and played an important role in the development of Marxist thought in the USSR. Asmus was a regular author and also took part in many important debates transpiring on its pages. He introduced a significant theoretical background into the atmosphere of the 1920s.

Asmus can be said to have performed a truly heroic feat in the late 1920s—early 1930s as he enriched the future Marxist Leninist philosophy with the names of great European rationalists. . . . In 1929, a book on Kant was published, and that year, Asmus also published his *Essays in the History of Dialectics in the New Philosophy*. (Andreeva 2011, p. 167)

Asmus's Soviet-era biography was both typical and unique. On the one hand, his outstanding talent appears to have been guaranteed to bring upon him a tragedy similar to those that befell many of his contemporaries, confirmed Marxist philosophers, who originally created the theoretical foundations of the philosophical thought, and then were crushed by the system for being unique and failing to fit with the ideological clichés of the day. Sergey Korsakov, one of today's eminent scholars of that era, created a "collective portrait" of the 1920s generation with particular emphasis on the Deborin school; he showed that virtually all of Deborin's students were destroyed by Stalin's repressions. At the same time, Korsakov justly says, "People of the 1920s were different from people of the 1930s with the latter being different from the generations of the 1940s and 1950s" (Korsakov 2022, p. 30). The fate of a person and a nation may be vastly different depending on a specific decade, and consequently, grand historical generalizations and clichés are dangerous in that they disregard individual stories. The tragedy of the 1920s includes the lives and tragic deaths of Nikolai Karev, Jan Sten, Ivan Luppol, Israel Vainshtein, Dmitry Gachev, Alexander Medvedev, and many others. What sets the Soviet generation of the 1920s apart is that they were subjected to repressions primarily for their "professional activities" (Ibid., p. 32). In the 1920s, being devoted to the overarching idea was more important than being devoted to the leader or the party.

Korsakov believes that the main distinguishing feature of the 1920s Marxists was their ability to make the moral choice wherein they were guided, as Mikhail Bakhtin said, by the ethical imperative of the alignment of word and deed. Korsakov put forward an interesting idea that the most devoted Marxists had borne the brunt of repressions. All kinds of timeservers or even idealists lived till ripe old age as their

interests never clashed with those of the authorities. The most talented and outstanding people perished. Deborin, however, did not, and his ideological opponent, the leader of Mechanists Lyubov Axelrod also was not subjected to repressions. Bakhtin and Alexei Losev both survived the purges. Asmus himself had never been really persecuted.

Despite his conformism, Asmus strove to preserve “the intellectual dignity of a scholar”; this is the idea presented in the article of Andrey Maidansky and Maksim Maidansky. He certainly was not always fully successful. If anyone is so minded, they can trawl his biography (and any other biography) for ugly deeds and unsavory thoughts, and find them. But if Asmus was indeed forced to publicly condemn someone, those were, as a rule, people from the past, those who could no longer be physically harmed. Most frequently, it took the form of a linguistic aberration, what Yekaterina Khan in her article called “the shibboleth of Soviet intelligentsia.” That is, despite featuring ideologically correct words and phrases, texts still contain a true philosophical idea or introduce a proper academic approach, or objectively expound someone else’s thought. Even though Asmus was not subjected to incarceration or exile, he had to live for a while with the dangerous label of a “Menshevizing idealist.” In 1944, Zinovy Beletsky recalled this phrase in his denunciation of a group of philosophers he sent to comrade Stalin. Nikita Tinus’s article focuses on this episode. Today, classifying philosophers of the past into true ones and timeservers appears greatly exaggerated. True Marxists destroyed by Stalin’s regime demonstrated the same forms of extreme behaviors, assessments, and judgments as “untrue Marxists.” It would be sufficient to read their public debates that were published extensively in *Under the Banner of Marxism*, among other outlets, to discover highly emotionally charged rhetoric and categorical ideological claims from many victims of Stalin’s repressions. Yelena Besschetnova’s article analyzes these debates. Maybe people of the 1920s were less afraid of the system, as they had been immediately involved in the revolutionary events and had been an integral part of the revolutionary process. However, the repressive machine of Soviet totalitarianism did not delve into the matters of who was in the right and who was in the wrong. Most likely, the survival of some eminent thinkers of the time, including Asmus, was purely accidental.

