

The Weekend Essay Life & Arts

Kant and the case for peace



Three centuries after his birth, the Prussian philosopher's arguments for a rational, clear-eyed pacifism are more relevant than ever

Lea Ypi 9 HOURS AGO

In another possible world, more predictable perhaps than the one in which we live, instead of rushing every morning to check the latest news on Russia's war in Ukraine, I would be regularly monitoring its weather forecast. I would be eagerly anticipating a long-planned trip to Kaliningrad to attend the birthday party of my favourite philosopher, and, apparently, also one of Vladimir Putin's: Immanuel Kant. A flight to Moscow and a domestic transfer would have been booked for the end of this month, and I would be romantically, uncritically, somewhat inappropriately for a Kantian, daydreaming about my arrival.

Should I try to emulate Kant's legendary afternoon stroll through the then Prussian city, setting my watch to coincide with it as Königsberg's residents were rumoured to have done? Should I head straight for the city centre, trying to find the famous "seven bridges of Königsberg", the mathematical problem analysed by Leonhard Euler that laid the foundations to graph theory? Should I stop for a selfie on the banks of the Pregolya (once Pregel) river? Or should I try to visit the 14th-century Gothic cathedral?

Perhaps later. As far as I'm concerned, the most important site of Kaliningrad is Kant's modest tomb.





A 1791 portrait of Immanuel Kant by Gottlieb Döbler © Getty Images

“Immanuel Kant / 1724-1804 / Prominent bourgeois idealist philosopher. Born, lived without leaving, and died in Königsberg”, read a Soviet-era plaque, placed there shortly after 1947, when the grave was surprisingly saved from demolition. At that time, Kaliningrad, which had been bombed during the war by both the British and the Soviets, was undergoing postwar reconstruction, with plans to turn it into a Soviet poster city, filled with Stalin statues and Lego-like purpose-built blocks.

Kant’s tomb was saved by the miraculous intervention of one VV Lyubimov (most likely a false name) who wrote to *Izvestia*, the government’s official newspaper, to alert the authorities of the imminent danger to the philosopher’s grave. Kant, he wanted to remind them, had received a favourable mention in *Dialectics of Nature* by Friedrich Engels, who praised Kant’s “epoch-making work” for breaking with the “petrified”, theological view of nature. In a rare instance of responsiveness to democracy from below, the committee for cultural sites of the Council of Ministers decided to preserve Kant’s grave, and as a consequence the cathedral that contains it.

Since then, how authorities and the wider public engage with Kant and his thought, how they negotiate, appropriate — and to some extent distort — his legacy, have offered an interesting lens through which to explore some of the wider tensions of Russia’s relation to Europe and Europe’s relation to itself.

In early July 2005, on the eve of the 750th anniversary of Kaliningrad-Königsberg, the local university took the name of Immanuel Kant. Russian president Vladimir Putin and then German chancellor Gerhard Schröder were both in attendance. There were enthusiastic speeches and vigorous handshakes. Kaliningrad. Schröder said, “is

more enthusiastic speeches and vigorous handshakes. Kaliningrad, once east, is now the most western city of the Russian Federation”, and though this is still “painful for some, it is history”. The city had “a real chance to become a truly European metropolis, overcoming the borders that have been drawn”.



Russian president Vladimir Putin and the then German chancellor Gerhard Schröder stand at the grave of Immanuel Kant on the 750th anniversary of the founding of Kaliningrad, formerly Königsberg, July 2005 © Tobias Schwarz/Reuters

In subsuming the tragic past to a more hopeful future, one could hear echoes of the old *doux commerce* thesis: trade as the precondition to lasting peace. In Kaliningrad/Königsberg, Kant’s genius and spirit were invoked to seal that special union of German reason and Russian passion that became later known as Nord Stream 1 and 2.

More recently, a presidential decree signed by Putin ordered the preparations for Kant’s 300th anniversary. A dedicated Russian website still reads: “Esteemed academics will gather in the city where professor Kant was born, lived, worked, and now rests, to discuss the philosopher’s legacy, the influence of his ideas on the progress of science and modern society.”

I am one of these academics. Or rather, I was. In February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, and the international conference I was going to attend, the largest gathering of Kant scholars in the world, was moved to Germany. The event’s (now updated) webpage condemns Russia’s war of aggression, explaining that the decision to no

longer travel to Kaliningrad was changed in the “justified assumption” that the congress “was acting in the interest of its members and the purpose of the association”.

