



## Roundtable: Q&A discussion

Artemy Magun<sup>1</sup> · Kate Khan<sup>2</sup> · Lina Bulakhova<sup>1</sup> · Anastasia Merzenina<sup>1</sup> · Artem Serebryakov<sup>1</sup> · Oleg Aronson<sup>3</sup>

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### Abstract

This is the Q&A portion of the roundtable that focuses on the crucial issues of individual and collective guilt of the intellectual class in the face of war. The participants address the stratification of Russian society, possibilities and obstacles of dissent, and the eschatological tendencies of history by engaging with each other's claims and ideas and seeking answers to direct questions.

**Keywords** Guilt · Responsibility · Russo-Ukrainian war · Hannah Arendt · Evil · Class structure

### On Artemy Magun's entry "Guilty of goodness? Or innocently good?"

#### Kate Khan:

You mention that we could bear responsibility "for underestimating the demonic potential of history"; but are you implying that the potential of history also contains

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✉ A. Magun  
[amagun@gmail.com](mailto:amagun@gmail.com)

K. Khan  
[katerina.inno@gmail.com](mailto:katerina.inno@gmail.com)

L. Bulakhova  
[lbulakhova@eu.spb.ru](mailto:lbulakhova@eu.spb.ru)

A. Merzenina  
[Nansy.96.96@gmail.com](mailto:Nansy.96.96@gmail.com)

A. Serebryakov  
[aserebryakov@eu.spb.ru](mailto:aserebryakov@eu.spb.ru)

O. Aronson  
[olegaronson@yandex.ru](mailto:olegaronson@yandex.ru)

- <sup>1</sup> The European University at Saint Petersburg, 6/1A Gagarinskaya St., St. Petersburg, 191187, Russian Federation
- <sup>2</sup> RUDN University, Moscow, Russian Federation
- <sup>3</sup> Institute of Philosophy, Russian Academy of Sciences, 12/1 Goncharnaya Str., Moscow, 109240, Russian Federation

a certain historical logic? It seems to me that unlike the history in textbooks, the fabric of real history as becoming, as the historical happening of events, is woven seamlessly. . . . Doesn't accepting this form of responsibility require from its bearer a certain belief in the rational, metaphysical philosophy of history? Is there truly any certain chance for a wise and rational recognition of the Historical Event—until it comes out and shows itself as already happening here and now?

**Artemy Magun:**

Actually, yes, I plea for a rational approach that would place events into a logic, which unfortunately also means that we have to partially accept them, as it is too late to “undo” them, like Sigmund Freud’s neurotics do. We need to understand why they happened. But this does not imply a historical necessity. There were contingencies involved, such as Putin’s tactical acumen. But the very victory of right-wing Russian chauvinism does not seem to be a contingency. A large-scale war was avoidable. But then why did similar wars happen so often in history after imperial collapse? Portugal in Angola, France in Algeria, Yugoslavia in Croatia and Bosnia? History appears to me less as a deterministic sequence and more like a collective obsessive neurosis where symptoms, once emerged, keep reappearing for a while. A wise recognition of this tendency does not imply that we are unaffected by it, but a rational understanding of what happens would, ideally, contain the actors.

**Lina Bulakhova:**

(1) You are talking about a split in and collective responsibility for alienation, but in fact, you reproduce this split structure in your own entry. I have read many such texts where Russians never see themselves as a united society, although de-facto we still have to live in the same country. We still share common things. Occasionally, we are even from the same families!

It seems problematic to me because even at the textual level, we do not find an opportunity to overcome this mental split. I believe that any personal writing, even academic, is partly instinctive, but, apparently, we do not have this instinctive solidarity.

Therefore, I argue that we are in a state of civil war. So far, it takes place only at the level of discourse, but after the regime falls, it could easily pass into physical expression. It seems to me that it is a dramatically outdated trope to divide Russians into a conservative majority and a liberal minority. Don't you think that the nation is depoliticized on both sides?

