

DECOLONIZING THE TRANSNATIONAL, TRANSNATIONALIZING THE DECOLONIAL: RUSSIAN STUDIES AT THE CROSSROADS

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RUSSIA'S FULL-SCALE INVASION OF UKRAINE on 24 February 2022 and the ensuing brutal war have caused shock and upheaval, moral and intellectual, across the multidisciplinary field of knowledge, study and expertise commonly referred to, in the Anglophone world, as 'Russian Studies'. The present war has prompted many scholars in our field to reconsider their work – theoretically and practically, ethically and politically – bringing a sense of urgency to the field's ongoing self-reflection. In our case, the war has led us to rethink the assumptions and conclusions of our co-edited volume *Transnational Russian Studies*.¹ This volume formed part of a broader Transnational Modern Languages initiative, which sought to grant Modern Languages a more coherent disciplinary identity centred on the transnational paradigm.² Our volume began from the premise that Russia is a multi-ethnic, multicultural and multilingual formation and sought to place the mobility of language, culture, ideas and people within, across and beyond national boundaries at the core of our understanding of that which we study. Crucial to this was our call for an epistemological shift in Russian Studies. This entailed a move away from the tacit methodological nationalism that took 'Russianness' for granted. We argued, instead, for a reflexive deconstruction of the epistemological boundary-work sustaining the various reigning notions of 'Russia' and 'Russianness', as well as for a Bakhtin-inspired ethical reframing of our field's dominant epistemological perspectives, emphasizing the imperative of viewing our object of study simultaneously from without and from within.

Transnational Russian Studies was published in early 2020, but Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine two years later prompted us to return to our ideas with a new set of questions. To what extent was our 'transnational' approach still necessary – or even valid – at a time when the Russian army was literally transgressing national borders? How do our calls to transnationalize the field coincide with – and differ from – the voices now calling, with increasing urgency, to decolonize it? To what extent do

the epistemological and ethical moves that we called for offer a useful or sustainable framework for Russian Studies in the midst of war or even after it?

We acknowledge that our own expertise lies in Russian Studies specifically, albeit with a transnational inflection, and that this shapes the focus of our article. However, the expanded scope (and title) of the forum which our article introduces is reflected in the fact that we invited interlocutors from the wider Russian and Slavonic Studies field. Indeed, we should recognize at the outset that our field has never been confined to a narrow conceptualization of 'Russia'. It has been named and framed in various ways, with 'Slav(on)ic', 'East European', '(Post-)Soviet' and 'Eurasian' being commonly added to, or placed in lieu of, strictly 'Russian' Studies. Such labels reflect the fact that the field's remit is delineated by a long history of empire across northern Eurasia and has historically encompassed – in mobile and strategic ways – the study of an evolving network of socio-political entities, ethno-national groups and lingua-cultural communities inhabiting the vast region in question. It has long been evident, however, that such an expansive approach to defining this field, while serving a pragmatic purpose, has also worked to conceal the field's fundamentally asymmetrical structure – namely, the tacit given, grounded in both past and present geopolitical power relations, that the study of 'Russia' and, by extension, of things 'Russian', lies, seemingly by default, at the 'centre' of inquiry. This centrality of a large and powerful Russia has consistently generated a gravitational pull on limited institutional and epistemic resources at the expense of the many smaller, peripheral, non-Russian elements within this field's elastic remit. It has also often entailed a certain constructive ambiguity about what exactly counts as Russian and in what sense.

The epistemic bias has taken many forms, has been rationalized or caveated in numerous ways and has been reinforced by entirely predictable institutional logics. One might say that the sheer force of political and cultural power dynamics in the geopolitical area upon which this academic field maps its epistemic territory – broadly the historical boundaries of the former Russian Empire and the Soviet Union (sometimes including the latter's satellites) – was sufficient for the relatively easy perpetuation of this bias. It has, in fact, been generally tolerated by participants in the field, despite the widespread recognition that Russia's epistemic centrality is grounded in a history of empire and related forms of political and cultural hegemony, and that said field's epistemes are thus reproducing the imperial hierarchies of the past and the geopolitical inequities of the present.

Yet there have been significant strides in making this field of knowledge less Russo-centric. Indeed, the problem of empire and coloniality across both tsarist and Soviet eras has been high on the field's agenda in recent years, producing important, subtle analyses that prevent any simplistic conceptualization of imperial and colonial power relations on these territories. Since the 1990s, scholars have applied the kind of Saidian postcolonial approaches that had emerged in English departments and French Studies to the Russian case; Aleksandr Pushkin's 'southern' poems and Mikhail Lermontov's prose, for example, proved particularly responsive to such frameworks.³ At the same time, it was becoming increasingly clear that Russian

history, culture and politics offered a distinctive case that needed to be reinterrogated beyond the potentially simplifying nation/empire and colonial/postcolonial binaries.

In the twenty-first century, our field has diversified significantly, with much critical work appearing on the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union as multinational and imperial formations, as well as an increasing number of studies of peoples and regions previously deemed to be 'peripheral'.⁴ The journal *Ab Imperio*, first published in 2000, has played a major role in reframing the study of empire, nations, colonialism and postcolonialism in our region. Moreover, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent use of proxy forces in eastern Ukraine has demonstrated that Russian expansionism was not merely a subject of historical interest, but also had immediate consequences. Taras Kuzio's 2020 book *Crisis in Russian Studies?*, written in part in response to these events, sought both to challenge the official imperialist versions of Russian history proffered by the Putinist state and to demonstrate that Western historiography has often been complicit with these narratives, particularly in respect of Ukraine.⁵

Our *Transnational Russian Studies*, which also appeared in 2020, was perhaps both broader in its ambitions and less politically pointed in its aims: we called for an epistemological shift that would encourage both researchers and students critically to examine the boundary-work that was sustaining categories such as 'Russia', 'Russianness' and 'Russian language'. Our book shared shelf space with two other edited volumes that aimed to reconceive Russianness as a global phenomenon: *Global Russian Cultures*, edited by Kevin Platt, and *Russian Culture in the Age of Globalization*, edited by Vlad Strukov and Sarah Hudspith.⁶ All three volumes were concerned with showing how Russian culture has historically been made and remade through transnational encounters, demonstrating the limitations of the Russian government's attempt to foreclose the definition of Russian language and culture and examining how Russian people, language and culture around the globe continue to operate in ways independent of the nation-building projects of the Kremlin.

