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# ON OCCIDENTALISM, RUSSO-CENTRISM, AND THE (IM)POSSIBILITY OF DECOLONIZATION

Vladimir Ryzhkovskyi

## Abstract

The Russian full-fledged invasion of Ukraine intensified the discussion in the academia about the urgent need to decolonize Russian, Slavic, and Eurasian studies and finally to remove the Russo-centric bias, which has structured the field for decades. This essay contributes to this discussion by elaborating on the concept of Occidentalism, as it has been developed within the Latin American tradition of decolonial thought, and turning it into solid ground for epistemological and historical critique of the Russo-centrism beyond façade-style decolonization.

**Keywords:** Russian-Ukrainian War, Russian imperialism, decolonization, Orientalism, Occidentalism

“US intelligence officials are concerned that Kyiv could fall under Russian control within days, according to two sources familiar with the latest intelligence. The sources said that the initial US assessment from before the invasion – which anticipated that the Ukrainian capital would be overrun within one to four days of a Russian attack – remains the current expectation. Russian forces have moved to within 20 miles of Kyiv, senior administration officials told lawmakers on Capitol Hill Thursday night”.<sup>1</sup>

For the CNN reporters, the US intelligence prediction on the bleak prospects of Ukrainian resistance just a day after Russia’s full invasion sounded more certain than a weather forecast in the time of climate change. It was simply an inevitable fact. This inevitability was propped by decades-long ruminations about Russian “authoritarianism,” “natural boundaries,” “persistent factors,” and “deep historical configurations,”

which have become a shared common sense among Western briefing rooms, university campuses, concert halls, think tanks, and art galleries. A common sense that made a European country the size of France naturally invisible. Of course, Ukrainian historical misfortune was lamentable, but hardly unexpected or intellectually challenging. A paroxysm of the proverbial Russian barbarism that, nevertheless, could not completely deny some deep appreciation. After all there was a great European Russian culture out there to sweeten up the bitterness of yet another barbaric outburst.<sup>2</sup> In a moment of awkward silence, when Kyiv failed to fall, the matter-of-factness of Ukraine's non-existence precipitated as discursive fallout.

History is written by the victors. And even the most consistent efforts to read it against the grain do not necessarily mean to recognize those who are destined to perish. As Ukrainians learned the hard way, the recognition was not meant to be achieved by conceptual sophistication, methodological rigor, and artistic subtlety, but by lots of Ukrainian blood. In a moment of awkward silence, when Kyiv failed to fall, the grunts of persistence finally could be recognized as "neglected voices."<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, there is something deeply Hegelian in this bloody war – an existential struggle for recognition, the dialectics of the master and the slave. In the Hegelian parable, one becomes aware of his own existence only by facing the prospect of death in the hands of the Other. In the current deadly struggle, the former master and slave, however, stare at a third party, thus complicating a straightforward dialectical resolution of the conflict. Ukraine has been seeking recognition not from Russia, but from the West – presently such recognition is imperative for survival. Russia does not even recognize that it is fighting Ukraine – Ukraine does not exist in its delusional imagination. Instead by killing Ukrainians it also seeks recognition from the West as an imperial equal. The point is that the West is implicated in this conflict not only militarily, politically, economically, but also imaginatively and conceptually.

But has this fact been properly reflected upon in the recent calls for decolonization of the Russian studies in the West? It seems that the toxic discursive fallout that covered the field of Russian studies as a result of Ukrainian perseverance made the urge for displacement of the uncomfortable question quite strong and hardly veiled by a hectic activity ranging from scraping the "Russian" from the names of the centers and institutional divisions, inviting to the table "peripheral voices," and purging bad ideas vaguely defined as Russo-centric. But can decolonization

proceed beyond this familiar mixture of “woke culture” and “identity politics,” which hides, but hardly washes away, the toxic discursive dust? What options then do we have to activate epistemological and historical critique of our habits of knowing the region?

In 1995, the American-Venezuelan anthropologist Fernando Coronil published a critique of Orientalism. Without denying the intellectual power and elegance of Edward Said’s arguments, Coronil pointed to a lack of critical engagement with Said’s ideas, particularly stressing the essentialized logic behind the application of the concepts of otherness and diversity and their uncritical celebration as a reverse effect of Said’s intentions. Coronil advanced the idea that in order to approach Orientalism beyond its superficial dismissal as “bad discourse”, one would need to shift to a reevaluation of the complex and evolving historical conditions (colonialism and imperialism) that made perception of certain parts of the world through an orientalist lens possible. He famously conceptualized the mechanism that frames the representation of essentialized cultural differences in terms of Western political epistemologies as Occidentalism, emphasizing its role in obscuring the “relational nature of representations of human collectivities and their genesis in asymmetrical relations of power [...] and thus to present as the internal and separate attributes of bounded entities what are in fact historical outcomes of connected peoples.”<sup>4</sup> Defined like that, Occidentalism in Coronil’s formulation referred to the conditions of possibility of Orientalism.

