



Valentin Asmus's first book in émigré and in Soviet criticism in the 1920s

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Abstract

This article covers Valentin Asmus's first book *Dialectical Materialism and Logic* and response thereto among émigré and Soviet intellectuals. The interest in Asmus's first book is not only related to the demonstration of his ideas. It records and discusses the main problems that emerged in early Soviet theory of cognition, and reveals the existence of a latent Hegelian trend within it. Asmus presents the dialectical method by situating it within the development of philosophical ideas from Hegel to Marx. The article particularly focuses on the perception of Asmus's book "on the two shores," on the discussion of philosophy's subject and method. Lenin's name, featured in the book's title, turns out to be essentially absent from the study itself. Asmus argues that only thinking taken in its dialectical development can be the true subject of philosophy (30 years later, Evald Ilyenkov would assume this stance as well). The second part of the article considers critical responses to Asmus's first books in both émigré and Soviet press.

Keywords Soviet philosophy · Marxism · Dialectics · Dialectical materialism · Philosophical criticism

Introduction

Frequently, Soviet philosophy is taken to mean the theoretical foundations of the Marxist-Leninist ideology. However, Soviet philosophy has not always been construed in this ideological vein, and its evolution depended on its historical and political situation. For a variety of reasons, its early days (the 1920s) were particularly turbulent and abounded in debates. First, Soviet philosophy had to distance itself from the pre-revolutionary Russian philosophy, whose most notable figures ended up emigrating. Second, Soviet philosophy had to prove its validity and tenability vis-à-vis new ideological tasks and landmarks of the new Soviet society. Third, locked in

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a confrontation with the “bourgeois” philosophy (primarily with positivism), Marxist philosophy had to define its subject and method. Only in the late 1930s, just as the totalitarian regime emerged victorious, did Soviet philosophy fully transform into a dogmatic construct and a servant of ideology.

The 1920s may be still called an era of relative freedom and of searching for new forms of philosophic production rooted in materialism and dialectics. Debates between the Deborinites and Mechanists constituted the striking phenomenon of the time.¹ These debates left their imprint on discussions of Valentin F. Asmus’s (1894–1975) first book. Asmus is frequently called Deborin’s student and follower.² In the very first line of this book, he appeals to Deborin’s authority, yet personal loyalty to anyone was not typical of the young philosopher.

Asmus’s first book: an introduction to a discussion

In 1924 Asmus published in Kyiv his first monograph. Entitled *Dialectical Materialism and Logic: An Essay on the Development of the Dialectical Method in Modern Philosophy from Kant to Lenin*, it drew a wide response not only among Soviet philosophers, but also within the intellectual émigré community. An analysis of this book and its critical reception from the “two shores” tells us a lot about the nature of Russian philosophy, its exponents and the types of scientific arguments adopted in the early Soviet period.

Time has shown that this interest in Asmus was not incidental. He was to go on to play a decisive role in the history of Soviet philosophy. Today, he is one of the handful of recognized authorities, if not classics, of Soviet philosophy. A book comprised of memoirs written by his students and friends (Vasily V. Sokolov, Boris V. Biryukov, Teodor I. Oizerman, Nelli V. Motroshilova, Vladimir A. Smirnov, et al.) abounds with praise for his impeccable personal qualities, his pedagogical and philosophical achievements (Zhuchkov, and Blauberger 2010). Several critical pieces and claims concerning Asmus (Korsakov 2018; Petrov 2018) essentially failed to undermine these praises. His overall philosophical legacy has not been studied, and I have at my disposal but a few texts describing Asmus himself and his time (Blauberger 1995; David-Fox 2015; Steila 2018; Kusenko 2019). His autobiography is of tremendous interest in this regard (Zhuchkov, and Blauberger 2010).

Asmus is the case of a Soviet philosopher with a classical pre-revolutionary education. Nonetheless, he never was in opposition to the Soviet authorities, never spoke openly against them and their party line. On the contrary, he consciously chose to cast his lot, including his philosophical lot, in with the Soviet system and Marxism:

In his other works from the 1920s (and in later works) we do not find that critical attitude towards Marxism, but instead find many references and quotations

¹For more details, see the article “Saving philosopher Descartes” in this issue of *Studies in East European Thought* (A. Maidansky and M. Maidansky 2023).