However, by this point, the academy had seen the emergence of a new paradigm with a distinctly activist slant: decoloniality. If postcolonial theory emerged largely out of work on the Middle East and South Asia – with Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as its central figures – decolonial thinkers based in Latin American Studies, including Walter D. Mignolo and Ramón Grosfoguel, critiqued postcolonial studies for being too reliant on Eurocentric paradigms such as deconstruction and poststructuralism and too embedded within the academy.⁷ The decolonial paradigm they initiated, by contrast, called for nothing less than the cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, psychological and, crucially, epistemological effort to undo, and thereby free oneself from, a particular colonial mindset understood to be engrained in the dominant Western structures and traditions of academic knowledge. This effort itself was framed as one of all-encompassing 'decolonization', crucial to which became the mobilization of a global social movement.⁸ The emergence of the decolonization movement coincided with global campaigns such as the Rhodes Must Fall movement in South Africa, the 'Why is My Curriculum White?'

campaign in the UK and Black Lives Matter in the USA and beyond. Decolonization, in this sense of undoing the colonial mindset, has now gained considerable momentum in higher education here in the UK and around the world.⁹

The first more sustained attempt to consider how the decolonial approach might work in relation to the former Soviet space appeared in 2012, with a monograph co-authored by Mignolo and Madina Tlostanova.¹⁰ If our field had been inching towards applying this approach to itself only tentatively during the 2010s, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, interpreted by many as an imperialist act par excellence, served as a powerful new catalyst of decolonization, suddenly making the need to engage with the decolonial paradigm much more urgent, though also taking it in a very particular direction. This resulted in a significantly more proactive and organized engagement in it by the relevant Western-based disciplinary associations and individual scholars alike.¹¹

One obvious decolonizing strategy for scholars to follow has involved redirecting the epistemic focus away from the traditional Russia-dominated 'centre' towards the heterogeneous and proportionally neglected non-Russian 'periphery'. This approach has amounted to redressing pre-existing imbalances in the distribution of epistemic resources in favour of the formerly disadvantaged regions of the field. Such redistributive work is important, yet it can hardly be uniformly equitable, as ethno-cultural groups that lack a nation state and concomitant cultural, social and economic capital (including those remaining within the current borders of the Russian Federation) are unlikely to benefit from it significantly. Moreover, in the context of the current war, a specific region of this previously subordinated 'periphery' – namely, Ukraine – has, understandably, in expression of wartime solidarity, received proportionally the largest degree of attention.

This form of decentring – namely, a politically and/or ethically motivated redistribution of epistemic interest and resource, which is usually accompanied by a redistribution of cultural recognition and status – has helped to deepen our understanding of languages, cultures and societies other than those of Russia, especially those of Ukraine, where institutional will has been strongest because of the current war. Yet there are questions about the material resources needed to sustain these decentring efforts in the longer term. Moreover, such approaches risk falling back into methodological nationalism, reinforcing rather than deconstructing the 'centre' versus 'periphery', as well as the 'Russian' versus 'non-Russian', binaries. As Marlène Laruelle notes in an astute reflection, Ukraine has framed the current war as one of national liberation, contributing to 'the celebration of the nation-state in its utmost classicism, almost as an ideal-typical case study of nation-building'.¹² To be sure, one can see the value of deploying what Spivak terms 'strategic essentialism' to build wartime solidarity, although this raises ethical questions about who gets to decide on when, and for whom, 'strategic' essentialism is appropriate.¹³ Furthermore, decolonial thinkers are often critical of nations and nationalism, seeing 'national liberation' as insufficient for decolonization and the nation as a Eurocentric construct that provides a continuation of coloniality by other means.¹⁴

Precisely what a decolonial epistemology would offer in our own field awaits a definitive response. Crucially, there is currently no scholarly consensus over interpretations of imperial and (post)colonial relations across the imperial, Soviet and post-Soviet histories, or indeed over how one might apply postcolonial or decolonial concepts to Russia itself, given the latter's historically complicated political and cultural relationship with 'the West' in particular, though also with 'the East' and 'the Global South'. Given the complexity of these questions, which remain strongly political, consensus is unlikely to arise in the short term. A new normative epistemic order will eventually emerge, but it will undoubtedly require a protracted, messy and conflicted process – a process of decolonization, for sure, but one that cannot be understood simplistically nor be pursued reductively.

While in *Transnational Russian Studies* we did not explicitly attend to decolonial approaches, with hindsight, we should have done so. For that reason, we address anew the question of the current state of Russian Studies, partly in light of the major developments prompted by the ongoing war in Ukraine, but also, more broadly, with reference to the significance that decolonization has acquired in it as currently the most prominent driver of change in the field. We will argue that the conceptual lens that we sought to develop in *Transnational Russian Studies* can, in fact, help think through some of the complexities and dilemmas currently faced in this field.

The decolonial 'à la Russe'

Russian Studies has a peculiar position with respect to decolonization. A wave of work that examined the role of empire in Russian culture and history from a broadly postcolonial perspective emerged in the 1990s; this included milestone studies such as Susan Layton's and Harsha Ram's explorations of empire in classical Russian literature.¹⁵ Since the 2000s, a growing debate has focused on the appropriateness of using the postcolonial, and later decolonial, paradigms to understand the post-socialist world.¹⁶ Yet the contours of this debate have varied across the region. Viewing the history of the Caucasus and of Central Asia through a postcolonial lens is often seen as uncontroversial; the dynamics of Orientalism, as theorized by Said and others, seem to fit these regions well. By contrast, Central and Eastern Europe were perceived differently; here the Russians and Soviets ruled over territories that were often more economically developed and Westernized than Russia itself. The field of Polish Studies, for example, has seen a debate over whether Poland's relationship with Russia and the Soviet Union should be considered 'postcolonial' or 'post-dependent'.¹⁷ At the same time, within the Russian Federation there exist dozens of ethnically, linguistically and culturally distinct minority groups, who are socially and economically disadvantaged, yet unlikely to present themselves as subaltern subjects of colonial exploitation. Some of these minorities have, in fact, disproportionately contributed conscripted front-line soldiers to the invasion of Ukraine.¹⁸ And, of course, the current war has brought Russia's relationship with Ukraine into sharp focus. Timothy Snyder, for example, has argued that while Ukraine's long history can be read as one of its colonization, the country

has emerged out of it as a 'post-colonial nation', ready to create something new out of this past.¹⁹ For Snyder, Russia's invasion of Ukraine constitutes a form of colonial aggression that seeks to deny this fact and halt the latter's 'post-colonial' national self-creation.