It seems that Coronil’s intervention hardly lost its relevance 30 years later and can be expanded both historically and epistemologically, for discussing the reasons behind the Russo-centric epistemological bias both in our methodology and in the historical past. In this essay, first I will shortly introduce the specificity of the Latin-American decolonial approach by contrasting in more detail Orientalism to Occidentalism, then I will point to some benefits that engagement with Russian and particularly Soviet imperial and colonial experience could have for expanding the scope of the concept. Finally, in a historical-autobiographical manner reminiscent of the Latin American decolonial tradition, I will demonstrate how historical elaboration on the discourse of Occidentalism provides a vantage point for pushing the discussion of decolonization beyond the ritualistic choreography of identity politics and towards critical engagement with the toxic discursive fallout produced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

## 1. From Orientalism to Occidentalism

The well-established academic paradigm of postcolonialism usually is associated with diaspora scholars, who during the 1980s and 1990s raised concerns about identity, imperialism, colonialism, and nationalism to the center of Western academic agenda. The towering figure and the founder of this tradition was an American-Palestinian scholar, Edward Said, whose seminal *Orientalism* has been considered to be a founding text of postcolonial studies and defined our thinking about the above-mentioned issues up until present day. As it is well-known, Said mobilized his impressive erudition to present the idea of Orientalism as political, scholarly, literally, and artistic discourse, which since the 18<sup>th</sup> century has been employed by different iterations of Western imperialism to keep the essentialized passive, feminine, irrational, and underdeveloped “East” subordinated to the active, masculine, virile, and rational “West.”<sup>5</sup> However, what launched Orientalism into academic stratosphere was not simply a passionate exposé of imperialistic Western biases, but the way his critique was framed. Said’s interpretation of Orientalism happened to be closely intertwined with his critique of essentialism, stagism, evolutionism, and developmentalism of modern European thought, which resonated particularly well with the rise of post-structuralist approaches, post-modernist irony, and an overall doubt about the validity of grand narratives now exposed as ideology and power. In addition, Said’s advocacy of conspicuously non-Marxist forms of academic activism aligned well with the proliferation of various forms of identity politics (along gender, racial, and ethnic lines).<sup>6</sup> Not surprisingly Orientalism was eagerly embraced by the Western academia as an important ingredient in the methodological toolkit of the updated progressivism reframed now as multicultural equality achieved through identity politics.

The collapse of socialism in 1989 added yet another casualty on the list of essentialized fantasies – socialism itself. The end of history and triumph of capitalism implied the universal proliferation of liberalism, democracy, market – a hardware for the new era of globalization – with ideas of multiculturalism and political correctness substituting those of equity. In the new circumstances it was a duty for scholars to expose bad ideas (like Orientalism) or its equivalents as major obstacles on the way towards a new era. Given the need for ideological and geopolitical incorporation of the newly liberated Eastern European countries, Eastern Europe itself was proclaimed as yet another example of a distorted Western mental



mapping. Larry Woolf's *Inventing Eastern Europe* and Maria Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans* were good examples of that readiness of the Western academics to contribute to the cause of dispelling prejudices of the past and embracing the benefits of the multicultural globalization.<sup>7</sup>

In the world where history ended, it was enough to simply discard bad ideas in order to maintain the equilibrium. After relishing in debunking imperialist ideas (like Orientalism), it was logical to argue that not only Westerners has been perpetuating essentialist myths. The Others were not absolved of the sin either. Precisely in this context, the concept of Occidentalism was deployed for the first time as a mirror image of Orientalism. The Dutch journalist Ian Buruma and the Israeli anthropologist Avishai Margalit defined Occidentalism as simplified or stereotypical renderings of the West by non-Western societies.<sup>8</sup> Occidentalism conceptualized this way amounted to a critique of the resurgent nationalisms (especially strong in Eastern Europe and stigmatized respectively), which usually would combine essentialized ideas about the nation with no less essentialized ideas about the West.<sup>9</sup> In this combination, however, and quite ironically, mainstream globalized Western academia, funding agencies, and NGOs kept reproducing the same conceptual disparities that they were supposed to transcend: the West – again rational and composed managed to get rid of its own orientalist prejudices, while, as usual, the irrational other (the global East or South) was persisting in its essentialized nationalistic absurdities – a reason eventually to deny political sovereignty and even intervene on behalf of the reason in the best colonial manner.

On another level and quite subconsciously, the exclusive focus on the critiques of essentialism was a powerful way for maintaining the post-1989 liberal-democratic and capitalist *status quo* by denying both the trauma of post-socialist transition (the East European context), or the trauma of the experience of the long colonial subordination (the Ukrainian case).<sup>10</sup> Given that left-wing ideas were quite effectively supplanted politically and intellectually in the aftermath of 1989, ridiculous and essentialist nationalism provided the only way for voicing these concerns, thus entrenching liberal-capitalist denial. In fact, the critique of Orientalism as essentializing methodology had been voiced already in the 1980s as a reminder of the lamentable shift of the Western social sciences and humanities from clear class analysis towards cultural interpretations.<sup>11</sup> However, these critiques were too reductive in their attempts to reduce Saidian insights to a reading of Orientalism as ideological justification for

colonialism. A more comprehensive position, as mentioned above, has been developed in yet another global periphery. Quite tellingly it came from Latin America and was related not simply to academic dynamics, but to a specific political constellation: powerful indigenous movements and a strong left – there was no state socialism and therefore no dialectical negation of the revolutionary politics.

In this regard Coronil's critique of Orientalism and Occidentalism was not simply an attack on Margalit and Buruma, but a condensed summary and conceptual sharpening of the research program of Latin American decolonialism, which is based on the modernity/coloniality approach which operates within a modified world-systems model of analysis that drew from dependency theory, liberation theology, Latin American philosophy, and later also Chicana feminism, subaltern studies, and postcolonial studies.<sup>12</sup> Provocatively, Coronil submitted that "Occidentalism" had to be understood not as an analytical category, which should be seen as a symmetrical counterpart to Orientalism, but rather a category that "refers to representations of cultural difference framed in terms of Western political epistemologies and therefore creates the "conditions of possibility of Orientalism."<sup>13</sup> Occidentalism in this regard could not be seen as a causal factor behind colonialism, but rather an ever evolving work in progress of constructing occidental superiority as an expression of hegemonic epistemology and structural coloniality. The stress on conditions, rather than identities, subjectivities, and prejudices points to a fundamental contribution of Latin American decolonial studies, which recast the problem of the relationship between colonialism and modernity by setting it in a wider historical context, by offering a certain perspective on the world history which stresses interconnections and mutual dependencies in the production of the modern world.