²In the 1920s, Abram Deborin (Ioffe) (1881–1963) was the most influential philosopher in the Soviet Union. In 1921, with Lenin still living, Deborin became the head of the philosophy department at the Institute of Red Professors; later, he held the offices of Director of the Institute of Scientific Philosophy and Editor-in-Chief of the *Pod Znamenem Marksizma* (*Under the Banner of Marxism*) journal.

to the classical works of Marxism, as well as assessments and conclusions in the spirit of the Marxist approach. In Marxism, Asmus saw the expression and continuation of the fundamental traditions of classical philosophical thought. (Kusenko 2019)

Even though Asmus fit smoothly into his historical circumstances and kept in line with the state of ideological affairs, he is seen as a smart, educated, and erudite thinker. He preserved an untarnished reputation as he strove in his scholarship to remain both objective and ideologically neutral. By considering his first book and its first reviews, this article elucidates the genesis of Asmus as a Soviet scholar. Émigré criticism is represented by articles authored by P. Prokofiev (the pen name of Dmitry I. Chizhevsky³) in the *Sovremeniye Zapiski. Obshchestvenno-politicheskiy i literaturniy zhurnal* (*Contemporary Notes. Social-Political and Literature*) journal published in Paris in 1920–1940. Reviews by Soviet critics (Deborin, Bammel, Karev) were published in Soviet journals: *Pod Znamenem Marksizma*, *Letopisi marksizma* (*Chronicles of Marxism*), *Pechat' i Revolyutsiya* (*The Press and Revolution*).

Asmus's first book determined his entire life. This is where he severs his ties with the ideas of Vasily V. Zenkovsky, Alexei N. Gilyarov, and his other professors at the School of History and Philology at Kyiv University (Asmus graduated in 1919). He also abandoned his own militant idealism obvious in his article “On the Great Captivity of Russian Culture,” published in 1919 in the *Zhizn'* weekly in Kyiv. Today, this article is depicted as a reflection of Asmus's true views he carefully concealed throughout his life as he “never lied, but spoke evasive truth” (Gromov, Kucenko 2010, p. 348). It seems to me that both this article and the very expression “evasive truth” demonstrate only that the young philosopher was adept at adapting to his changing situation. In 1919, he called Marx “the great tempter” and labeled his teaching “a mechanistic interpretation of being.” He accused Marx of transforming the spiritual principle (thinking) into a pathetic attribute of matter.

Never before has a symbiosis of Hegel and Marx produced such stunted, terribly bloodless fruits bereft of creative seeds.... The first, most urgent task (upon the collapse of the Soviet power as Asmus mistakenly believed—S.K.) is freeing the entire spiritual culture from the pernicious, deadly captivity wherein it was plunged by the insanity of today's communist rationalism and mechanistic Marxist idolatry. (Zhuchkov, and Blauberg 2010)

Five years later, Asmus, who had stayed in Soviet Russia, quickly found his place in the new reality. Unlike those who were devoted to the Soviet life and Soviet philosophy from the very outset, Asmus chose both quite calculatingly. The irony is that many earnest Marxists were subsequently destroyed by Stalin's regime, while Asmus was never subjected to major repressions.

His first book emphasized studying dialectical materialism as a new method in the epistemological theory. For him, dialectical materialism was not merely a historical stage in the development of philosophy; it was a revolutionary philosophical

³Chizhevsky Dmitry Ivanovich [Dmytro] (1894–1977). A Russian-Ukrainian philosopher and literary scholar. After the October Revolution, he emigrated and worked in Halle. He used the pseudonym “P. Prokofiev” (sometimes “PP”).

breakthrough, a vivid manifestation of the Marxist paradigm that entailed changing the world by means of a progressive philosophical methodology. The very first phrase shows that Asmus kept his nose to the wind: “Comrade Deborin justly complains that we have not yet provided a consistent exposition of the development of the dialectical method” (Asmus 1924, p. 3). This is the task the young Asmus set out to handle.

Even though his first book used historical and philosophical material (the philosophy of classical antiquity and modernity, German classical philosophy and Marxism), Asmus positioned it as primarily a study of epistemological problems. He attempts to show Marxist epistemological theory as a synthesis of materialism, dialectic, and logic. Recalling a “symbiosis” of Hegel and Marx and in opposition to Mechanists’ view of dialectic as the doctrine of the development of nature, society, and the human being, Asmus develops Deborin’s idea of dialectic and logic being identical with theory of knowledge (Deborin 1922).