Russia's imperial history and the peculiarity of its colonial enterprise, whether under tsarist or Soviet rule, has been the subject of much critical scrutiny. Though one of the world's largest empires, Russia has, nonetheless, often perceived *itself* as subject to social, economic or cultural colonization by 'the West'.²⁰ Some have developed this argument further, contending that Russia's own elite – whether in the name of Westernization or another form of modernization – has subjected its people to colonization. As early as the nineteenth century, the Russian historian Sergei Solov'ev saw Russia as a country that 'colonizes itself' [*koloniziruetsia*].²¹ This idea echoes throughout Russian letters, finding its fullest recent expression in Alexander Etkind's thesis of 'internal colonization'. 'In the nineteenth century', Etkind argues, 'Russia was a colonial empire alongside those of Britain or Austria, and a colonized territory like Congo or the West Indies'.²² Similarly, Viacheslav Morozov has described contemporary Russia as a 'subaltern empire', with a globalized capitalist elite who have effectively subjected the country to uneven colonial development.²³ Others, though, including Tamar Koplatadze, have challenged this characterization, suggesting that it deflects attention from Russia's colonial rule among non-Russians in the Caucasus, Central Asia and elsewhere.²⁴ Choi Chatterjee's comparative study of the British and the Russian Empires also finds that Russia resembles the European endeavours more closely than Western scholarship has recognized.²⁵

In Russia itself, the imperialist impulse has often been masked by a self-Orientalizing tendency, evident among the nineteenth-century Slavophile movement and in early twentieth-century Scythianism. The Eurasianists of the 1920s, including the linguist Nikolai Trubetskoi, saw Russia as a unique civilization that needed to throw off the shackles of Westernization. The Eurasianists firmly condemned Western colonialism, seeing Russia's position in the world order as analogous to the overseas colonies of Western empires.²⁶ The Eurasianists were writing in exile, but the Soviet Union itself had an ambivalent relationship to empire, officially denouncing imperialism but extending its own power abroad through military and cultural intervention. Internally, Soviet policy around nationalities was complex and often contradictory. While the initial policy of indigenization [*korenizatsiia*] was abandoned by the 1930s in favour of Russification and the promotion of Soviet patriotism, ethnic particularism and support for national structures persisted alongside some misconceived efforts to forge a non-ethnic pan-Soviet identity.²⁷

Externally, Soviet espousals of Marxism attracted many in the developing world at the time, who looked for global superpower support for their own anti-colonial struggles. Even today, the Russian Federation's presence as a counterweight to Western hegemony in the global order has gained it some sympathy in the Global South. Russian culture itself has had an impact among subaltern populations such as African Americans in the USA, as well as several developing nations in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa.²⁸

In Russia, if the fall of the Soviet Union brought a new wave of Westernization in the 1990s, the pendulum soon swung back to anti-Westernism as Russians felt the palpable effects of the loss of military and economic power, along with the pains of integration into the system of global capitalism. The Putin administration fuelled such sentiment, drawing on Eurasianist ideas about Russia's unique civilizational path and positioning the country as a major global player in what would become a 'multipolar' world, replacing the 'unipolar' one dominated by the USA.²⁹ Significantly, though, the Putin regime has in this context appropriated much of the West's rhetoric of diversity and uses it in unexpected ways to serve its own ends. For example, Putin has appealed to Russia's 'multi-faith' and 'multinational' nature to defend reactionary ideas about gender and sexuality against incursions from abroad.³⁰ According to this narrative, Russia's multi-faith history and culture offers a bulwark against a decadent West seeking to impose its own ideology of liberalism globally.

The Putin regime has also created a narrative of Russia as a leader in the global 'anti-colonial' movement. Building on a Cold War-era Soviet legacy, Russia is using such rhetoric to garner support across the developing world, especially in Africa, where it has forged alliances with military regimes in countries including Mali and Burkina Faso, often facilitated by the Wagner Group, fomenting anti-French feelings and accusing France of neo-colonialism.³¹ Isaias Afwerki, the tenacious anti-Western dictator of Eritrea, has proved a particularly staunch supporter of Russia on the continent, parroting Putin's rhetoric in calling for Russia to take the lead in challenging US hegemony.³² Russia is not alone in pitching itself as a counterweight to Western hegemony and its history of colonization. China has also adopted the rhetoric of a multipolar world and both countries have made significant inroads in Africa where they have – with varying degrees of success – styled themselves as alternative partners to the Western former colonizers. Putin has even developed a narrative about the Russian intervention in Ukraine as an *anti*-colonial act, arguing that it was the expansionist, neo-colonial West that colonized Ukraine culturally, socially and economically, exploiting the country's resources and using the Ukrainian people as cannon fodder in its war against Russia.³³ In this version of events, Russia is the decolonizing power staging a war of liberation on behalf of a Ukraine that has been colonized – not least mentally – by the West.³⁴

Beyond foreign policy, contemporary Russian thinkers increasingly draw on decolonial rhetoric and ideas in developing their exceptionalist worldview, insisting that concepts such as liberal democracy are fundamentally Western and cannot be imposed on Russia. For Russian academics, this move has had serious consequences, because the very epistemologies that underpin scholarly research – especially in the humanities and social sciences – are now rendered ideologically suspect by their Western heritage. In this context, Ivan Kislenco raises concerns about 'epistemicide' in the contemporary Russian social sciences – the intentional destruction of epistemologies that underpin entire disciplines.³⁵ Alexandra Lewis and Marie Lall have also noted how the decolonial agenda has been co-opted in higher education in Putin's Russia (and Modi's India) to serve authoritarian ends.³⁶

Of course, the version of decolonial thought adopted in Russia is a distortion of what is a diverse and complex global body of thought. Lewis and Lall, as well as Kislenko, point out that the Putinist version of decolonization lacks the counterhegemonic and democratic impulse inherent in decolonial thought. Certainly, when Raewyn Connell proclaimed the need to provincialize Western social science and foreground indigenous alternatives in her *Southern Theory* (2007), she did not foresee how these same ideas could be used by authoritarian and nationalist regimes to silence dissident voices and critical enquiry.³⁷ To Connell's credit, she did not call for individual societies to develop their own 'national' social sciences in mutual isolation, but for an inclusive and democratic social science that would involve a 'principle of unification' to bring together the peripheries and the metropole.³⁸ Yet other major figures in decolonial studies speak in strikingly similar terms to the Kremlin. Mignolo, for example, invokes a 'multipolar' world in tones not dissimilar to Putin's. While Mignolo does not go as far as Putin in calling the war in Ukraine an act of Western aggression, he does present it as 'a point of no-return in the re-Westernizing effort to contain de-Westernization'.³⁹

At the other extreme, the term 'decolonization' has been used to advocate liberal Western intervention against authoritarian regimes such as Putin's. For example, in an editorial of the magazine *The Atlantic* titled 'Decolonize Russia', the author, Casey Michel, argues that '[t]he West must complete the project that began in 1991. It must seek to fully decolonize Russia'.⁴⁰ As observed by Volodymyr Ishchenko, such an understanding of 'decolonization' ultimately amounts to wishing to see 'the Russian Federation disintegrate into multiple smaller states – to finish the process of the collapse of imperial Russia that began in 1917 and was not completed in 1991, with the dissolution of the USSR'.⁴¹ The practicalities of how one might achieve such a mission, and on whose authority, are not explained by Michel. Nor does he wrangle with the ethical questions of what it would mean for the West to take the lead in dismantling another empire.