While enumerating the conditions that enabled Western representations of cultural difference in the modern world in terms of radical alterity, subordination, and exoticism, Coronil included "colonialism and imperialism; a hierarchical system of nation-states; capitalism as a global mode of production of regions, persons, and things; a division of the person into private individual and public citizen; faith in secular science; and an expansive *universalism* supported by the sciences and by ideologies of progress."<sup>14</sup>

For sure, the decolonial thinkers are well aware that othering and essentialization are characteristic of human communities as well as imperial enterprises across history. However, the majority of participants in

Latin American decolonial paradigm would agree that the rise of European colonialism and imperialism did constitute a significant epistemological break with previous imperialisms. The rise of European colonial empires produced not just a different type of othering, but combined this othering with deep transformations in the perception of the world, identity, body, and geography – coloniality and modernity are understood as twins. The fundamental categories of political and social perception of the objective world are permeated with these processes of colonial transculturation. In this manner, thinkers like Coronil, Mignolo, Quijano, and Dussel suggest that bounded narratives about renaissance, secularization, modern science, modern society, History, are in fact products of centuries of colonial expansion and encounters, and not a legacy of a localized and separate European experience as it was once claimed by Reinhardt Koselleck.<sup>15</sup> Not least important, as Coronil reminds us, increasing temporalization of the geographical imagination in the course of colonial expansion could hardly be disentangled from practices of political and economic exploitation.<sup>16</sup> Absolutely, this process was not only repressive, but clearly had emancipatory and liberating aspects, which also should be understood as products of a mutually dependent, combined and uneven development.<sup>17</sup>

As such, this program invites us to explore the genesis of epistemological blind spots and biases not only in imagination and discourse, but in the totality of history, by turning world history into a collective enterprise of rewriting separate histories as part of the global whole. The pioneers of decolonial thinking themselves made a significant historical contribution by highlighting the importance of the experience of the early Spanish and Portuguese empires in the production of the European modernity instead of the exclusive critiques of British and French imperial enterprises. By pointing to this encompassing historical sensitivity, Coronil envisioned further expansion of both historical scope and conceptual ambition of the decolonial effort. He advocated something he called “tactical postcolonialism,” meaning the need for developing the theory as well as a decolonial narrative of world history and critique of Occidentalism from a variety of positions reflecting various geographical points as well as class/gender/racial experiences of those launching the explorations.<sup>18</sup> It must be admitted, however, that Coronil’s call was not well received. Since the beginning of the new century some major proponents of the “decolonial option” took a conspicuously non-historical turn in their efforts to carve

out some space for themselves within Western academia and ascertain difference from the dominant types of postcolonial theory.<sup>19</sup>

It is one of my contentions that historicization is critically relevant for activating the conceptual potential of decolonial critique. In this regard Russo-centrism, similarly to Orientalism, could be seen as yet another function of the occidentalist mapping. It is not enough to dispel the bias, but instead it is necessary to reconstruct the historical constellation, which made it possible. In this regard, Russia is an important part of the world's historical panorama, mediating the perception of this huge region and shadowing the presence of numerous other people and their histories. Russia came to be defined as Russia in the occidentalist map of the world as an expression of both "otherness" and "sameness." Since the ascendance of the colonial age: Russia has solidified its place as conceptual opposition of the West.<sup>20</sup> The first conscious articulation of the West as a separate and superior civilization was formulated in the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in opposition to Russia.<sup>21</sup> In a similar manner the West turned into a structural constraint and epistemological fixture of Russian thought and quest for superiority.<sup>22</sup> This conceptual crystallization, however, had a long pre-history, which has been hardly scratched in historical literature.<sup>23</sup> However, it seems to be analytically productive to take the perennial Russia and the West dilemma out of the confines of the European comparisons and expose it to more globalized, decolonial readings. From the latter's theoretical standpoint, the Russian development appears not so much as a peculiar distortion of some "pure" European pattern, situated on the lower level of the European gradient, but instead as a unique and at the same time typical variation of what Anibal Quijano defined as coloniality.<sup>24</sup> Once established as the antinomic Western Other both in Russian and Western discourses, Russia was eagerly building its cultural influence as well as self-perception on this legacy. By being racially similar and at the same time culturally different, Russia constituted itself as a perennial interlocutor mirroring Western identity, and as an exotic entity mediating the Western perception of the huge region. This continuous appropriation into the occidentalist framework was built on the previous legacy, marked particularly by Russian cultural advances as compensation for its supposed political and cultural backwardness. The Great Russian Novel, the Great Russian Ballet, the Great Russian Avant-garde, etc. marked important points of this appropriation. While a historical account of imperial Russia's place on the occidentalist map would necessarily complement the understanding of the making of the

vision of the modern world, the experience of the Soviet empire points to the possibility of redressing certain theoretical omissions of the conception of Occidentalism as it was formulated by Latin-American writers.