On the one hand, there is depressing poverty, on the other, the desire to pretend that we are Europeans, that we have creative and middle classes. But this illusion was supported at the expense of the same poor people. That is all the split we have. Don't you think that while we pretend that there is some kind of political confusion, a public space for at least someone, while we dig up historical logic and “demonic” desires, we are in thrall of the same liberal rationalism that continues to reproduce its plan of comfortable discourse, rather than trying to address reality sincerely?

(2) I think your argument does not answer the question of how we should now relate to Ukrainians in terms of guilt. Yes, perhaps we are to blame for the split within

our society. Perhaps our redemption is horizontal politics. But to be honest, neither the world, nor especially Ukrainians care about this. Russian society's salvation is strictly our business, it is not what our accusers expect from us.

**Artemy Magun:**

(1) Unfortunately, I disagree with you. The social and cultural split in Russia (like in many other countries) is quite obvious and well documented from both the economic statistics and from qualitative data. I do not see the existence of a creative Europeanized class in Russia would be “an illusion.” It is a solid socioeconomic reality of a post-Fordist internationalized economy, even though this class (unlike in Europe) does not have political influence. The situation is far from being what some observers suggest: “everyone kind of agrees on the support of Russian imperialist policy, and then there are minor disagreements.” In fact, this is not the case. Since 2011–2012, the split has been articulated and expressed, for example, in the demonstrations. Urban professionals bet on including “the people” into their (then) movement and it failed, in part due to the government's infusion of nationalist sentiment. The “civil war” argument, however, is tricky: most Ukrainians deny this, because they claim to be (now) a different, separate nation. As of now, there is no civil war within Russia. What we deal with right now is rather an authoritarian oppression of opposition based on the civil divide. My argument is not “comfortable” to the extent that I do recognize the intelligentsia's guilt for their failure to deal with other strata of the population.

Understand me: up to the point where they openly support unethical, murderous activities, I do not claim that I am good, and these other people are “bad.” We share a certain cultural background, and I feel a solidarity with them. However, I am not a very nationally minded person, and I feel relatively closer to people of my sociocultural class in other countries than to representatives of other sociocultural classes in Russia. Again, this is not a value judgment, but a statement of fact. That these class divisions are so strong is tragic, but it was already so in the late Soviet Union. We failed in our effort to overcome them.

(2) I admit that I personally do not experience guilt before Ukrainians. I feel horror, repulsion, sympathy, a desire to help. But let the people who started this fratricidal war, and their accomplices, feel the guilt. We must be precise here; otherwise, we will end up being guilty of taking guilt: interiorizing violence (which is contagious). My guilt, dealing with something we as a group structurally profited from, concerns the existence of a privileged Westernized stratum of society failing to build productive crossclass alliances. I also feel a “metaphysical guilt” in the sense of secretly desiring violence. The warmongers always catch common people in this unconscious desire: we should be conscious and develop a philosophy where love would trump sadism.

**On Kate Khan's entry “What is to be done in the age of ignorance”**

**Artemy Magun:**

I agree that the issue is (1) a certain return of the Real, and the Real is not just death but is also material subsistence; (2) that “we” need to stop the hysterical flow of fanatical fantasies. But: the text implies the existence of a “we” that would be able to play a

managerial role in the distribution of goods. But, as French authors from Jacques Lacan to Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou repeatedly insist, the implication of such authority is potentially depoliticizing and unrealistic. Where do we draw resources for building a unitary world government out of a world that is fundamentally split?