Decolonization transnationalized

What, then, is the relationship between the decolonial paradigm and the transnational one, specifically in terms of their value for rethinking Russian Studies? The two share much in common. Both frameworks demand a shift of focus beyond a core national canon and a singular national history towards a broader perspective that takes into account the diverse range of languages, cultures and peoples within and beyond 'Russia'. Indeed, both frameworks recognize 'Russia' and 'Russianness' as problematic terms, sustained by ongoing boundary-work that seeks, simultaneously and often ambiguously, to include and exclude. Both a decolonial and a transnational framework could be used to critique the logic of contemporary Putinism: a speech such as 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians' (2021) rests on the very kind of isomorphic view of language, culture, territory – and, especially, religion – that these frameworks resist, with its mythologized version of history and dubious assumption that religious ties made over a millennium ago must

necessarily translate into political union today.⁴² Most significantly, both the transnational and the decolonial paradigms call for an epistemic shift – a revision of the very structures of knowledge within our field.

The decolonial paradigm, however, emphasizes the unequal power relations that exist between states, languages, peoples and cultures in the imperial and post-imperial contexts, as well as how knowledge generated within that context forms part of a power hierarchy. In this regard, in *Transnational Russian Studies*, we perhaps did not pay adequate attention to power differentials. To be sure, our volume did examine the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation as colonial and neo-colonial formations; it did consider the boundary-work sustaining these formations, while also exploring texts that exposed, resisted or offered alternatives to colonial power. However, we might have been more critically aware of the power dynamics in play when, for example, in our ‘Introduction’, we discussed the Russian Federation’s Russian World [*Russkii Mir*] project and the regime’s claim to unite all ‘Russian speakers’ without highlighting the serious political implications of such claims. The war has now focused our minds on the human cost of such ambitions, but we should have seen it already from the annexation of Crimea and from Russia’s involvement in eastern Ukraine since 2014.

To examine the intersection of the ‘decolonial’ and the ‘transnational’, it is useful to turn to Edward Said’s notion of ‘travelling theory’, by which he meant that it is important to follow and observe how theories morph, adapt and gain new meaning as they travel across the boundaries of time, space and signification, from one context to another. For Said, this process can end up being a reductive one, when theories become blunted or simplified in their ‘travels’; or it can be productive, making the theories sharper and more nuanced.⁴³ Using this Saidian framework, Koplatadze argues cogently that postcolonial theory illuminates the history of the Russian Empire and its subject peoples.⁴⁴ However, we must also be cognizant of the ways in which such theories can also become distorted in their travels, as we see in Putin’s appropriation of anti-colonial language to justify the invasion of Ukraine.⁴⁵

What is crucial, however, is not simply to expose misappropriations of the rhetoric of decolonization, but also to be alert to the fact that decolonization can be harnessed in the service of an agenda of methodological nationalism that we challenged in *Transnational Russian Studies*, while giving it a new veneer of respectability. We are not thereby suggesting that the decolonial perspective lacks explanatory power for our field but that, in a transnational context, it has an unsettling malleability and may be used for nefarious ends. As modern linguists, we are acutely aware that the meanings of terms are contingent on their discursive contexts, not fixed, universal essences. Kenan Malik’s compelling, progressive critique of the ways in which ongoing identity politics debates can distract attention from fundamental socio-economic inequalities is eloquent testimony to the fact that one is not obliged to be a brutalizing dictator to reorient the lexical apparatus of decolonization in surprising directions.⁴⁶ Whilst leavening decolonization with the transnational perspective does not resolve this apparent paradox, it does signal critical awareness of it.

Indeed, efforts to decolonize Russian Studies since the start of Russia's aggression against Ukraine have intersected in complex ways with the 'culture wars' of Anglophone politics. Cries of 'cancel culture' have been heard worldwide when exhibitions, concerts and events featuring Russian writers, musicians and artists have been withdrawn because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Yet Russian state propagandists are themselves adept at operating at both poles in the 'culture wars' debates. If their own 'cancel culture' allegations reflect Putin's traditional-values mantras, decolonization, associated here with the progressive left, spawns the Kremlin's most enduring war narrative: that of Ukraine as a passive tool of the 'collective West' in its centuries-long effort to supplant 'indigenous' Russian art with the arrogant culture of the colonizer.⁴⁷ Far from undermining the agenda we develop in *Transnational Russian Studies*, then, the intricate interchange between the metaphorical 'culture wars' discourse and Russia's all-too-real war on Ukraine lends it new meaning, encouraging us to transnationalize not just our object of study, but also our mode of studying it – to explore tensions within Russophone culture, as well as the resistances that it might offer to the Western conceptual apparatuses we habitually apply to it.

At this point, it is worth returning to our institutional context as Russianists in the UK or the Anglophone world more broadly. Our situation is, in fact, a peculiar one. First, we research and teach a literature, culture and worldview, that is not only 'foreign' to many of our students and ourselves, but also sometimes openly at odds with the norms of our own society. Moreover, our history is, unlike that of other Modern Languages, bound up with the Cold War, where our perceived value related to the insights we could offer into 'enemy' behaviour – a rationale which now acquires new force and which also accounts for our discipline's incorporation of social scientific expertise and its alignment with Area Studies. Secondly, Russian Studies is still a 'minority' subject in the wider context of knowledge production within the broader disciplines to which we belong. Yet, thirdly, a distinctive characteristic of this field of knowledge is that its most influential interpretative frameworks globally have, for historical reasons, been developed largely outside of Russia (and previously the USSR).

Our institutional context makes it doubly important to be explicit about the consequences of our epistemic position in relation to our object of study. Indeed, decolonization encourages reflection on one's own positionality as a researcher, a re-examination of one's own worldview, biases and epistemologies and even a commitment to and the imperative of decolonizing *oneself*.⁴⁸ An awareness of positionality and reflexivity has become the norm in anthropology, geography and sociology, particularly in contexts where a member of a privileged community sets out to research an indigenous one. Some social scientists will now preface their work with a *de rigueur* 'positionality statement' where they state their own relationship to the material at hand.⁴⁹ This practice remains rare in our field, even though many of us are doing research in a culture, society and language that are not 'our own', yet also invariably have complex relationships with it. Admittedly, positionality statements can all too easily slip from being a sincere and meaningful examination of one's own limitations and biases to a way of proving one's own righteousness through apparent

self-deprecation, much like the medieval humility topos. Moreover, we should refrain from endorsing a crude version of positionality that would leave a non-Russian unable to comment on, or critique, Russia without a preamble apologizing for our status as (say) white, bourgeois Anglo-Saxons committed to liberal values. Doing so would be to impose on ourselves something like the Russian Federation's law that requires a disclaimer of our 'foreign agent' status. Moreover, as Laruelle points out, writing in the context of the Ukraine war, the West must be careful not to reserve the 'postnational' for itself, while simultaneously inviting 'countries around Russia' to become more 'nation-centric'.⁵⁰

There is surely some benefit to our field in undertaking methodical reflection on our own positionality, our motivations and our blind spots. What is crucial here is that a decolonial approach requires us to acknowledge how Russia's place in our own (post)imperial imaginary shapes our exceptionalist thinking about it, how we remain locked with it in a reciprocal process of Othering, and how this can help us contribute to the larger decolonization mission.⁵¹ For we might now engage in a paradoxical double manoeuvre: that of 'decentring' Russian Studies (by subjecting it to the rigours of decolonial theory) whilst 'recentring' and reauthenticating that theory (by inflecting it with the specifics of Western encounters with Russian imperialism). This gesture captures the essence of the humanities' impulse to articulate the embodied with the abstract, the empirical with the theoretical, the local with the global and, indeed, the national with the transnational.