In decolonial critique, the coloniality of modernity is coextensive with different iterations of the capitalist system: from Spanish-Portuguese breakthrough through British hegemony to the US-centered capitalism. However, decolonial theory only obliquely addresses the fact that for almost seventy years there was an alternative to capitalism, moreover, this alternative had conspicuously anti-colonial and anti-imperial claims. Unfortunately, without serious historical scrutiny of the experience of state socialism, its position and importance in the workings of global coloniality have been simply dismissed by some authors working in the decolonial paradigm as not worth of exploration. Focusing on colonial subjects and other victims of Soviet projects of modernization, the complexity and ambiguity of the Soviet experience of transcending modernity became flattened out.<sup>25</sup> However, the question about the relationship between decolonial impulse and ultimate imperial Soviet forms, between the Russian and Soviet imperial frameworks, and ultimately about the Soviet variation of the occidentalist historical consciousness remains relevant.

Indeed, there could be no uniform way of approaching these questions. Rather they have to be approached by working from one's own positionality. As Walter Mignolo suggests, "politics of epistemology" necessitates the integration of one's own and little questioned premises of knowing and knowledge as part of the analysis. Theories, methodologies, and interpretations are articulated results of the tension that emerges between experience and research in the process of scholarly activity. Mignolo calls the nexus of experience and reflexivity one's fully embodied position in space and experience – the locus of enunciation.<sup>26</sup> Without trying to be too self-indulgent, it is necessary to highlight my own positionality as a source of critique of Soviet imperial formation. The elucidation of the necessary global design requires an autobiographical detour.

## **2. Locus of Enunciation and the Haunted House of Universalism**

I was born in Uzhgorod, Ukraine a year before Chornobyl exploded, but luckily, I was not affected much by the immediate consequences of the nuclear disaster, being shielded by the high meadows and fresh air of the Carpathian Mountains. That was a courtesy of my grandfather, born in a

Northern Ukrainian village 50 miles from Chernobyl, but sent by the Soviet state to Transcarpathian Ukraine, freshly annexed from Czechoslovakia in the aftermath of the Second World War. He was an unlikely colonizer, who was supposed to bring happy modernization to his impoverished Ukrainian brothers, while carrying in the back of his mind the burden of the traumatic experience of collectivization, Holodomor, and war. To be happy and beaming with joy, one had to unlearn how to be sad. And Ukrainian was a sad language. My grandfather tried to unlearn it, but his Russian – the language of happiness, multinational friendship, universalism, and oblivion – betrayed his peripheral origins and sadness to the very end. My parents were doing much better, equating their urbanity, modernity, and happy disinterestedness in the past with the language of universalism. They were hardly alone in this quest, singing along with their peers across the Soviet space that there was no need to “be sad, since an entire life was ahead of us, so keep your hopes high and wait for better.”<sup>27</sup>

The political fallout following the Chernobyl disaster, however, brought down the regime, the multiethnic empire, and hopes for the better grew faster than me getting the chance to enjoy the fruits of Soviet modernity. What one was left with instead was an imperial melancholy. The incredible linguistic and ethnic diversity of the region – in itself a result of centuries of inter-imperial competition – allowed to re-appropriate the new Ukraine’s modest nation-state building efforts as part and parcel of this imperality, not as its opposition. Most importantly for a descendent of imperial settlers – the claim of universalistic transcendence and superiority was reserved for only one language. Incidentally it was my language.

Even ten years after the collapse, the marks of the imperial cultural hegemony of the distant metropolis were scattered around the Uzhgorod city scape. The library collections of the imperial university (opened by the Soviets in 1945) reflected it well. The library itself was stationed in the former episcopal palace (a token of Soviet modernity, transposing religion for knowledge and culture), but its collections, aside from a set of episcopal *incunabula*, looked like a chest of accumulated imperial knowledge. The infinite shelves of Russian language Marxist scholarship – a veritable “Weltgeschichte” in Soviet style – looked particularly impressive. As students we routinely practiced rewriting *verbatim* passages from the Soviet books as our sole research practice. It was a ritual of repetition and imitation for the lack of better choice and everyday homage to a distant world of the former imperial center. It was unimaginable that one cannot only copy-paste the Marxist wisdom about the past, but explore the past

through original sources. Amidst this boredom and lack of opportunities (a courtesy of imperial structures), me and many of my fellow students found relief in reading the books of a historian of medieval Europe, Aron Gurevich. Encountering his work was like a blast. His books were different in terms of plotting, methodology, questions from anything practiced in Soviet historiography and reminiscent of the French *Annales* school. Incidentally, Gurevich proved to be instrumental in introducing the major authors of that school to Soviet readers.<sup>28</sup>

In the intensified context of the Ukrainian discussions about post-coloniality reaching from across the mountains, no one doubted that the future meant rejecting the communist legacy, and embracing liberalism, capitalism, Europe, and thereby universality. On that account, Gurevich's anti-Sovietism and liberalism were impeccable, his devotion to the West uncompromised, and his Jewishness cosmopolitan to the core. Most importantly, however, he wrote about these things in the language of my choice. By celebrating Gurevich I wanted to celebrate Europe, universality and at the same time my own imperial pedigree and privilege. And the more eager I was to celebrate, the deeper the condescending joy at smaller, minor parts of my imperial puzzle, thinly framed as a quest for universality.

Ten years later, in one Moscow archival collection I found the exact visualization of my longing.