I have recently found myself engaged in another thought experiment. Would Kant have cancelled his own congress in Kaliningrad? Judging by his reaction to Russia’s war of aggression against his own country at the end of the Seven Years’ War, it seems rather unlikely.

Although Kant was the first to come up with a definition of the Enlightenment captured under the motto “*Sapere aude!*” (“Have the courage of your own convictions”), the prominent 18th-century philosopher and author of the *Critique of Pure Reason* was not known for his acts of personal courage. In 1757, Königsberg was under Russian occupation and Kant wrote to Empress Elizabeth promising her his loyalty. In the case of treachery, he said, I will “inform the authorities forthwith, but also try to thwart the deed”. A chair in logic and metaphysics had recently become vacant and Kant needed the authorities’ support (he failed).

Love for one’s nation should never be sacrificed to an ordinary academic chair, some might say. Still, cowardice may not be the only explanation for the inconsistency between the radical content of Kant’s writing and his more moderate personal behaviour. A deeper reason lies in the political requirements of his theory of freedom.

To be free, in a Kantian sense, is to be able to take a critical distance from your passions and inclinations, and to ask yourself if they contribute to “enlightened” thinking: the exit, as Kant puts it, from “humanity’s self-incurred own immaturity”. The process of enlightenment rests on three maxims: to think for oneself, to think putting oneself in the place of everyone else, and to always think consistently. Such maxims, he believed, could be advanced through “the public use of reason”, a *modus operandi* that is fundamentally different from the “private” use people make of it in their professions (say as students, teachers, doctors, politicians, lawyers or asset managers). While the latter is premised on the acceptance of authority, the former requires pluralistic, impartial and critical engagement.

As conflicts threaten to expand, from Russia/ Ukraine, and from Israel/Palestine,

It is difficult to relate to Kant’s aspirations in an age like ours where public-spiritedness is constantly threatened by the clash between private interests. Our mode of communication is wider and more inclusive than in the 18th century (for example,

rereading Kant proves deeply troubling, but also instructive

political participation is formally no longer limited to property-holders) but it is also shallower, more certain of itself and less critical. Dissent manifests itself more in clamorous acts of individual self-expression (preferably recorded on a mobile phone) and

less in collective critical engagement.

Like us, Kant lived in an age of crisis marked by great advances in science and technology but a collapse in values. Yet he carved out a role for reason as a universal communicative capacity that tries to steer a middle path between scepticism and dogmatism: between having faith in nothing and blindly following trends. That conception of reason seems harder to revive in our societies, strangled as they are between destructive interests and the individualisation of political commitment.

On February 12 2024, almost two years after Russia invaded Ukraine, Kaliningrad governor Anton Alikhanov declared at a conference that responsibility for the recent war lay with none other than the Enlightenment philosopher. Kant, Alikhanov emphasised, had a “direct relationship to the global chaos, the global realignment that we are now facing”; his works contributed to a “social and cultural situation” in which “the west has violated all agreements that had been reached”.

It was not the first time Kant attracted the ire of Russian nationalists. Already in December 2018, when the government conducted an online poll to rename Kaliningrad’s airport, Kant was a favourite until a smear campaign accusing him of being a “Russophobe” led to the vandalism of his statue, paint thrown over his tomb, as well as the destruction of a commemorative plaque marking the site where he had lived.

Still, this time there was a tragic irony to Alikhanov’s words that Kant had a “direct connection to the military conflict in Ukraine”. Kant, after all, is better known as the author of one of the most famous anti-war essays written in the history of philosophy: “Toward Perpetual Peace”, published in 1795. As destructive conflicts threaten to expand their reach, from Russia/Ukraine to Europe, and from Israel/Palestine to the rest of the Middle East, rereading Kant proves deeply troubling, but perhaps also instructive.

The very title of the essay is inspired by the satirical engraving on a Dutch innkeeper’s

board where “perpetual peace” refers to the calm of the “graveyard”. He never knew, of course, about nuclear threats. Still, his warning that “a war of extermination in which the simultaneous annihilation of both parties . . . would let perpetual peace come about only in the vast graveyard of the human race” has an eerie ring to it.



Russia's president Vladimir Putin tours the Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University in Kaliningrad in January © Getty Images

The essay itself takes the form of an ideal peace treaty containing a series of articles to arrive not just at a provisional cessation of hostilities but the end of war once and for all. Kant criticises the ease with which states contract debt for the purpose of funding war. Debt, he suggests, is legitimate for peaceful projects but when it comes to international conflicts, money has a “dangerous power” because, “combined with politicians’ inclination to fight”, it “increases the facility to do so”.