**Kate Khan:**

I truly suppose that this is a rare case when using “we” is a far more productive and important identification, as long as this “we” implies not only “me, like-minded persons, and friends,” but also “me and future generations.” Actually, I do not see any capacity to either suggest or suppose building a unitary world government, but I see the clarification of this “we”-motivation as the possible common ground behind various voluntary actions and activities that each person decides to participate in. This “we” again may appear as an effect of consent or as a harmonious assonance that would happen contingently—but the truth is that there is no chance of an effective social action that would solely be mine. Maybe the Spanish “*nosotros*”—literally “another we”<sup>1</sup>—would be more precise and appropriate. The Other must not be an abstraction or interiorized substructure of my ego but literally another being, another person. This world is mine but it is also yours, so, the responsibility is on “us”: or whoever joins in, let us say.

**Lina Bulakhova:**

You mention irrationality and the Kafkaesque atmosphere of what is happening. But then you immediately refer to the fact that there is nothing we have not seen before. However, don’t you think that irrationality in postmodern politics has some other nature and does not relate directly to real human affects? Sometimes, especially after reading the news, it seems to me that rationality was used precisely to awaken irrationality. Some political excuses were invented later, only to justify the pure death drive, and I don’t mean by the government, but by the people, by society. In other words, this is a Baudrillardian situation in which we consciously awaken a simulacrum, but the true meaning of this action is the furious instinct of destruction. The desire to crush the accumulated rationality with which we associate repressive capitalism, dictatorial regimes, the tension of the new Cold War, the rise of ultraright sentiments, liberal moralism, even the environmental crisis, etc. This is not even a problem of Russia and Ukraine, but a release of destructive energy concerning the whole world. What do you think about it?

**Kate Khan:**

Well, I guess it would be more precise to say that this exact conflict resembles previous ones and therefore the same motives behind different actions and political decisions (new and old) can be recognized. Moreover, to explain and recognize means to find and reinterpret something in the given situation as if it was more or less familiar.

<sup>1</sup>The importance of this hidden aspect of “we-others” in the Spanish pronoun *nosotros* was mentioned by V.V. Bibikhin in his essay *Hermeneutics*. See: Bibikhin 2010, p. 250.

To some extent, I would agree that the death drive or destructive instinct could be at the heart of the issue. But it seems to me that it never goes alone and is intertwined with perverted libidinal energy. Any political authority is basically intolerant to its impotence and searches for a certain way to prove its potency (i.e., power). Destruction as such seems to be a bad candidate for such proof only, as long as this can hardly be the ultimate strategic goal; but the death-drive revelation could stand for something else. What exactly? Resentment, maybe or the striving for recognition? ... I don't know, to be honest. In any case, the psychologization of politics may turn into a very tricky sort of metaphysics that I would prefer to be careful with.

### **On Lina Bulakhova's entry "Failed human: On national guilt and its religious roots"**

#### **Kate Khan:**

I admired the application of Deleuzian monsters and monstrosity here; do you see a chance to classify the monster type? What do you mean by recalling "Christ did—who was also a monster"?

#### **Lina Bulakhova:**

I don't see any problem in researching anything and learning more about it. It should not be a classification perhaps (to avoid establishing a repressive epistemology), but poststructural anthropology or even phenomenology. Why not? Sounds cool.

To remember Christ means to recognize the possibility of establishing a new reality. It is no coincidence that the Eucharist (the transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ) is a sacrament of remembrance. Christ showed that the sense of guilt, which is destructive on the ontological level, can evolve into creativity. And this is not the empty creativity that capitalism implies but a real opportunity for The New and The Event. Resurrection is a way out of the paralysis of guilt, and this is not necessarily a theological program. I'm trying to demonstrate that it can also be a political one.

#### **Kate Khan:**

This question may seem a bit nonserious, but still ... Could we somehow dive into mass culture or perhaps even the conceptual "monstrosity" (or teratology?) and describe these monstrous abilities (or human disabilities?). In my essay, I mention the concept "Zombies/Victims Blaming Apocalypse" as the passive and nonconstructive mutual blaming in popular rhetoric: some people claim that those who support war operations became zombies animated by TV propaganda, and they are to blame for being zombies, while some other people claim that those who suffered in Ukraine, in most cases deserved it (the typical victim-blaming logic), so they are to blame for being victims...