*"Once upon a time, somewhere, on another planet, there was a renowned white house packed with books. The book closets stored the busts of smartly smiling people and the portrait of [Oliver] Cromwell walking in his wide jackboots [...] In the room young people were studying Latin. Without breaking the obligatory silence, they enjoyed chatting about Anatole France [and] twice a week tried to prove philosophically the past and the present."<sup>29</sup>*

This description was a fantasy of a young student of medieval manuscripts from Moscow, written in the late 1930s. The "white house" of his fantasy captured better than anything else how I imagined the cosmopolitan metropolis of my imperial dreams. I had a similar feeling of transcendence (beyond petty national divisions and rivalries), a relish in the world culture and, fortunately, in the language of my choice, while swallowing the gems of beauty in the tower of the old episcopal house. The celebration of my heroes opened the doors for the updated version of that house in Moscow. As it turned out, the house was no less cosmopolitan

and even more approvingly universalistic than ever. It provided not only the feeling of belonging, but boundless opportunities: one could go higher and higher exploring its endless rooms. These explorations eventually brought me to a no less impressive and universalistic version of the house – the American campus – a veritable universalistic home for soul searchers. A home brimming with joy, fun, and sophistication. But despite this, I was somehow allured to the basement of the old white house, where the busts and portraits as well as my own anxieties were stored: my country’s gradually unraveling in the flames of imperial disintegration, which followed the annexation of Crimea and the war on Donbas. Or was my grandfather’s sadness, which kept hovering over my reflection about the universalistic joy and sophistication? And there was some mystery. Who were these priests of the West in the inhospitable barbaric country that I loyally chose to celebrate? What did they represent? Where did they come from?

As part of my research on the pre-revolutionary tradition of medievalists scholarship, I could not but bump into the figure of Paul Vinogradoff (1854-1925), a man credited with creating a Moscow school of research on social and economic history of the European Middle Ages. It was via Vinogradoff that deeply engrained anxieties about empire, colonialism, and universalism made an unexpected comeback on my agenda.

Vinogradoff is most known and lauded for his contribution to the explorations of the English medieval past. The book he wrote on a subject of English villainage eventually won him a professorship in Oxford. It is much less remembered that the chair in comparative law that Vinogradoff obtained in Oxford’s Corpus Christi was once occupied and named after Sir Henry Maine – a British colonial administrator in India. It was hardly a coincidence, since Vinogradoff’s interest both in medieval past and comparative jurisprudence, similarly to that of Maine, were not of antiquarian nature.<sup>30</sup> While reading his texts carefully, one could understand that Vinogradoff’s intellectual efforts were geared towards one goal: the instrumentalization of what he called “historical mindedness,” which aimed at maintaining and improving the global domination of world empires. As he argued in his numerous texts, the global world of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was incredibly diverse and uneven in its development, with its different parts representing different temporal snapshots of humanity’s history. This diversity was governed by a “civilized humanity” (meaning elites representing European global empires). The stability and progress of this structure depended not only on economic means, military



troops, and cultural achievements, but also on historical mindedness. Vinogradoff's own Russian experience of the coeval coexistence of the modern and the medieval provided insights for exploring the European medieval past and *vice versa*, his studies of that past informed his political judgement of the Russian and global present. The Russian intellectual class, presented as universal *par excellence* due to lack of engagement into intra-European national skirmishes, could deliver universal recipes of historical-mindedness for the rest of the imperial world: instructing on the pace of evolution. At the same time historical-mindedness was his recipe for modernizing the Russian empire, overcoming its autocratic nature under the aegis of liberal intellectuals and in the name of civilized humanity.<sup>31</sup> By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, major imperial cities with universities (Kyiv, Warsaw, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kazan', Kharkiv, Odesa) had experts similar to Vinogradoff. All these historians formed an imperial web of professionals, who were related to each other by intellectual lineages, but also by commonalities of backgrounds and the shared goal of transforming history into a true science of historical mindedness.<sup>32</sup> Almost all of them came from the ranks of petty nobility, clergy, and merchant class and originated ethnically from families of Slavic descent ("Great" or "Little Russian"). Many of these historians coupled their professional activities with political participation on the local scene, considering their contributions to national science, enlightenment, and local life as a solid ground for claiming a share of power from the politically backward autocracy. The reluctance of the Tsarist government to share power with liberal experts, however, hardly changed their attitude towards the role of imperialism in the overall design of potential liberal reforms. As Vinogradoff's close associate and student of English late medieval history Aleksandr Savin once said:

Let imperialism help us to overcome our internal ailments, to achieve the internal victory over our backwardness... Let the imperialistic and great Russia tempered in the crucible of the war resolutely go along the path, which would allow it to inscribe in the walls of its imperialistic temple the proud motto: *imperium et libertas*.<sup>33</sup>

The revolution of 1917, however, smashed all their plans. There was neither liberalism nor empire anymore. What happened then to these Foucauldian experts and their claims for power? The house stories suggested that they became utterly marginal and harassed in the new

Bolshevik state. Against all odds, however, they managed to preserve their traditions of thorough empirical research and pass this knowledge to the new cohorts of Soviet students. But could their claims for power and entanglements with imperialism simply disappear? What power was driving me then towards them almost 100 years after Vinogradoff left Russia? There was no “white house” in the imperial Russia. It was a post-revolutionary creation intimately related to the new forms of power, governmentality, and imperialism generated by the Soviet experiment.<sup>34</sup> However, to understand this transformation, one needs to take into consideration the mindset and ambitions of the revolutionary winners – the Bolsheviks.