The best-known paragraphs of Kant’s essay on perpetual peace are the ones that suggest how the rights of nations must be based on a “federalism between free states”. Kant’s proposal sought to address a challenge tormenting Europe since the “eternal peace” decree adopted at the 1495 Diet of Worms had led to a ban on private feuds common in the Middle Ages. What was the point of using the coercive power of the state to guarantee domestic peace, if the security of citizens was constantly threatened by international war? How should one handle warfare between larger units who now had a monopoly over the use of force?

For both Kant and Russell, pacifism does not simply amount to the position of ‘turning the other cheek’

Inspired by his predecessors’ efforts, including the Abbé de Saint Pierre’s proposal for a federation of European states that included Russia, Kant’s project was perhaps the most ambitious. The Prussian philosopher insisted that the standard 18th-century categories of private, public and international right must be complemented by a new one, which he labelled “cosmopolitan

right”.

Grounded on human beings’ original common possession of the Earth, Kant’s cosmopolitanism involves the recognition of a “right” to visit everywhere without being treated with hostility. It also specifies that since global interaction has now gone so far that “a violation of right on *one* place of the Earth is felt in *all*”, the concept of cosmopolitanism is not a question of ethics but politics. Since private, public, international and cosmopolitan right are interdependent, when one of them is questioned, the rest also collapse.

Kant was a pacifist, but he was not naive. In a well-known essay written in 1943 called “The Future of Pacifism”, the British philosopher Bertrand Russell distinguished between absolute and relative versions of the position. The former, Russell suggested, is the argument that “in all circumstances, it is wrong to take human life”. The latter, on the other hand, consists in the position that “the evils of war are *almost* always greater than they seem to excited populations at the moment when war breaks out”; and that while some wars were worth fighting, in cases such as the first world war the “evils resulting” were greater than the evils of making the concessions necessary to avert the war.

Kant’s system resists calculations of this sort: his pacifism is more about principles than consequences. Still, for both Kant and Russell, pacifism does not amount to the position of “turning the other cheek” held by the early Church fathers, and in response to which the Just War tradition developed. For advocates of Just War, turning the other cheek made sense only in the case of violence against individuals, not an attack in response to an entire group of innocent people. As Augustine, an early champion of Just War, put it, “it is the injustice of the opposing side that lays on the wise man the duty of waging just war”.

The position was as prominent among 18th-century jurists as it seems to be among 21st-century liberal politicians. In response to it, the sort of pacifism Kant proposed

(and that inspired Russell) was part of a political argument. Pacifists are fully aware of the risks of appeasement and of the argument that a pacifist stance risks encouraging further aggressions. What they try to highlight is the danger of escalation and the historical rarity of wars that end with the total victory of only one side.

Kant's essay on perpetual peace is often cited as an inspiration for the European Union: a project born out of the ashes of the second world war that saw former mortal enemies come together in a shared commitment to peaceful institutions. For all its limitations, it has been crucial not just to steer western European politics away from fratricidal nationalism but also for disillusioned states struggling to reconcile with their communist past.

Europe has recently become a place where the clash between good and evil are routinely invoked to justify acts of irresponsible brutality, and where the drums of war are heard ever more loudly. As governments across the world find themselves once again in an arms race, market shares in the military industry skyrocket.

Martial metaphors are everywhere: some find enemies inside Europe's borders, agitating the spectre of a migrant threat to traditional values while openly advocating the extraterritorial deportation of asylum seekers. Others reckon with the prospect of enemies outside, urging us to "mentally prepare" for a "prewar era" as Polish prime minister Donald Tusk recently warned. Meanwhile, those who advocate compromise and nuance are exposed to ridicule and trolling at best, to censorship and repression at worst.

Nothing is further removed from the spirit of Kant than the dogmatic way in which we are asked to accept war in all its forms: political, social, cultural. Perhaps this is where the danger lies. Perhaps war is fought in the mind even before it reaches the ground. Perhaps we are being persuaded that good and bad are obvious, that right must prevail and wrong will be punished, that war — in the world of ideas, in politics, on our borders, on the front — is the only way forward.

In another possible world, I would have still travelled to Kaliningrad. I would have gone because I happen to agree with Kant that the only trenches we should join are those of reason. As one of the articles of "Perpetual Peace" insists, even in the middle of the worst excesses, some confidence in the humanity of the enemy must be maintained. If Kant has anything to teach us 300 years after his birth, it's that when the pursuit of complete victory risks leading to complete extinction, escalation is

always a disaster.

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