The fact that much of Russia falls within the European continent and that, before the 1917 revolution, its adopted European cultural framework was rarely questioned, lends further complexity to an Othering process reinforced by the persistent failure of Russia's anticipated sameness to materialize. Marxism would not have inspired the USSR's creation without Russia's idealized reading of Western thought – prompting in today's Russian nationalists a similar antipathy towards the philosophical basis of one of the greatest totalitarian tyrannies as that felt by democrats (on the eve of invading Ukraine, Putin blamed Lenin for endowing it with the statehood he so resented).⁵² Conversely, Russia serves as the West's semi-Orientalized alter-ego onto which it projects images of its own repulsive underbelly (one reason why conspiratorial stories of collusion between Putin and the arch-populist Trump so seduced American liberals).⁵³ Indeed, as Martin Malia argued, the mirroring phenomenon reflects an older reciprocal identity dynamic in which, in defining itself against its constitutive Other, each participant projects onto that Other its own darkest features.⁵⁴ The reciprocity process also explains the offensive absurdity of Russian propagandists brandishing swastika-like Z signs to 'de-Nazify' a Ukraine they first assimilate to 'the Russian World' and then treat as the tool of a Nazified Western Other.

The Ukraine war foregrounds another connection between object and mode of study. As an active verb, 'decolonizing' demands that scholars explicitly do the work of challenging colonial or neo-colonial power structures, rather than simply analysing them. Indeed, many decolonial thinkers see scholarship and political activism as inextricably linked. The idea of the scholar-activist is familiar to fields such as gender

studies or critical race theory, which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s out of feminist and civil rights movements, especially in the US. During the 1980s and 1990s, humanities scholars increasingly engaged with questions of gender, race and class, challenging liberal humanist impartiality principles. During this same period, however, Soviet and Russian Studies were embroiled in a rather different kind of politics, shaped by the Cold War. Consequently, this field has been somewhat resistant to the activist turn, although this situation is now evidently changing.

There is little doubt that the exceptional context of the Ukraine war requires us to suspend impartiality norms in favour of research aimed at supporting affected communities. The suffering unleashed on Ukraine has underscored the salience – moral and practical – of such research. This trend includes the critique of the ‘objectivity myth’ across the humanities and social sciences and the strengthening of participatory and emancipatory research that sacrifices the privileging of objective distance in favour of collaborative work, often co-created with minoritized groups, which ties scholarship directly and intimately to activism.⁵⁵

That said, there remain varying degrees of porosity between ethics and epistemology in different disciplinary branches within Russian Studies. For example, certain quarters of Politics and International Relations can seem nonchalant about the brutal culpability of the Russian state, bypassing this ethically vital question in favour of cold analyses of the various ‘causes’ of the conflict, the war’s place in larger global geopolitical shifts and heavily theorized comparisons of each side’s ‘strategic narratives’.⁵⁶ What is problematic here is not simply a principled maintenance of a firm boundary between epistemology and ethics, but also a seeming indifference towards both lived reality and regional specificity in favour of universalist theory and generalist explanatory models.

And yet, the activist turn that has seen a strong boost in Russian Studies since the beginning of the Ukraine war finds a perverse reversal in the defence of activist bias by representatives of the principal foreign propaganda tool of the Russia state – the news network RT. Indeed, RT’s executive Margarita Simonyan has notoriously argued that while the BBC’s famed ‘impartiality’ is a deception concocted to mask British state interests, RT is, by contrast, laudably ‘transparent’ about its ties to the Kremlin.⁵⁷ Her reasoning echoes Lenin’s critique of the supposedly free and objective ‘bourgeois’ press, which, he argued, represented masked capitalist interests, in favour of an activist revolutionary one, which is open about its ideological agendas. This move confirms that the approaches that we adopt in the process of self-decolonization are always susceptible to rhetorical reversal. We therefore need to be explicit about the alignment of our politics, our ethics and our epistemology. More specifically, we need to demonstrate, quite unambiguously, that the democratic values that we advocate for Ukraine as part of decolonization are inextricably tied to our epistemological commitment to an open-ended approach to the production of knowledge within Russian Studies and that to abandon liberal democratic standards of scholarly impartiality in favour of an epistemology oriented exclusively to power relations is fraught with dangers. Our qualified endorsement of current activist approaches to the significance of the Ukraine war for our field is thus reconcilable

with the emphasis in our *Transnational Russian Studies* volume on the ethical imperative to combine emic and etic perspectives; that is, to ensure a balance between developing analyses that are meaningful to *us*, while avoiding unreflectively projecting our own tacit cultural assumptions onto what we are studying. For there are contexts in which this imperative is better delivered across time and in phases, rather than at a single point; now is the moment for empathetic internalization of the Other's perspective, with the phase of Bakhtinian *zavershenie* [consummation] from without necessarily deferred.⁵⁸

What lies ahead for Russian Studies?

Transnational Russian Studies primarily addressed a Modern Languages audience. While we pushed against the methodological nationalism within our field, we also recognized the value of an immersive grounding in language and culture. However, this must be combined with a transnational perspective and a critical distance from the object of study so as to avoid a narrow exceptionalism and to allow for the combination of etic and emic perspectives outlined above. Our call for linguistic immersion recognizes the importance that postcolonial thinkers placed on language.⁵⁹ Yet we would resist deterministic, Whorfian views of language. For example, we believe that the value of a Modern Languages degree – particularly a transnationally inflected one – is predicated on the possibility of linguistic and cultural crossings. We are unsettled by approaches that equate the Russian language with Putin, or with imperialism alone, such as the one implied in the statement of the Russian-American screenwriter, Michael Idov, that he 'will not write in Russian' while Putin remains in power.⁶⁰ While many Ukrainian writers now cite moral reasons for only using the Ukrainian language, others, like Boris Khersonskii, have used Russian to challenge the propagandistic militarized 'Z' culture of the Putin regime.⁶¹ Similarly, the language that we would teach in a decolonizing, transnationalizing Russian programme would not be the prestige variety of spoken Russian and of the literary canon; rather, we would advocate a broader approach that highlights the language's many varieties, as well as the politics surrounding it, and the translanguaging that occurs in the post-Soviet space. The fact that our students now undertake their Year Abroad in Russophone environments outside the Russian Federation underlines the need for this training and such locations offer new insights into linguistic and cultural crossings.