**Lina Bulakhova:**

There are vampires, werewolves, magicians, half-breeds, elves and brownies, ents, and elementals. And there are many interesting monsters today: queers, gays, migrants, the homeless, the child-free, the breast-feeding. People who demonstrate their objectionable and frightening bodies. Soldiers crippled in the war will also become monsters. Although they haven't realized it yet...

I agree that the word "monster" is in reality used by everyone against everyone. This is what Gilles Deleuze is talking about. But after all, for example, a zombie is also a figure of precarity. Zombies are unfortunate bodies wandering through ruined cities, trying to break into rare enclaves of welfare. Once, they were ordinary people.

And it seems extremely inadequate to make zombies only a metaphor for people following their Master. In fact, it's just the opposite. Zombies obey nothing but their instinct. These are people who became nearly animals again.

Therefore, it seems to me that this is another example of hiding the truth through the figure of a monster. We forget that zombies came as a result of our mistake, that these are our brothers who experienced misfortune because of the government, capitalism, military technology, and so on. Of course, they are dangerous, but no one is saying that there is no place for violence in the world of subalterns.

Here, we are concerned that the world blindly hates all Russians, our culture, and our products—like zombies. However, how did it happen? What preceded this hate? After all, we have done something to spread the virus of hate. Sorry, but it's true.

**Artemy Magun:**

Jacques Derrida famously wrote a book on "the beast and the sovereign," suggesting there was something beastly in the very figure of sovereignty, or of tyranny (traditionally, the tyrant is a "wolf"). What is this totemism of power, and what does it have to do with human and animal sacrifice, the logic of material devourment?

**Lina Bulakhova:**

As you know, Sigmund Freud in *Totem and Taboo* linked totemism and sacrifice with the ritual restoration of paternal law. Theophagy in general is a way to commune with the universal. This is also the reactualization of culture and ancestral ties symbolized by a particular totem with all their moral foundations.

And I assume that there is some dark archaic meaning to the indifference and submission with which Russian society (those whom Artem Serebryakov calls "The People" in his entry) treats the sending of young men to the Ukrainian war. I see a certain subconscious bloodlust here, which almost no one recognizes.

**Artemy Magun:**

In my article for this special issue of *SEET*, I also claim that evil, in the case of this war, for instance, has to do with the breakthrough of the Real, of sheer materiality and literalness. Could this simply be a protest against the overly symbolic nature of liberal society?

**Lina Bulakhova:**

I refer to my comment addressed to Kate Khan. I've proposed to reverse the general position that rationality has gotten out of control thanks to the propaganda and insanity of specific leaders. And what if the break with the symbolic was the real reason for what is happening? What if pure chaos is the true goal? I assumed that it was the desire to destroy the symbolic order, which we link to capitalism, liberal moralism, and environmental and material crises. On the whole, the disappearance of metaphysical foundations, as Slavoj Žižek might have formulated. So yes, we're on the same path. That's why I don't believe that fighting for rationality, as Kate suggests, will solve anything. And that these explosions, attempts to break the Real, will occur not only in Russia or Ukraine, that's what, I think, is crucially important to consider.

**On Anastasia Merzenina's entry "Russian guilt and Russian irresponsibility"****Kate Khan:**

I have the following three questions.

- (1) You mention that "living in Russia, a person cannot but integrate his fate into the common fate of the people," but isn't this "common fate" also a result of abstract and highly pathetic metaphysical thinking, which also implies a metaphysical concept of nation?
- (2) Why do you prefer to describe Russia as if it was a unity and not a multitude?
- (3) Is it fair to speak about the "individual guilt of each Russian," considering that there are far more participants involved?