As regards the relation of thinking to being, Asmus pointed out three approaches: materialism, idealism, and mysticism. Reminding his audiences, however, that being determines thought, he subsequently discourses on thinking, logic, and dialectic frequently without recourse to the very category of being or interpreting it as a logical abstraction in the spirit of Hegel’s “pure being” (*reines Seyn*). Asmus attempts to take Marxism out of the shadow of vulgar sociologism or economism, as he claims that many immature minds simply failed to understand the classics on this point. Asmus successfully established the principle of studying thinking as such, regardless of “describing those sociohistorical conditions wherein idealistic dialectic was developing” (Asmus 1924, p. 4). Asmus referenced Engels and his ideas concerning the division of labor and reminded his readers that both the base, or “social being,” influences the spiritual superstructure, and vice versa (Ibid, p. 24).

Although Asmus repeatedly referenced Deborin, his critics immediately noticed that in his investigation into the nature of the dialectical method, he fluctuates between official Marxism and his own vague stance. This ambiguity was spotted by his critics on both shores. Some criticized him for “Marxism,” while others suspected him of being an idealist and a covert Hegelian.

From Marxism to Hegel and back again

Asmus’s first book should certainly be credited with defining materialistic dialectic as a current epistemological theory. For Asmus, dialectic should combine the method and the subject of knowledge. The chapters on Hegel and Marxism particularly focus on the specifics of dialectical materialism and dialectical logic.

Asmus assesses the philosophical contributions of Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Marx, and Engels from the point of view of Marxist epistemology. Asmus’s materialistic dialectic as a new “epistemology” differs from the Hegelian version in its specifically historical nature and in that dialectical thinking objectively reflects both becoming and development through the struggle of opposites.

The philosopher discovers the triumph of materialism in what he calls an “*a posteriori experience*” (the term is also taken from Kant). Asmus argues that if Kant merely

states that cognition reveals to us how being is shown to us in experience, then materialists can know “being independently of us and our consciousness” (Asmus 1924, p. 12).

To answer the question of how it is possible, Asmus uses a dialectical methodology that he compared to the methods of natural sciences. What unites them is that they reflect objective and independent laws that exist independently of people, even though people do discover them. For Asmus, it is science that should be credited with proving the world to be founded on change and contradictions. He, however, glosses over the fact that science, like every other spiritual product, comes from people's activities performed at a specific historical time. Consequently, nothing can be said or discovered outside these activities. Asmus does not have an “activity” category and leans toward the Hegelian identity of being and nothing, objective knowledge and the Spirit's self-development. Subsequently, he reduces virtually entire contents of dialectic to Hegelian tenets that he paints in materialistic hues.

For Hegel, self-determination is based on the Spirit, while for Asmus it is based on Being, which, in fact, does not differ in any way from the Hegelian Spirit. Asmus showed that it was Hegel's doctrine that first became the “cradle of the historical worldview.” Asmus describes the movement of concepts through the method of ascent from the abstract to the concrete, contrasting it with Aristotelian evolutionism and teleology, characteristic of formal logic.

I believe this point to be one of the book's most notable successes. Asmus attempts to go beyond the dispute between the Deborinites and Mechanists. He demonstrates that dialectical methodology, as a matter of principle, eliminates the contradictions between evolutionism (Mechanists' stance) and teleologism (Deborinites). For him, dialectic is immanent to dialectical logic and any theory of cognition.

The book clearly shows that for Asmus, Hegel is the acme of the entire history of dialectical thinking that is “strictly monistic in its method and design” (Ibid, p. 128). Although his monism can only be interpreted from an idealist perspective, Asmus sees it the key to historicism in studying social being. Asmus even goes as far as ascribing “materialistic insights” to Hegel.

The merit of Hegel is that his concept of development was transformed so much that it could have become, and indeed has become, the cradle of a historical worldview ...; the method ... was translated into the language of idealism and an *a priori* expression of purely empirical and even materialistic intuitions. (Ibid, pp. 132, 137)

Analyzing Hegelian philosophy, Asmus shows the dialectical unity of method and subject, the impossibility of adopting this unity “mechanically.” This unity reflects the identity of being and thinking. The same principle of unity underlies the interpretation of contradiction as the core of dialectics. And finally, he makes a compelling argument that the dialectical method is the theory of dialectics itself or the theory of development (Ibid, p. 152). Following Hegel, he shows that in engaging in dialectics, we engage in a theory of cognition, we study categories and laws of thinking. This conclusion seems especially important for subsequent discussions in the 1950–~60s on the subject of Marxist philosophy. In fact, long before Evald Ilyenkov, Asmus had already shown that the subject of philosophy can only be thought in its dialectical development.