Beyond the language question, the war in Ukraine is a strong reminder of how inextricably the institutional, professional and epistemic structures of our field are tied to and dependent on historical transformations of geopolitical configurations. Indeed, any more significant geopolitical change is likely to have a profound impact on it. Although Western academic interest in Russia certainly predates 1917, as a mass, developed domain of scholarship this field has evolved across only two major historical eras of relevance – the 'Soviet' and the 'post-Soviet'. While neither period has been either monolithic or static, each has implied its own specific overarching geopolitical constellation that has determined the dominant, normative frames of

orientation and horizons of expectation (political, demographic, territorial, epistemic, pragmatic) governing the forms, approaches, boundaries, agendas and meanings of study and research within the field.

The collapse of the USSR was the previous radically transformative historic moment which prompted this field's thorough, multifaceted reconfiguration – political, conceptual and practical. The current war in Ukraine is potentially turning into a fracture different in kind but on a similar seismic scale, requiring the generation of new frames of orientation and horizons of expectation to those to which we had become accustomed since 1991. Indeed, one might argue that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has caused a tectonic breach that runs deep into the history of the region, with consequent dramatic effect on not just the present, but also the future transnational, transethnic and transcultural relations in it. Put differently, one could say that the overarching 'order of things' that governed research in our field during the thirty years since the collapse of the USSR is now over.

It would, indeed, seem that we are entering a new, uncharted historical territory that is still only in the making through a series of disruptions challenging our existing frames of reference, though without yet establishing a stable new order. The war in Ukraine is ongoing and its outcomes, both immediate and longer term – for Ukraine, for Russia and for the wider world – remain uncertain. However, based on what has happened so far, this conflict seems to presage the kind of geopolitical shift that makes the present moment a turning-point for the field. Such a shift will occur irrespective of whether the dynamics of change that we observe right now are already creating a blueprint for the longer-term systemic reconfiguration of this field or whether present-day developments are merely the beginning of a chain of transformations that we cannot anticipate from our current vantage point.

As things stand, the disruptions taking place in our field's epistemic foundations are not just symbolically mirroring the war's violence and brutality, but are also shaped by them in a very immediate way. The sheer emotional impact of the daily destruction of life and infrastructure in Ukraine is directly influencing how instructors talk to their students and how scholars perform their role of experts who cannot but take professional responsibility in attempting to deliver as full and as honest an understanding as possible of what is happening in and to the region of their specialism. The field itself is in such profound flux that the disorientations which arise from this make it hard to anticipate where it is heading and what kind of epistemic landscape will emerge once the present devastations have passed. However, a new normative order will inevitably crystallize in due course and time will be needed for the field's participants to grasp its shape and adapt to it. Meanwhile, hasty teleological projections backward of the war's definitive aetiology, or forward to its lasting meaning, should be avoided, contradicting, as they do, the commitments to the openness of time that infuse the value system we embrace as members (and defenders) of the liberal democratic academy.

In anticipation of this new normative order, what we are arguing is that a strategic and self-reflective combination of the transnational and decolonial paradigms can help develop a lens through which critically to reflect both on the war in Ukraine

itself and on its impact on our field's epistemic structures. We see these two approaches as distinct but complementary and, crucially, mutually corrective. We believe that, together, they enable a suppler, more multi-dimensional understanding of how the present conflict is, in new and complex ways, simultaneously 'global' and 'regional', 'national' and 'colonial', 'ethnic' and 'imperial'. Only through combining the two approaches can we ensure that 'decolonization' does not end up facilitating a return of 'methodological nationalism' and that 'transnationalization' does not morph into a dangerous new form of 'methodological imperialism'.

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NOTES

¹ *Transnational Russian Studies*, ed. by Andy Byford, Connor Doak and Stephen Hutchings (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020). The introduction is available open access at <<https://modernlanguagesopen.org/articles/10.3828/mlo.voio.311>> [accessed 9 April 2024].

² The series includes a volume for each of the most commonly taught languages and is anchored by *Transnational Modern Languages: A Handbook*, ed. by Jennifer Burns and Derek Duncan (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022), available open access at <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2fjwpw7>> [accessed 9 April 2024].

³ See, for example, Susan Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Ewa M. Thompson, *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000).

⁴ See, for example, Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001) and Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

⁵ Taras Kuzio, *Crisis in Russian Studies? Nationalism (Imperialism), Racism and War* (Bristol: E-International Relations, 2020).

⁶ *Global Russian Cultures*, ed. by Kevin M. F. Platt (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019); *Russian Culture in the Age of Globalization*, ed. by Vlad Strukov and Sarah Hudspith (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).

⁷ For an outline of the complex and still contested differences between postcolonial and decolonial approaches, see Gianmaria Colpania, Jamila M. H. Mascata and Katrine Smiet, 'Postcolonial Responses to Decolonial Interventions', *Postcolonial Studies*, 25.1 (2022), 1–16. A key collection in establishing the decolonial approach as distinct from postcolonialism appeared in *Cultural Studies*, 21.2–3 (2007). In this issue, see especially Walter D. Mignolo, 'Introduction: Coloniality of Power and Decolonial Thinking', 155–67; and Ramón Grosfoguel, 'The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond

Political-Economy Paradigms', 211–23. See also Gurminder K. Bhambra, 'Postcolonial and Decolonial Dialogues', *Postcolonial Studies*, 17 (2014), 115–21.

⁸ In what follows, we use the terms 'decolonial' and 'decoloniality' principally with reference to relevant theoretical frameworks and epistemic paradigms, while the term 'decolonization' and the verb 'to decolonize' we reserve for active processes aimed at transforming both the political and the epistemological status quo.

⁹ Priyamvada Gopal, 'On Decolonisation and the University', *Textual Practice*, 35 (2021), 873–99.

¹⁰ Madina Tlostanova and Walter Mignolo, *Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and the Americas* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2012).

¹¹ For example, 'Decolonization' was the theme of the Association of Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies (ASEES) conference in 2022. The journal *Canadian Slavonic Papers* included a forum on 'Approaches to Decolonization' in the summer 2023 issue. Calls to decolonize Russian Studies have also appeared in the press: see, for example, Artem Shaipov and Yuliia Shaipova, 'It's High Time to Decolonize Western Russia Studies', *FP*, 11 February 2023 <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/11/russia-studies-war-ukraine-decolonize-imperialism-western-academics-soviet-empire-eurasia-eastern-europe-university/>> [accessed 9 April 2024].