**Anastasia Merzenina:**

I am going to try to cover all three questions in one answer. (1) It is true that what underlies the phenomenon of state (or national) unity is "abstract." However, there are two manifestations of the phenomenon of collectivity. I write about the abstract dimension (in a negative sense) and about the event of the collective, that is, about the "collective of singulars." This collective is neither multitude (2) nor unity. The multitude theory implies that there is some true core of unity that needs to be released, and so on. However, such a theory has a tendency to remain metaphysical. Therefore, an alternative theory is the theory of "concrete" action (based on Hegel and Kierkegaard). The point of "concreteness" is something that germinates from the abstract, not that simply negates it. And this concrete should free everyone from "collective guilt," that is, from shame, and turn to personal guilt as responsibility. I am not talking about the responsibility (3) of others (French, Germans, Americans), because I am focusing on the originality of Russian absenteeism. In simple terms, the Russian man is responsible for avoiding politics and the abstract as evil, but at the same time this choice to remain irresponsible allows for the manipulation of his own name for

political purposes. But there is a way for an action to be an expression of resistance and at the same time not be an expression of “abstract” political unity (like a party’s political mobilization, etc.). And, once again, this is the singularities’ path of protest. The difference from the concept of multitude (in Antonio Negri’s interpretation) is that a concrete action destroys its own abstractness from within, without insisting on the independence of its own dimension. At the same time, abstraction remains possible, potential, but not actualized. Rebellion suspends the work of politics, but what is important to note for an alternative theory is that it never passes into an independent dimension-being.

## **On Artem Serebryakov’s entry “On the distorted structure of Russian guilt”**

### **Kate Khan:**

Here are my two questions.

- (1) It seems like the only position that presupposes activity here belongs to the Authorities, but what about Volunteers, so-called local activists and local partisans (both pro- and antiwar)—are they all included in “Citizens”?
- (2) Is it possible to say that these three types are also predetermined by their relation to and access of information about the events (Authorities hold and control information flows; Citizens are aware of getting information from different sources; People are consuming the information from the given sources or prefer a calm ignorance)?

### **Artem Serebryakov:**

(1) Indeed, in the current configuration the Authorities are the only truly active party, while local initiatives remain either exceptions or reactions to decisions made by the Authorities. It’s worth noting that for many years, Russia’s political discourse has been dominated by a focus on external locus of control: the People are *fooled* by the Authorities, the Citizens are just *puppets* of enemies of the state, and so on. And in the case of the invasion this leaves other parties not as actors, but *first and foremost* as responders or spectators. Also, it should be stressed that I have outlined the major discursive positions specifically with regard to the problem of collective guilt and not necessarily to the question of, for example, the invasion’s legitimacy or of justifiability of any war in the modern world. Variety and diversity of possible political stances in Russia cannot be reduced to only three. Although, when it comes to volunteering and humanitarian activism, one can observe that in some cases the activism is indeed driven by guilt, thus corresponding to the position of the Citizens.

(2) I would argue that it is only partially true. While, if we compare the largest cities to other regions, there is definitely uneven access to media sources in Russia, I find it erroneous to assume that the vast majority of those who support aggression toward Ukraine are simply consumers of the given information. As sociologists have



shown, it is not uncommon for them to make a conscious choice to stick with pro-state media sources (see, e.g., <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russia-ukraine-war-support-interviews-opinion/>). I'm also keen to believe that, more often than not, those who occupy the position of the Citizens are not very picky with their sources of information either, they just put trust in different media. A good example of this credulity was a wave of panicking, rumor spreading, and fleeing the country after misinformation from the Ukrainian side was reported about Russia's supposed military mobilization in the early days of the invasion.

**Lina Bulakhova:**

(1) I loved the reasoning of your text, and its clear conception.