The Bolsheviks were revolutionary radicals, recruited from the ranks of the Russian intelligentsia and borderland subalterns, whose anti-capitalist and anti-Western ideas were built on a profoundly Occidentocentric vision of the world. Bolshevik Occidentocentrism originated in the late imperial period, in the revolutionary underground and in the radicals’ Western émigré colonies. There they developed a fascination with non-capitalist aspects of Western civilization, industrial power, comfort, and most importantly culture and science.<sup>35</sup> Despite the radicalism of their agenda, they did not mean to challenge the idea of the “West,” but only dreamed about the possibility of purifying it and spreading it across the globe. In a certain way, by launching the revolution in Russia, the Bolsheviks hoped to pave their way back to the West. However, once their effort to export the revolution abroad failed, they had to compromise and set on building socialism in one country. This was an important theoretical revision, which would have significant consequences for the evolution of the experiment, particularly when combined with their deeply engrained fear of infiltration and foreign threat.

In many ways, the Bolshevik commitment to culture and enlightenment was a building bloc of their anti-capitalist and anti-profit vision of the world, and of the revolutionary transformation. They believed that knowledge and education were the most effective tools to achieve the goal of creating the “new man.” However, their approach to culture and science reflected another deep contradiction: they were as much committed to spreading culture as to keeping this spread under total control, the goal of creating a completely liberated and independent personality was unseated by the fact that liberation may lead the liberated self into a direction different from that prescribed by the Bolsheviks. These contradictions were particularly vivid in the Bolsheviks’ approach to enlightenment in

the immediate aftermath of the Revolution, and crucial for understanding both the imperial and the revolutionary genealogy of the “white house” of medievalists.

In the immediate aftermath of the revolution, the Bolshevik commitment for spreading enlightenment led them not only to organizing campaigns against illiteracy, but also to democratizing drastically and expanding the higher education all around the former imperial space. In 1917-1922 new universities were opened across the country. Most of these universities hosted freshly established social science departments. However, after realizing that democratization of knowledge production did not necessarily mean ideological homogenization, the Bolsheviks opted for a hyper-centralized and controlled model of enlightenment. A semi-conscious solution to the tension between spread/excellence and control was to keep overly-autonomous and rarely-predictable knowledge production under the party’s ideological control through spatial concentration and surveillance. This meant that, as early as the 1920s, the Bolsheviks were pursuing a highly-hierarchized version of cultural revolution. They supported mass cultural campaigns, but preferred to bring to the periphery only strictly-controlled and prefabricated ideological knowledge. By the end of the 1920s, they had successfully eradicated the diversity of cultural and intellectual life in the former imperial space as a matter of security, thus unintentionally creating some structural disparities in access to knowledge and information. This would eventually serve as an important foundation for reestablishing the imperial identity and framework of the Soviet project and the creation of new imperial elites.

Medievalists were part and parcel of the process. In the 1920s their expertise on the origins of the West was highly appreciated by the leading Bolsheviks as a necessary prop for showcasing Soviet superiority in knowledge production. However, the production of this kind of knowledge was exceedingly concentrated in one place – in Moscow – as a matter of ideological control. By the late 1920s the imposition of the Stalinist ideological dogmatism, made independent knowledge production completely inviable. During the years of the Great Break (1929-1931) many medievalists were harassed and fired. Between 1934 and 1936, however, most of them were re-hired and employed by a much more expanded and robust Soviet Academy of Sciences and prestigious Moscow universities. It was precisely the moment when Moscow students conjured up an image of the “white house” for the first time. Why did this shift happen and what did their knowledge and expertise actually mean in the

new context, in which scholarly and political conclusions of their studies were known in advance?

The answer to this question is well captured in the characterization of medievalists that a party official responsible for monitoring the situation in the Institute of History gave to his superiors in 1936, after the divisions of medieval history were reestablished in the academic institute and university. He wrote:

They [medievalists] lack national consciousness. No one can sense that they are patriots of the USSR [...] They are present here more like attorneys for West European affairs [...] Our medievalists [resemble] merchants who came here from Venice or Florence and settled in a merchant's hall...But we need to have at least couple of them in the whole [Soviet] Union, those who would be able to deal with all kinds of special questions."<sup>36</sup>

By “special questions” it was meant an ability to showcase a rare and supposedly useless expertise in editing Western Latin sources or to interpret the intricacies of the medieval land measurements, having a deep knowledge of vulgar Latin and an ability for paleographic research. In fact, their practice was transformed from a scholarly expertise into a display of aesthetic practice – a process which had a lot to do with the contradictions of the revolutionary experiment as global in its aspirations (world revolution) and local in its application (communism in one country). In the 1930s Moscow was intentionally constructed as a showcase for global aspirations, achieved no least through a forced display of Soviet cultural superiority. The privileged institutions (an expanded Academy of Sciences, an expanded Moscow University, the Moscow model schools, museums, theaters, publishing houses, and translation enterprises) were responsible for producing world-class culture and science, which would incorporate and transcend the best achievements of humanity, understood predominantly as achievements of the West. These institutions (along with the elites that served them) – heavily policed ideologically, yet lavishly funded – were constituting what I call Soviet Occidentalism, of which the medievalist “white house” was an integral part. However, the emergence of the universalistic and globally-oriented occidentalist hub in Moscow was closely entangled with yet another part of the Bolshevik ideological dilemma – that of building communism in one country.