Subsequently, Asmus is forced to go back to discussing base and superstructure and to show that idealism's "defeat" is "rooted in the social being of the bourgeoisie as a class and its historically discoverable attributes" (Ibid, p. 174). Despite all the feathers in his cap, Hegel also suffered from this flaw.

Hegel's philosophy proved unable of going beyond pure contemplation. . . . This inability is an objective limit set for the thinking of bourgeoisie. Only the proletariat was destined to go over this limit. (Ibid, p. 177)

The proletariat's mission is to become an active agent of history, to actively change history. According to Asmus, this is what Marx understood, this is what he principally deserves credit for, and this is also what sets him apart from other members of the bourgeoisie.

As he embarks on a discussion of Marx, Asmus offers standard quotes from the classics (for instance, a lengthy quotations from *Theses on Feuerbach*), and then proposes his own concept of history and dialectical laws; he repeatedly references Plekhanov as the supreme authority on the matter. At that time, both Deborin and apparently Asmus himself were Plekhanovites and as such valued Feuerbach's interpretation of the human being/thinking. Yet as we know, the concept of historical activity, of labor as the essence of the human being was more important for Lenin. This topic is not treated in Asmus's first book, which also does not have a substantial chapter on Lenin, even though his name is in the title and is repeatedly mentioned in the book itself.

Reminding his readers of the advantages of Marxism in economic substantiation of society's spiritual development, Asmus makes an odd qualification that Marx and Engels were forced "to place special emphasis on the economic factor for purely *tactical reasons* [italics mine]" (Ibid, p. 20). Their followers failed to understand this tactic and debased the classics' teachings.

Ultimately, Asmus presents the following scheme of historical development: in the history of humanity, the first manner of thinking, a metaphysical one, grew out of developing a primitive practice based on *linguistic* exploration of discrete individual things, of a world that has *no* connections between phenomena. Failing to reveal the essence of the connection between basis and superstructure, Asmus introduces language as a mediator between these two levels. "A proper explanation of causal relations and interactions between economy, language, and thinking opens up a way toward successful resolution of crucial epistemological problems" (Ibid, p. 17).

Metaphysical thinking is based on formal logic that dominates all pre-capitalist societies, including the primitive society and the society of classical antiquity. Asmus here points to formal logic as a particular case of dialectical logic. He retells Engels' idea of dialectic remaining in place while stripping the laws of formal logic of their absolute value. True dialectic, in Asmus's view, begins to emerge in bourgeois society; it was mastered by Hegel within the idealist paradigm, and then it found its proper manifestation in the dialectical method of Marx, Engels, and Lenin.

Émigré criticism

P. Prokofiev was one of Asmus's first critics. Ironically, he and Asmus graduated from the same School for History and Philology in the same year. They came from worlds

of similar intellectual, educational, and living experiences; yet found themselves on two opposing shores of life. In emigration, Prokofiev closely followed Soviet philosophy and its institutions and subjected them to ceaseless and biting criticism.

The articles by P. Prokofiev about Soviet philosophy were printed in the journal *Sovremeniye Zapiski*. The author pointed out the lack of any philosophy (including logic) in Soviet universities and its ugly transformation into “Soviet (red) philosophy,” represented in the pages of what he describes as the “strange Soviet journal” (Prokofiev 1927, p. 481) *Pod Znamenem Marksizma*⁴ and the Institute of Scientific Philosophy. Prokofiev called the articles by Soviet philosophers “an embodiment of nothingness” or “pure nothing, the shadow of the shadow of reality” (Prokofiev 1927, p. 483). Soviet philosophy for him was a sort of oxymoron: “a hoist made from straw, a causeway made from breadcrumbs, butter from iron fillings,” “absurd ... intellectualizing from nothing and about nothing” (Prokofiev 1927, p. 482).

Moreover, the author unexpectedly discovered the inner foundation of this *nothingness* in the history of Russian (pre-revolutionary) philosophy. Reflecting on the party mindedness of Soviet thought, Prokofiev exposes the enduring presence of this feature in Russian philosophy. As examples, he pointed to the “Khlestakov-type dilettantism” (Prokofiev 1927, p. 497) of the *narodniks* and *raznochintsy*, thinkers such as Chernyshevsky or Pisarev; he also recalled the utilitarianism of critical realism in art, the Wanderers (*peredvizhniky*), for example.

He, therefore, viewed Soviet philosophy as the logical conclusion of the party-based (ideological) trends in the philosophy of pre-revolutionary Russia. Prokofiev's conclusions about Soviet philosophy being the opposite of Russian philosophical thought are refuted by his own observations and conclusions.