As for Asmus’s philosophical stance, virtually all articles in this issue demonstrate purely outward similarity to the official Soviet Marxism. While displaying the required Soviet rhetoric and “shibboleths,” Asmus steers his own historical and philosophical course as he ponders the era and ideas and navigates between the ideological Scylla and Charybdis of Marxism-Leninism. Diana Gasparyan’s and Nikita Tinus’s articles trace the influence of Hegel’s dialectics on Asmus’s interpretation of historical development. Gasparyan uses Asmus to showcase the difference between Western and Soviet interpretations of Hegel. Gasparyan reconsiders the claim of Asmus being “Russia’s first expert on Kant” (Andreeva); in Gasparyan’s opinion, Asmus had offered a very unusual interpretation of Kant only as a historical and theoretical stage in understanding Hegel and specifically Hegel’s dialectics that was used as a lens for studying many figures in the history of philosophy. Gasparyan notes the inner similarity between Asmus’s view of Hegel on the one hand and later Western ideas of structuralist, Freudo-Marxist, Lacanian, etc., “brands” of Hegelianism on the other.

Tinus’s article explores another avenue in interpretations of Hegel offered in Asmus’s philosophy. Tinus also notes the radical difference between western and Soviet

interpretations of the German philosopher. However, when pondering Asmus, Tinus emphasizes primarily his neo-Kantian reading of Hegel's understanding of history. Tinus draws a clear demarcation line between Nazi ideology and German philosophy, following in the footsteps of many Soviet philosophers, including Asmus, who strove to differentiate between the two as they rehabilitated German classics in the hardest period of the 20th century, during World War II. Whereas some Soviet ideologues bent over backwards taking a sledgehammer to German culture in attempts to "eliminate" German classics, altogether and others simply remained silent, Asmus carried out the great feat of differentiation by demonstrating the radical difference between truly momentous German philosophical ideas and Nazi ideology and false propaganda that used these ideas for its own purposes. He and his colleagues who authored the famous third volume of *History of Philosophy* succeeded in uncovering major falsifications of Hegelian philosophy by Nazi propagandists; by turning to Hegel's authentic thought, they attracted attention to the true contents of his philosophy.

Asmus, therefore, was a prominent historian of philosophic ideas. His love for European philosophers of the 17–19th centuries had largely been nourished by his family and the educational environment that had shaped his worldview. Those had primarily been neo-Kantian traditions and affinity for the ideas of Cohen and the Marburg school that were important for many Silver Age figures. For instance, the Nevel Circle, active in the 1910–1920s (founded by Bakhtin and Matvey Kogan) was "shaped in a dialog (exploration-differentiation argument) with the Marburg neo-Kantian school and primarily with Hermann Cohen" (Bibler 1991, p. 15). Piama Gaidenko recalled Asmus's fascination with the philosophies of Cohen, Paul Natorp, Ernst Cassirer. Articles co-authored by Andrey Maidansky and Maksim Maidansky's) and those of Nikita Tinus's analyze Asmus's essays in the history of philosophy and note his far greater proximity to neo-Kantian traditions and their aesthetics rather than to Marxism.

This picture of Asmus would not be complete without addressing an important aspect of his perpetual interest, i.e., his attitude to art. Asmus was artistically gifted, he loved music, knew contemporary poetry well, loved European and Russian literature. He was a scholar not only of philosophy, but also of aesthetics. Boris Pasternak, Asmus's close friend and the addressee of many of his articles on creative aesthetics, was an important figure in his life, linking together the subjects of art and neo-Kantianism. Curiously, Pasternak, like Bakhtin and Asmus, was in his youth greatly influenced by Cohen, whom he met in 1912 while studying at the University of Marburg. He incorporated some neo-Kantian ideas on the synthesis of art and science into his art and theoretical pieces.

Asmus's article on Pasternak produces an impression of Pasternak thinking about and feeling art almost as another of Asmus's favorite people, Leo Tolstoy. Their stances are brought closer together by an affirmation of the independent value of life separate from art, by their positing a mandatory moral dimension to art, and by Pasternak's metaphor of art as a "soaking sponge," being similar to Tolstoy's art that "infects with goodness." They are also similar in understanding the principal task of art as "searching for truth" (Asmus 1990, p. 9). One of Yasnaya Polyana's guests,

Vasily Alexeyev,¹ recorded Tolstoy saying that “the task of art should lie in bringing the light of truth into life, in lighting up the darkness of life, and pointing out its true meaning” (Krasnov 1978, p. 255).

Aestheticism was entirely alien to them both. Asmus clearly conveys their affinity to his readers. He reminds them of Pasternak’s love for Tolstoy and his admiration for the writer’s unique capability for “creative contemplation.” Back in the 1910s, Viktor Shklovsky, a founding father of Russian formalism, named this unique feature “distancing” (*ostranenie*), Tolstoy’s trademark literary device. We should also add that in his thoughts on Tolstoy’s work, Asmus was not a total stranger to Shklovsky’s methodology, although he never cited him. Drawing on Lenin, Asmus “peppers” his dialectic logic with the formalist device in a very peculiar manner and stresses the “new optics” of Tolstoy’s vision of historical reality. These optics presented Tolstoy

looking at [the new social system] through the eyes of a *patriarchal Russian peasant*, and not a landowner, an officer, an official, or a person of letters; it was the same peasant who, without having fully shaken off the oppression of serfdom, found himself under a greater and more ruinous capitalist oppression. In such conditions, the mind of a patriarchal peasant proved to be a contradictory mind. (Asmus 1969, p. 42; italics mine—S.K.)