During the 1920s, that country was built along the national lines as a conglomerate of national republics, with their respective political elites

and cultural establishments. National elites considered themselves to be a part of the global revolutionary movement, valued their national agency, and preserved a significant degree of autonomy from the Moscow center, particularly in the matters related to culture. The project of socialist nation-building was perceived by the cultural elites as going hand in hand with a quest for modern, urbanized, and sophisticated national culture. The “West” played an important imaginary role in this pursuit.<sup>37</sup> In the late 1920s and early 1930s, however, the diversity of indigenization policies of the 1920s, led by the national Bolsheviks had been curtailed, and national cultural elites were decapitated and replaced by loyal supporters of Stalin. Without questioning the multi-ethnic foundations of the socialist state, Stalin’s imperial turn towards celebration of the Russian state and nation, and fears of foreign influences led to cultural provincialization-autochthonization of the national cultures, their purging of any alien influences, and their commitment to the friendship with the great Russian people.<sup>38</sup> However, the policing was not fully applied to the center of the experiment, to Moscow. The combined effect of making sealed nationalized territories along with a conspicuously cosmopolitan, though tightly policed, center unintentionally worked towards an unexpected recreation of the imperial differences, which separated the imperial center and the parochial peripheries, but this time based not on economic exploitation or racial discrimination, but on unequal access to sophisticated culture and information. Since then the limited access to the world culture had to be mediated exclusively through the center of the experiment. It is true that Russian culture, aggressively promoted by the regime as a shared obligatory heritage, overlapped with the occidentalist priorities. However, it clearly went beyond prescribed limited purview and its precarious position was marked by a certain ethnic blindness. Was this center Russian at all in terms of national distinctions?

Looking at the composition and recruitment of the new cohorts of medievalists, one could only observe that the cosmopolitan and aesthetical business of medievalism was attracting a disproportionately large number of students of Jewish descent (children of those who moved to the center after the collapse of the imperial structure in 1917). In fact, Jews were overrepresented among connoisseurs as well as within Occidentalism’s various institutional corners. Most of them simply did not see any place for themselves in the multiple nationalisms of the utopian socialism in one country and thus chose the only ideological option available to them: the version of world culture with a Russian accent. By opting out

from celebrating the ethnically defined Russian imperialism, they were more eagerly embracing its cosmopolitan and universalistic version. The “Jewishness” of this elite was not a matter of percentage, but an aura of “otherness” that the conspicuous Jewishness created in marking that elite as not-quite Soviet, i.e. national enough. There were many Russians in their ranks, however, even those Russians who were part of the elite, by dint of their cosmopolitan aspirations and liminal place in the edifice of the Soviet project, became in a sense alien and thereby “Jewish.” The history of the Soviet imperial (occidental) elite was shaped by a combination of ideologically motivated privilege and repression, promotion and punishment. Since any story is better told as a story of the victim, both its privilege and position in the workings of the empire became substituted by a well-articulated tale of punishment. The punishment became a token of self-identity.

The rise of the official anti-Semitism, especially in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel, made this elite even more distanced from the Russian national glory, from the Soviet state, and later from the communist experiment in general. Without being banished, exiled or deported *en masse*, this elite occupied a precarious, but unique position in the cultural and imperial hierarchies. Rejecting the national mythology, the national state, the national parochialism – promoted by the Soviet Russo-centric regime, they started to identify themselves with the distinctly imperial, cosmopolitan and universalistic version of Russian culture understood as epitome of world culture or rather translated world culture. Committed to servicing and expanding occidentalist institutions and discourses as a moral issue, they eagerly contributed to the solidification of the imperial structure of the Soviet experiment. By having a privileged access to Western things – including knowledge and culture – as well as being heavily oriented towards the West as civilizational standard opposed to their Soviet experience, these elites by their path-breaking contributions and efforts, by reimagining culture as a realm of autonomy, by re-excavating previously forbidden cultural heritage, and re-appropriating the imperial legacy as their (meaning Russian imperial) legacy, by pursuing universalism, actively contributed to the maintaining of the restructured imperial regime based on disregard for national traumas, on prescribed parochialism of national cultures, and on promotion of Russian as a medium of high culture. The cosmopolitan occidentalist elite was placed at the top of the enormous and huge hierarchical edifice of cultural governmentality and hegemony

build by the decades of Soviet experiments in the realm of culture. The “white house” of medievalists that I happened to study was just in the middle of the vast infrastructure of imperial institutions, epitomizing the Soviet quest for global domination.

The disregard for one’s own unwitting participation and complicity was, however, not present in discourse and discussions. The little nations of the Union turned out to be too little and negligible to become a point of reflection, together with their parochial and narrow nationalistic concerns. It is quite telling that both in the late Soviet period and in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse this academic and artistic elite turned a blind eye to the discourses that had any interest in the questions of coloniality, as marked by parochialism in their agenda, and too narrow (and politicized – the years of Soviet inoculation) to accommodate the global ambitions. Instead, the major goal was an ability to showcase transcendence and universality, catering to the universalist aspirations of the Western (and no less imperially oriented) interlocutors. The “white house” not restrained by Soviet structure and now even funded by the Russian oil money in another no less contradictory and bizarre attempt of showing off, was growing, shadowing its past and ominously looming over its disastrous future.

### **3. Russo-Centrism of Western Academia as Imperial Love and Reversed Occidentalism**

“Not in my name,” was the only confused reaction when Russia openly attacked Ukraine in February 2022. As Ukrainians say, there are no “good Russians.” This does not mean that there are not individuals doing important work, helping refugees and so on. It is a conceptual statement, meaning the complete absence of reflection and the inability to cope with one’s own past instead of relaying it to nationalists, fascists, or even to Pushkin or Tolstoy for that matter. “Good Russians” are those that Ukrainians instinctively distrust the most, more than blood-thirsty imperialist nationalists, whose intentions are clear and whose words are direct, without taking any universalistic detours.<sup>39</sup>

But does not a similar displacement characterize the Western academic talks of decolonizing Russia? An abruptly delegitimized Russo-centrism is no less abruptly blamed for bad ideas, bad heritage, sometimes dirty Russian money, while one’s own responsibility is conveniently removed. The generously invited peripheral neglected voices create a sense of

justice recovered and the purified, universalist, and objective academic position regained. Western academia emerges here somehow inimical to entanglements, and in occidentalist fashion a bounded entity outside the stream of time, with little epistemological or historical reflection.