His personal position, too, was no exception to such a binary consciousness. It was also ideological and partisan, as was the position of his opponents. He, too, used the “swinging pendulum” mechanism of total accusations and denunciations of the “red professorship,” including in relation to the work of his classmate, about whose book he was one of the first to write a negative review: *recenzia* (Prokofiev 1926).

Having paid tribute to the “diligence” and erudition of the Soviet philosopher, Prokofiev immediately criticizes not so much the author's formulation of the problem as the ways of solving it. He cannot forget about the “communist leaven” of the author, from which, in his opinion, there inevitably follows a specific ideological enthusiasm about Marx, Engels, Lenin, etc., with mandatory references to their works. One finds in the review a customary unmasking of Soviet works as timeserving. It should be noted that, undoubtedly, this is a correct observation and a correct criticism. But behind this there was also the existential schism between people from the “two shores.” The thoughtful reader in Soviet Russia, as well as in the West, could hardly be deceived by references to the classics. This was the necessary tribute that needed to be paid to censorship. The fact that Prokofiev accuses Soviet philosophers of insincerity makes his review somewhat of a denunciation.

And Mr. Asmus has something to be afraid of—his work is, by and large, serious and businesslike, without the inevitable polemical and abusive excitement

⁴Abram Deborin was associated with the journal from the moment of its launch in 1922 for a period of 9 years first as a member of the editorial board, and then as its chief editor (from 1923 onwards).

in the “philosophical” works of communists and the decreeing of philosophical truth—sufficient reason to suspect the purity of the author’s communism. (Prokofiev 1926, p. 510)

The main part of the review consists of a completely objective analysis of the structure and content of the book. The reviewer identifies two basic themes: pre-Marxist dialectics and materialist dialectics in “left Hegelianism,” that is, in Marxism. The reproaches are quite traditional for historical and philosophical works: any critic lacks certain names and author’s remarks in texts of this kind to complete the picture:

After all, the whole process of development ‘from Kant to Hegel’ was a continuous living stream in which each link possesses not only historical, but also systematic significance (Prokofiev 1926, p. 510).

Furthermore, it turns out that Asmus’ incorrect and fragmentary interpretation of the German classics (since a number of important binding names were omitted) led to the collapse of the “idea of unity” of the entirety of German philosophy. Prokofiev approved of the chapters on Fichte and Schelling, but berated Asmus for those on Kant and Hegel. Two fundamental points of view had become entangled here. For Prokofiev, the method of dialectics is exclusively *idealistic*. Therefore, one cannot allow even a glimpse of materialistic tendencies. The most common argument in Prokofiev regards the “substitution of words” and “terminological impurity” (Prokofiev 1926, p. 512) in Asmus, who identifies, for example, Kant’s “thing in itself” or Schelling’s “nature” with matter. At the same time, Prokofiev himself does not shun substitution. Asmus clearly distinguishes the concept of “thing in itself” in Kant as matter in his early works and its “displacement to the transcendent world” in the Kantian Critiques” (Asmus 1924, p. 68).

He is also very critical of the Hegelian analysis in this book. Recognizing Asmus’ grasp of the idea of development in German thought, Prokofiev denies that Asmus understands the nature of the concrete in Hegel. But Asmus’ main sin is that he looks for the origins of materialistic dialectics in Hegel too.

But the exposition of Hegel in the book, in any case, loses all value, thanks to the materialistic variations played out on Hegelian themes by the author, who even ends up talking about “secret,” hidden materialism, and “materialistic intuitions” in Hegel. (Prokofiev 1926, p. 514)

Prokofiev clearly spotted opportunistic elements of Asmus’s objective exposition of Hegel’s idealism. But above all, he does not accept the reasoning about Marx and Engels. Here, from his point of view, the poverty of the author’s thought is revealed, one which subsumes everything to the ideological needs of the time. In particular, Prokofiev mentions the nature of materialistic dialectics that Asmus simply attributed to Marx and Engels. This, it seems to us, shows his affinity with the teachings of Plekhanov and Deborin. At the same time, Prokofiev does not give his own interpretation of Marxism, nor does he indicate how dialectics should be understood. Rather, this topic seems to him to be empty, as does the whole framework of ideas of Soviet philosophy. At the end of the review, Prokofiev returns to the thesis of the “ugly nature of Soviet philosophy.”