Does it seem that there is a certain opposition in the camp of Citizens? On the one hand, there are speakers like Ilya Krasilshchik, who toxically accept blame in the name of the entire "nation" and at the same time acrimoniously accuse the People. On the other hand, there are Citizens who have never lived, as you put it, "developing its institutions and initiatives as if the country were rich, advanced, pro-Western and so on." They did not introduce people to cannibalistic services like Delivery and Yandex.Taxi. They did not arrange food markets or create countless lifestyle magazines, where there was nothing Russian or made in Russia. There were people who understood how despicable any complicity in the regime is.

What I am trying to say is that the concept of "Citizens" is perhaps not so homogeneous, and that we can assume the same with "People."

(2) Don't you think that the task is not to convince the People, but to reformulate guilt for people like Krasilshchik or Yandex's top managers, who for years pretended to live in a normal country because they were successful, and now have become the mouthpiece of Russian resentment?

**Artem Serebryakov:**

(1) This is precisely true! I firmly believe that this illusion of homogeneity is the major obstacle in the search for a common language we so desperately need today. A proper analysis of any established discursive position should reveal nonidentity within certain identification. Even those who used to articulate the Authorities' position—we do know there is disagreement and dissension among them (remember the case of Channel One journalist Marina Ovsyannikova). We also know, and this is true for any discourse, that there is an unavoidable inner tendency to suppress such disagreements, to suture this always already dissolving unity. The more homogeneous a "collective voice" appears to be, the more suspicious it is and the more likely it conceals deepened and pressing contradictions behind its apparent unity. And disclosure of these contradictions is, of course, a necessary step toward the kind of reconfiguration I am talking about in my commentary.

(2) Such a reformulation, accompanied by a critique of their discursive position (and the socioeconomic privileges it is based upon), is undoubtedly an important task. And no "convincing," no dialog whatsoever, is possible without it. However, we should always take into account the political structure as a (fractured) whole, the

limitations it imposes on different parties and their ability to reflect on the situation they find themselves in. Therefore, the task is doubled: by looking to more adequately articulate the position within the structure (an articulation that would acknowledge the aspect of enjoyment the structure provides its parties with), we must also develop a higher-level critique to point out the ultimate inadequacy of such structures where the Citizens and the People are opposed to each other.

## On Oleg Aronson's entry "Shame as Sensus Communis"

### Katerina Khan:

How relevant can the "polis thinking" be in the case of contemporary Russia, a country that has not been much affected by Renaissance or Republican identity, but seems to associate itself with the Empire (bearing the historical legacy of "Third Rome" and the highly centralized type of political institutional organization)?

How could you describe a "megapolis democracy" if it could exist?

Maybe it is not so much a classical monarchy (with a political theology and the king's personal responsibility for his state, in the face of God as the source of legitimacy for the monarch's political will), but more likely a model of "aggressive imperialism" as described by John Hobson; this time not a *pax Britannica*, but *pax Russica*?

### Oleg Aronson:

I don't think that it is possible to repeat the polis thinking of the Greeks today. I use this example only to underline the relationship between community and equality, which allows us to go beyond the individualistic tradition of understanding thinking. But, the Greek polis and its *isonomia* are possible only in the situation of slavery as the natural condition of social order.

In our time, it seems to me, the elements of social community that are comparable to the polis as a space of collective action are war and revolution. They oppose each other. War is a necessary component of imperialism (Lenin showed this even better and more vividly for me than Hobson).

I agree that Russia as a state acts on the model of an empire. But this Empire is archaic, because it prioritizes space and resources. It turns politics into geopolitics and the megapolis into an analogon of a metropolis.

My aim, however, was not to revisit this subject. Through an understanding of collective shame, I wanted to draw attention to the fact that contemporary democracy (unlike fascism and imperialism, which are oriented toward war) has lost its own mobilization resource, which was and remains revolution.

Where is the place of this revolution in the contemporary megapolis? This is an open question. Perhaps we underestimate the revolutionary potential of digitalization, seeing in it only a new version of the global concentration camp. For me, however, it is clear that the digital world is not only about control, but above all a new field of depersonalized trust. This brings us back to the *sensus communis*.

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