Despite such a complicated linking of formalist and Marxist ideas, Asmus remains, in his analysis of Tolstoy’s contradictions, a firm adherent of Leninist methodology in interpreting Tolstoy’s works. Still, the formalist device prompts him to rely on the laws of formal logic he knows so well, the logic that views thinking in contradictions as an inadmissible assumption. When it comes to Tolstoy, Asmus confirms the well-known truth of formal logic: if two thoughts contradict each other, one of them is true. Clearly, the true thought must be the one Lenin thought to be such. Dialectic logic, Asmus’s recognized field of expertise, is for some reason not employed here at all.

Going back to Pasternak, we should note that Asmus also saw an important difference between him and Tolstoy. While Asmus always saw Tolstoy as a moralizer and a “teacher of life,” a person in possession of a stark political talent, and a thinker eternally torn between archaic ways and modern ways, Pasternak, in Asmus’s eyes, did not have such qualities. Moreover, Asmus believed the very mission of educating people, transforming life, and getting involved in current political events to be entirely alien to Pasternak. This is where I believe Asmus tries to speak about himself via Pasternak, to attempt separating his creative self from his civic indifference and everyday conformism. Surprisingly, in his article on Pasternak, Asmus even allowed himself to offer some positive religious assessments, and he did it in 1965, at the time of rampant militant atheism! “He confined his role to assessing observable phenomena and relations from the point of view of ethics inspired by the ideals of Christian goodness and non-resistance” (Asmus 1990, p. 29). However, even Asmus’s presence at the funeral of his friend, who had fallen out of favor, and Asmus’s public farewell look to us as an act of incredible bravery and valiance. In his speech, Asmus said that

¹Vasily Ivanovich Alexeyev was the home tutor of Leo Tolstoy’s children; he remained faithful to Tolstoy’s teachings until the end of his life.

the meaning of a poet's creative effort is being in conflict with all eras. This criterion is quite suitable for testing the measure of talent of any creative person.

Asmus's aesthetics is certainly extremely rich and cannot be reduced solely to the names listed. Let's not forget that his doctoral thesis, which he defended in 1940, was written on the subject of the Ancient Greek aesthetics. He did much work in the areas of history and theory of aesthetics and literary studies. In particular, continuing in the same neo-Kantian vein, he considered the relationship between concepts and images as the key epistemological device that unites philosophy and literature. Asmus tends to identify concepts and images that affect the art of imagination. Here, he appears to repeat the claims of Cohen who believed aesthetics to be the outcome of ethics and logic since aesthetics produces systematicity. Systematicity is the goal of philosophy.

As the moral is not rooted in the subjective feeling of an agent, but should instead be founded on an objective law, so now it turns out that this law really rests on the thinking of a community and only therein does it possess a meaning. (Cohen 1877, S. 277)

Asmus has many such arguments. He finds the same idea in the works of Henri Bergson and other western philosophers, whose works he analyzes. However, unlike Bergson who saw a concept as an incomplete reflection, Asmus asserts absolute concepts to be absolutely identical to images, and he even stresses that artistic images are somewhat superior to scholarly concepts in their accessibility and broad span of meaning. In addition to neo-Kantians, his musings are inspired by Tolstoy's legacy. Asmus expands Tolstoy's idea of art's "emotional infection" to its broad effect on the entire range of our concepts and notions.

In addition to the effect art has on feeling, the effect that Tolstoy particularly stresses, art affects, through its images, the entire area of our *concepts and ideas*. Art is capable of changing not only our *feelings*, but also our *thoughts*. Art changes the degree and depth of our *knowledge* of life and its phenomena. Moreover: art possesses *special* means of cognition that are unique to it; in some aspects, their power even *exceeds* that which can be gained through *scholarly* cognition. (Asmus 1969, p. 93)

In conclusion to the brief introduction of this collection of articles on Valentin Asmus, I cannot help returning to the events of today. While preparing this journal issue for publication, we contacted Asmus's son, Valentin Valentinovich Asmus, an Orthodox priest in Moscow. We wanted to interview him, and we also asked him as the official holder of copyright to his father's works to grant permission to translate into English his father's introductory article about Pasternak. Our purpose has always been to make the legacy of our compatriot known to broad international audiences. Our request was blankly denied on the grounds of the Orthodox Russian priests' extremely radical rejection of the West. Essentially, for purely ideological considerations, the son denies the great historical legacy of world culture and philosophy, whose significance his father, Soviet philosopher Valentin Ferdinandovich Asmus, defended in his works that are the focus of the articles contained in this issue.

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