With a terrible feeling, you come to a standstill before the question “And what next?” Is it possible that only this strange mixture of deception, self-deception, and illiteracy and, as the book of Mr. Asmus shows, sometimes even fragments of actual science, yielded by its obsequious priests to the service of ignorance and deception, will be monopolistically recognized under the name of philosophy? (Prokofiev 1926, p. 516)

Soviet criticisms of the book

The book, as I have already remarked, turned out to be a much-discussed volume. A whole series of Soviet reviews appeared almost immediately, less unequivocal than those appearing in the West but no less animated. The book was to prove seminal for the author. Most likely it was Deborin's acquaintance with this book that played a decisive role in the invitation proffered to Asmus to work in Moscow.

When in January 1927 Abram Deborin submitted a plan to create a Philosophy section at the Presidium of the Communist Academy, Valentin Asmus was named as one of the active members of the section, even though at that time he was still living in Kyiv. (Korsakov 2018)

It was in fact Deborin's review, albeit an unsigned one (Review 1926), which came out in the journal *Letopisi Marksizma*⁵ in 1925. In the same year, reviews of two followers of Deborin were also printed: Nikolai Karev (Karev 1925a) in the journal *Pod Znamenem Marksizma* and Grigory Bammel (Bammel 1925) in the journal *Pechat' i Revolyutsiya*. The review attributed to Deborin is a rare illustration of benevolent criticism in the Soviet press of those years. It is party-neutral and mostly sticks to the book's basic content. The author of the review very subtly bypasses the sensitive issues regarding the “materialistic flaws” of the book. Thus, he approves of Asmus' approach, who considers the inner logic of the dialectical method of German philosophers, and at the same time ignores the “category of social being,” focusing

on the internal evolution of dialectical systems, without referring to the analysis of their premises and their immutable grounding in social being. Thanks to this compartmentalization, it was possible to trace more clearly the inner dialectic of idealism itself, the history of its evolution and its flaws (p. 174). (Review 1926, p. 99)

Effectively, Deborin approves the use of the method of abstraction, which allowed one to avoid vulgar sociology, the dominant methodology of those years.

At the same time, the review states that, analyzing materialistic dialectics, the author not only separates the object of analysis, but also attempts to discover the genetic connection of the ideas of German idealism with social being and, as a result of his research, comes to the conclusion that “the final reason for the failure of classical

⁵“It issued the journal of the Marx and Engels Institute, where Abram Deborin was its vice director and head of the Philosophy Department. The review notes those features of dialectics in Kant and Fichte from the book by Valentin Asmus, which Abram Deborin himself highlighted in his works on German classical philosophy”. (Korsakov 2018).

bourgeois philosophy is rooted in the social being of its historically discovered features” (p. 175) (Review 1926, p. 99).

Paying tribute to the prevailing wisdom, Asmus, according to the reviewer, is busy justifying the features of the dialectical method characteristic of Marx and Engels. It is based on the principle of *historicism*, the principle of the *interrelatedness* of all phenomena or the “monistic understanding of being and dialectics” and the economic conditions of social life, and, finally, *contradiction* as the main spring of all development. Deborin is well aware that the Marxist methodology described by Asmus is based largely on Hegelian dialectical principles, and this is quite consistent with his own attitudes. The reviewer concludes: “the author has successfully dealt with his task” (Review 1926, p. 100). It would be appropriate here to recall that Asmus was handling a task “set by comrade Deborin.”

Such a review can be called an exception rather than the norm of the typical polemic of the time, including in relation to the book under review. Subsequent Soviet reviews create a sense of their incredible similarity with émigré reviews, while being diametrically opposed in their philosophical approaches. For example, Prokofiev accuses the author of not being able to grasp dialectics in thought, as bequeathed by Hegel, but is hopelessly looking for it in “things,” but Nikolai Karev⁶ attributes to him a directly opposing transgression: “Asmus agrees with modern logicians like von Sigwart that in general contradiction is realized only in thinking, . . . and not in things” (Karev 1925a, p. 250).

Let us consider Karev’s review in more detail. It was published in 1925 in the third issue of *Pod Znamenem Marksizma*. Traditionally, he notes that the book is valuable in the way it posits the issues to be considered; he also notes the author’s independent and original thinking. Yet he immediately goes on to criticize its erroneous claims, even though he, for some reason, confines his analysis to the first two chapters. While émigré critics debunked Asmus’s ideological “bending with the wind,” the Soviet critic accused him of underestimating Marxism, i.e., of not being sufficiently Marxist. Karev is particularly indignant over the first chapter that focuses on the dialectic in classical antiquity since Asmus doubts the claim (promoted by Engels) that “all Greeks were born materialists and dialecticians.”