¹² Marlène Laruelle, 'The Tensions of Positionality Reflection', *Ab Imperio*, 1 (2023), 35–40, (p. 36). For a related critique of national identity politics as part of the politics of decolonization in Ukraine, see Volodymyr Ishchenko, 'Ukrainian Voices?', *New Left Review*, 138 (2022) <<https://newleftreview.org/issues/iii38/articles/volodymyr-ishchenko-ukrainian-voices>> [accessed 9 April 2024].

¹³ Spivak first discussed strategic essentialism in a 1984 interview: see Elizabeth Gross, 'Criticism, Feminism and the Institution: An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak', *Thesis Eleven*, 10/11 (1984/85), 183–84.

¹⁴ See, for example, the critique of nationalism in Ramón Grosfoguel, 'Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies and Paradigms of Political-Economy: Transmodernity, Decolonial Thinking, and Global Coloniality', *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 1(1), 1–38 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5070/T411000004>>, esp. 25–26.

¹⁵ Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire*; Harsha Ram, *The Imperial Sublime: A Russian Poetics of Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003).

¹⁶ See, for example, David Chioni Moore, 'Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique', *PMLA*, 116.1 (2001), 111–28. See also the forum in *PMLA* in 2006: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Nancy Condee, Harsha Ram and Vitaly Chernetsky, 'Are We Postcolonial? Post-Soviet Space', *PMLA*, 121.3 (2006), 828–36.

¹⁷ This is an ongoing debate in Poland that has attracted some public attention. See, for example, the special issue of *Teksty drugie*, 5 (2010) dedicated to the question 'Postkolonialni czy postzależni [Postcolonial or post-dependent]?'. Ewa Thompson offered a defence of the postcolonial paradigm in the same journal: see her 'It is Colonialism After All: Some Epistemological Remarks', *Teksty drugie*, 1 (2014), 67–81.

¹⁸ Mariya Vyushkova and Evgeny Sherkhonov, 'Russia's Ethnic Minority Casualties of the 2022 Invasion of Ukraine: A Data Story from the Free Buryatia Foundation', *Inner Asia*, 2 May 2023, <https://brill.com/view/journals/inas/25/1/article-p126_11.xml> [accessed 27 April 2024].

¹⁹ Timothy Snyder, 'The War in Ukraine is a Colonial War', *The New Yorker*, 28 April 2022, <<https://www.newyorker.com/news/essay/the-war-in-ukraine-is-a-colonial-war>> [accessed 9 April 2024]. We retain here Snyder's hyphenation of 'post-colonial' in recognition that the term's meaning here appears to be a fairly literal one of 'after the period of colonization'.

²⁰ For an analysis of Russia's ambiguous position as both culturally peripheral to a hegemonic West and an imperial power with Orientalizing tendencies towards its Asian neighbours, see *Russian Orientalism in a Global Context: Hybridity, Encounter and Representation, 1740–1940*, ed. by Maria Taroutina and Allison Leigh (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023).

²¹ S. M. Solov'ev, *Istoriia Rossii s drevneishikh vremen. Sochineniia v vosemnadtsati knigakh. Tom 4. Kniga II* (Moscow: Mysl', 1988), p. 631.

- 22 Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), p. 251.
- 23 Viacheslav Morozov, *Russia's Postcolonial Identity: A Subaltern Empire in a Eurocentric World* (London: Palgrave, 2015).
- 24 Tamar Koplatadze, 'Theorising Russian Postcolonial Studies', *Postcolonial Studies*, 22.4 (2019), 469–89.
- 25 Choi Chatterjee, *Russia in World History: A Transnational Approach* (London: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2022).
- 26 One of the strongest denunciations of European colonization appears in N. S. Trubetskoi, *Evropa i chelovechestvo* (Sofia: Rossiisko-bolgarskoe knigoizdatel'stvo, 1920).
- 27 On indigenization, see Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001). On the persistence of ethnic particularism, see Yuri Slezkine, 'The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism', *Slavic Review*, 53.2 (1994), 414–52. For a critique of the 'inexorable Russification' view of Soviet nationalities policies, see Jonathan Brundstedt, 'Building a Pan-Soviet Past: The Soviet War Cult and the Turn Away from Ethnic Particularism', *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, 38 (2011), 149–71.
- 28 Dale E. Peterson, *Up from Bondage: The Literatures of Russian and African American Soul* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Jeanne-Marie Jackson, *South African Literature's Russian Soul* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).
- 29 Vladimir Putin, 'Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy', 10 February 2007, <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>> [accessed 9 April 2024].
- 30 In this vein, see Putin's response to an interviewer's question about whether gender fluidity could take root in Russia: 'Bol'shaia press-konferentsiia Vladimira Putina', Prezident Rossii, 23 December 2021, <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67438>> [accessed 9 April 2024].
- 31 On the fomenting of anti-French sentiment, see, for example, Laura Kayali and Clea Caulcutt, 'How Moscow Chased France Out of Africa', *Politico*, 23 February 2023, <<https://www.politico.eu/article/france-africa-russia-emmanuel-macron-vladimir-putin-mali-central-african-republic-burkina-faso/>> [accessed 9 April 2024].
- 32 For an example of Afwerki parroting Putin's rhetoric, see Tesfa-Alem Tekle, 'Afwerki to Putin: Remake World Order to End US Dominance', *The East African*, 2 June 2023, <<https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/rest-of-africa/afwerki-to-putin-remake-world-order-to-end-us-dominance-4255960>> [accessed 9 April 2024].
- 33 For commentary on Putin's appropriation of decolonial rhetoric, see Ivan Kisenko, 'Putin postoianno rassuzhdaet o bor'be s zapadnym "neokolonializmom"', *Meduza*, 24 November 2022, <<https://meduza.io/feature/2022/11/24/vladimir-putin-mnogo-govorit-o-borbe-s-zapadnym-neokolonializmom-odna-iz-zhertv-ego-borby-rossiyskaya-nauka>> [accessed 9 April 2024].
- 34 While rejecting this cynically distortive argument, Volodymyr Ishchenko, writing from a Ukrainian perspective, points out that Ukraine's own current (self-)decolonization efforts nonetheless remain caught up between two logics of imperialism – Russian and Western, the effect of which is that Ukraine continues, if only tacitly, to 'interiorize' an 'inferior colonial position'. See Ishchenko, 'Ukrainian Voices?'.
- 35 Ivan Kisenko, 'Between North and South: Decolonial Isolationism of Russian Social Science in the State of War and Beyond', *European Societies*, 2023, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2023.2187073>> [accessed 9 April 2024].
- 36 Alexandra Lewis and Marie Lall, 'From Decolonization to Authoritarianism: The Co-Option of the Decolonial Agenda in Higher Education by Right-Wing Nationalist Elites in Russia and India', *Higher Education*, 2023, <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-023-01074-0>> [accessed 9 April 2024].
- 37 Raewyn Connell, *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2007).
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 223.