To say, finally, that Heraclitus was not a dialectician, since he sought in the very variability of being its unchangeable basis, means to be a metaphysician himself. < . . . > Of course, the dialectical process itself is eternal and unchangeable, but this immutability does not exist *outside* of the changing content, but *within it* itself. (Karev 1925a, p. 248)

Consequently, Asmus turns out, at the very least, to engage in debates with the classics of Marxism. Therefore, contrary to what Prokofiev erroneously believed, no one was deceived by the abundance of quotations and references to those very classics.

Karev criticizes not only its subject of dialectics and metaphysics, but also denounces the opposition of formal and dialectical logic in Asmus’ book. The reviewer

⁶Nikolay Afanasievich Karev (1901–1936), Deborin’s comrade-in-arms, a specialist in materialist dialectic, was expelled from the communist party in 1933 and executed by firing squad on October 11, 1936.

does not take into account that the foundations of formal logic were laid down by antiquity, and those of dialectical logic were laid down by German philosophy. Karev criticizes Asmus' consideration of Hegel, relying on the popular idea of the Hegelian contradiction between method and system.

The main flaw and metaphysical nature of Hegel lies in the fact that his temporal development of nature and society is based on the timeless, therefore metaphysical development of the categories that make up a complete system in themselves. (Karev 1925a, p. 252)

This idea stands in direct contradiction to the dialectic of concepts Asmus so convincingly presented in his book. What is at work here is rather Karev's own ideological argument that idealist dialectics is unable to objectively describe matter since this dialectic is, as indicated, idealist in nature.

Asmus was also criticized for his thoughts on the primitive mind that he, in opposition to materialistic traditions and Lévy-Bruhl's ideas his reviewer subscribed to, unexpectedly discovered to possess the foundations of metaphysics and formal logic. In his criticisms of Asmus, Karev predictably proceeds from Engels's ideas. Surprisingly, however, in order to criticize his fellow Soviet philosopher, another Soviet philosopher refers to the authority of a French anthropologist and ethnologist, who was no admirer of Marxism.

In Karev's opinion, Asmus betrays his idealism by viewing contradictions as having solely mental existence. Here Karev clearly fails to take into account Asmus's chapters on Hegel, Marx, and Engels, where Asmus relied on the principle of historicism and development in his attempt to demonstrate the objective nature of contradictions. This is an area that produced an odd critical asymmetry on the two "shores." Asmus appears to spare no effort to become a proponent of materialist philosophy. And this is what garners the harshest remarks of his opponents abroad. Soviet critics, however, do not see Asmus as one of them either, suspecting him of clearly idealistic leanings. For Prokofiev, Asmus is a materialist, while for Karev, he is an idealist which manifests, among other things, in Asmus's understanding of the essence of the dialectical method. Karev's criticism becomes clear in the light of his own view of dialectic, claiming that "a method becomes a theory, a system, when it is combined with material worked through using this method, when the method forms a unity with such material" (Karev 1925b, p. 41). For Karev, the task of philosophy is identifying those concepts that reflect the dialectics of things themselves and processes in nature and society. In this respect, Karev is a far more consistent Marxist than Asmus who took pains to remain true to Hegel's methodology.

Another reviewer of Asmus's book, Grigory Bammel (Bazhbeuk-Melikov)⁷ was even a more severe critic. He denounced that which Deborin himself deemed as the achievement of Asmus: his dialectical method, basically denying that the author had any substantial understanding of the dialectical approach. In the 1925 edition of the journal *Pechat' i Revolyutsiya*, he gives a brief overview of the first book of this

⁷Bammel' Grigory Konstantinovich (1900–1937) was a full member of the Institute of Philosophy in 1928–1931. He was arrested on 23 February 1937. He was condemned on 9 April 1938 to 8 years of a correctional Labour Camp. He was imprisoned in the Sevvostlag Labour Camp ran by the NKVD of the USSR (Nagaev Bay, Far Eastern Region). He died on 10 October 1939.

“provincial author.” The structure of the review resembles the theory of the classic “sandwich” method of criticism (Bergen et al. 2014). Initially, he notes the fine structure, clear logic, and epistemic significance of the book for a history of dialectics. Reading this work can become “a valuable tool for the independent study of the history of dialectics by a Russian reader... the book of comrade Asmus is a valuable contribution to *Russian* literature on the history of philosophy” (Bammel 1925, p. 439).

After such a positive assessment, the author embarks on a party trial against what Asmus has written, not only striking out the positive significance of the book, but also instantly turning its author into a petty-bourgeois thinker. He accuses Asmus of compiling and combining different theories and ideas into one. But behind this lies the main fact, from the point of view of the reviewer that: Asmus’ *ignorance* of the dialectical method allows the author to simply “drag his history of dialectics behind him like a rope” (Bammel 1925, p. 440). Bammel clearly does not trust the author’s Marxist pedigree and snipes at Asmus, trying to prove his substantially anti-Deborin stance. Deborin uses the dialectical method, making it the basis of the history of thought, whereas Asmus, on the other hand, adopts a non-dialectical method (metaphysics) to expound dialectics. Moreover, what Deborin approved of in the methodology of Asmus, namely his correct understanding of the unity of method and system, his student called metaphysical thinking, which Asmus only mechanically linked to the dialectical methodology of cognition.

Where the spectrum of metaphysics emerged, so did the error of idealism (as I see, a counter-posing argument to émigré logic is being used here too). The key thing that Asmus failed to do was to take a “dialectical approach to dialectics” according to Bammel. In fact, this means one must reveal the connection between dialectics and materialism at every historical stage. The absence of such a link automatically excludes Asmus from the ranks of genuine Deborinites. According to Bammel, Asmus also failed to grasp another basic axiom of Marxism: dialectics is a reflection of the socio-economic development of society.

The study should begin with the base, with the real struggle of antagonistic forces, with economic and class contradictions, and move on to the corresponding forms of social consciousness. (Bammel 1925, p. 440)

Asmus failed to connect dialectics with materialism, that is, the superstructure with the base, and this “core of all truth” was constantly ignored in his exposition of the idealists Kant, Fichte or Hegel. “But it would be half the trouble if such a methodological point of view did not lead to incorrect, obviously false ideas.” (Bammel 1925, p. 440)

And so Asmus is accused of idealism, in him having turned the form of exposition of ideas (methodology) into a research process (theory). This, according to Bammel, is the substance of his main flaw.

Bammel then sets out his own point of view. Dialectics should be considered in its concrete historical development, something Asmus did not do, for example, by falsely interpreting ancient dialectics as “heuristics” and “metaphysics.” Dialectics (the history of ideas) is a reflection of the history of “material, economic relations.” The reviewer generously uses diamat’s (short for “dialectical materialism”) verbal

arsenal: *the base, the struggle of antagonistic forces, economic and class contradictions*, etc., which are practically absent in Asmus' book.

Hence Bammel concludes that Asmus only dresses up in the clothes of a Marxist. He has trespassed on the sacred: the primacy of the base in relation to the superstructure, first demanding to be well acquainted with the superstructure in order to associate it with the base (see: Asmus 1924, p. 24). His book (and this is something that Bammel subtly perceives) is a direct path to idealism.

Paradoxically, but after a short time, both Bammel and Deborin themselves will turn out to be "*Menshevik idealists*." Asmus will avoid this charge. Possibly owing to the fact that he was not really a follower of Deborin's dialectic, and possibly because of this criticism.

Conclusions

My analysis of Asmus's first book showed that he failed to fit organically into Deborin's circle. His scholarly honesty and intelligence did not sit well with the prevailing style of philosophizing at the time. Deborinites accused him of a penchant for idealism, while Russian emigrants, on the contrary, disliked his tendency to compromise with Soviet Marxism. In fact, his concept of Being is not fundamentally different from Hegel's Spirit. Asmus's fascination with Hegelian logic influenced his definition of the subject of philosophy. Asmus regarded this subject as thought in its dialectical development; by that, he virtually anticipated the conclusions that Ilyenkov would reach thirty years later.

Asmus's book and its critical reception on "both shores" showed that in the 1920s, Asmus was not an earnest adherent of any specific trend in philosophy. His philosophy and his desire to become part of the new world was a textbook case of a smart and clever person adjusting to his new circumstances. His critics spotted his oscillations between his own "evasive" philosophical stance and the new materialist ideology. Subsequently, he chose the path of the history of philosophy and logic and distanced himself from stark ideological battles.

At the same time, the 1920s debates, despite their ideological bend and pathos, were a rare moment of free thinking in Russia. All the Soviet reviewers of Asmus's first book were repressed and died in the Gulag. Asmus lived his life unaffected by repression. The history of philosophy he has dedicated his life to will have proven a lucky lifebuoy for sailing its neutral waters.

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