³⁹ Walter Mignolo, 'It is a Change of Era, No Longer an Era of Changes', *Postcolonial Politics*, 29 January 2023, <<https://postcolonialpolitics.org/it-is-a-change-of-era-no-longer-the-era-of-changes/>> [accessed 9 April 2024].

⁴⁰ Casey Michel, 'Decolonize Russia', *The Atlantic*, 27 May 2022, <<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/05/russia-putin-colonization-ukraine-chechnya/639428/>> [accessed 9 April 2024]. A very different approach to 'decolonizing Russia', namely that of showcasing a variety of understandings of 'decolonization' in the Russian context, by ordinary citizens as well as academics, can be found in the BBC Radio 4 programme with this very title: 'Decolonising Russia', BBC Radio 4, 27 February 2024 11.30am, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/moorwq4c>> [accessed 27 April 2024].

⁴¹ Ishchenko, 'Ukrainian Voices?'. When the same expression is applied to Ukraine, though, it acquires an entirely different sense – namely, that of 'ridding the Ukrainian public sphere and the education system of Russian culture and language'. This approach to 'decolonizing Ukraine' Ishchenko decries, however, as a 'narrow "decolonization" agenda', 'reduced to anti-Russian and anti-communist identity politics', which, in his view, 'makes it more difficult to voice a universally relevant perspective on Ukraine'.

⁴² Vladimir Putin, 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians', 12 July 2021, <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>> [accessed 27 April 2024].

⁴³ Edward W. Said, 'Traveling Theory', in *The World, The Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 226–47. Said subsequently developed these ideas further in his 'Travelling Theory Reconsidered', in *Critical Reconstructions: The Relationship of Fiction and Life*, ed. by Robert M. Polhemus and Roger B. Henkle (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 251–68.

⁴⁴ Koplatadze, 'Theorising Russian Postcolonial Studies', p. 471.

⁴⁵ For a critique of Russia's appropriation of decolonial rhetoric, as well as of those in the broader decolonial movement who have sought to defend Russia, see Selbi Durdieva, "'Not in Our Name": Why Russia is Not a Decolonial Ally or the Dark Side of Civilizational Communism and Imperialism', *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 29 May 2023, <<https://saisreview.sais.jhu.edu/not-in-our-name-why-russia-is-not-a-decolonial-ally-or-the-dark-side-of-civilizational-communism-and-imperialism/>> [accessed 9 April 2024].

⁴⁶ Kenan Malik, *Not So Black and White: A History of Race from White Supremacy to Identity Politics* (New York: Hurst and Co., 2023).

⁴⁷ For further analysis of Russia's war narratives, see Vera Tolz and Stephen Hutchings, 'Truth with a Z: Disinformation, War in Ukraine and Russia's Contradictory Discourse of Imperial Identity', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 39.5 (2023), 347–65.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Michele Moffat, 'Exploring Positionality in an Aboriginal Research Paradigm: A Unique Perspective', *International Journal of Technology and Inclusive Education*, 5.1 (2016), 750–55.

⁴⁹ An early advocate of this approach was Kim England. See K. V. L. England, 'Getting Personal: Reflexivity, Positionality, and Feminist Research', *The Professional Geographer*, 46.1 (1994), 80–89.

⁵⁰ Laruelle, 'The Tensions of Positionality Reflection', p. 38.

⁵¹ See Chatterjee, *Russia in World History*, pp. 167–68, for a detailed elaboration of this argument.

⁵² For an analysis of this and other controversial aspects of Putin's eve-of-invasion speech, see Max Fisher, 'Word by Word and Between the Lines: A Close Look at Putin's Speech', *The New York Times*, 23 February 2022, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/23/world/europe/putin-speech-russia-ukraine.html>> [accessed 9 April 2024].

⁵³ Alexandar Mihailovic has, in this context, pointed out striking commonalities and exchanges of ideas between the populist radical right in the United States and the Russian Federation. See his *Illiberal Vanguard: Populist Elitism in the United States and Russia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2022).

⁵⁴ See Martin Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum* (New York: Belknap Press, 1999). Importantly, however, Malia acknowledged that Europe and the West are not one and the same.

⁵⁵ For an argument in favour of this approach, see Victoria Donovan, 'Against Academic "Resourcification": Collaboration as Delinking from Extractivist "Area Studies" Paradigms', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 65.2 (2023), 163–73. For a related deployment of the 'extractivist' metaphor as part of a broader argument for decolonization as an ethical stance, see Jeremy Morris, 'The Ethical Imperatives Deriving from War: Decolonization Begins at Home', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 25.1 (2024), 143–54.

⁵⁶ For an excellent critique of the 'normalizing' and 'rationalizing' tendencies in some Politics and International Relations research on Russian anti-Ukrainian aggression, see Andrey Makarychev and Nikor Ryzhnikau, 'Normalize and Rationalize: Intellectuals of Statecraft and Russia's War in Ukraine', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 26 (2023), 632–42, <<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41268-023-00299-x>> [accessed 9 April 2024].

⁵⁷ See Il'ia Azar, "'Ne sobiraius' delat' vid, chto ia ob"ektivnaia": Interv'iu s Margaritoi Simon'ian', *lenta.ru*, 7 March 2013, <<https://lenta.ru/articles/2013/03/07/simonyan/>> [accessed 9 April 2024].

⁵⁸ See Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity', in *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, trans. by Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), pp. 2–256 (p. 14).

⁵⁹ See Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986).

⁶⁰ Michael Idov, "'Language is never the enemy": Why I Will Not Write in Russian as Long as Putin Is in Power', *Vanity Fair*, 28 February 2022, <<https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2022/02/why-i-will-not-write-in-russian-as-long-as-putin-is-in-power>> [accessed 9 April 2024].

⁶¹ See Dirk Uffelmann, 'Self-Translation – The Looming End of Russophone Literature in the CIS? Boris Khersonskii's Anti-Hegemonic Code-Switching', *Russian Literature*, 127 (2022), 99–126; for other Ukrainian Russophone authors, see also Alex Averbuch, 'Russophone Literature of Ukraine: Self-Decolonization, Deterritorialization, Reclamation', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 65.2 (2023), 146–62. Language policy in post-invasion Ukraine is complex and fraught. Russian is not currently banned in Ukraine as some Kremlin propagandists claim, but, in the context of Russian aggression, there have been strenuous efforts to establish Ukrainian as the dominant language in public space. However, as a Council of Europe Commission cautioned in 2023, this has at the same time put at risk 'the survival of minority schools [in Ukraine], the proficiency in the minority language and thus even the linguistic identity of the minority', quoted in Ágnes Dinnyés, 'Caught in the Crossfire: Minority Languages in Ukraine', Minority Rights Group, 11 October 2023, <<https://minorityrights.org/caught-in-the-cross-fire-minority-languages-in-ukraine/>> [accessed 9 April 2024].