One of the most obvious reactions has been to reconsider the origins of the field of Russian studies, particularly emphasizing the role of imperial liberal emigres, not much different from Vinogradoff, who supposedly infused Russo-centric bias into the academic discourse. During the decades of the Cold War confrontation, this bias allowed to dismiss or simply ignore the multiethnic nature of the USSR.<sup>40</sup> However, it was evident for everyone that the Soviet Union collapsed along the ethnic lines, which necessitated the reconsideration of the Russian and Soviet history as a history of multiethnic space. After 1991 a veritable boom of interest in peripheral and non-Russian histories consolidated itself in the so called “imperial turn” in Russian studies.<sup>41</sup> This fixation on the empire, however, seemed to be not at all irreconcilable with the perpetuation of the Russo-centric bias. Could this fact be simply accounted for by the bad and old academic heritage? And how was it related to the new post-Cold War intellectual and political climate?

Indeed, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War was considered a true watershed in the history of the Russian field. The enemy was defeated, its archives were finally opened for normal work. The end of the cold war was fused with a sense of euphoria and enthusiasm. The ideological shackles were finally cast away, the old biases and prejudices put aside, and a new era of global cooperation was dawning. The West, its liberal democracy, capitalism, and critical self-awareness (including transcendence of hegemonic orientalizing discourses towards the others) were considered objectively universal in their significance. A real end of history was at the length of an extended hand. Self-righteous feeling of transcendence has been usually framed as no less self-reflective overcoming of the Cold War binaries, simplification, and ideologization.

The “imperial turn” was part and parcel of this universalizing rhetoric of transcendence. Methodologically it was built on the appropriation of the vast constructivist critiques of nationalism. Geopolitically, however, it was powerfully shaped by the experience of bloody ethnic wars in Yugoslavia and across the Soviet peripheries. The new hegemonic reading of history after the end of history looked quite condescendingly and pitifully at the numerous little nations engaged into a senseless bloodshed and historical mythologizing. In these circumstances, empire as a category of analysis



provided an intellectually robust and superior model of approaching the history of the multiethnic space. At the end of history, nationalism seemed to be ridiculous and doomed to disappear in the globalizing multiculturalism of liberal democracy – a future epitomized by the timeless universalism of the American university campus. It is true that the empire was not democratic, but it was always imperial. In that climate, quite apologetic celebration of imperial diversity and vibrancy as well as a quite dismissive attitude towards national traumas were not uncommon. It is not very surprising that a strong aversion towards nationalism made implicit self-identification with the former imperial center and imperial elites devoid of national allegiances almost counterintuitive in the Western context. In this climate the occidentalist Russian elite (in itself urging to be fused into West driven globalization) might have appeared to be even more cosmopolitan and benignly imperial than their Western interlocutors. In turn, the former national peripheries seemed to be too parochial to be taken seriously. In the playful atmosphere of the 1990s, nationalism was related to the monotonous seriousness reminiscent of the Soviet ideological straightjacket. In turn, the empire seemed to be fun and funny. Here, the previous solidness of universalism merged with the ironical approach and sarcasm of the late Soviet occidentalist elite, which was ironically looking at the anti-colonial efforts of rewriting national histories and relishing its own superiority and position – neither Russian, nor national, but imperial and therefore universal.<sup>42</sup> In the time of victorious liberalism and capitalism, this interlocutor was devoid of any nationally tinged agenda and equally callous towards real economic disaster, which hit the compatriots. Probably, these ironic and superior universalistic qualities were most powerfully reflected in Yuri Slezkine's contributions; the application of the late socialist *stio*b stylistics to reflect on the imperial past, somehow rendered seriousness in this department not only stylistically, but also intellectually flawed. His memorable metaphors "USSR as a communal apartment," "imperialism as the highest stage of socialism," and finally "the Jewish century" for comprehending Russian and Soviet imperial experience resonated powerfully with American academia's globalization moment, shielding its most cherished imperial blind spots with an exoticizing elegance and brilliance that only the occidentalist Moscow elite could produce. In the quite restrictive and boring system of peer reviewed arguments – Slezkine's intellectual *épatage* was truly imperious. Nationalistic concerns were not even dismissed, but laughed away, while one's own positionality was self-ironized to the point of

complete disappearance.<sup>43</sup> It may well be that by now the irony dissipated and the academic climate itself became more and more Victorian and repressive, but it hardly decreased the demand for universalist repertoires. Russia would never disappoint in that regard and its intellectual elites have always been around the corner with universalistic solutions: anti-capitalist rehabilitations of the socialist experience, anti-colonial struggles, cosmic aspirations, or revolutionary green deal transitions. The imperial romance of occidentalist elites makes it difficult to notice anything smaller than the universe. By celebrating global Russian culture, in fact, they were celebrating themselves. A strong and mutually reinforcing universalist alibi for the occidentalist elites was probably the figure of Osip Mandelstam – a Jewish Russian poet, shot by the criminal Soviet regime for his love of world (Western) culture.<sup>44</sup> In a moment of awkward silence, when Kyiv failed to fall, the imperial discursive fallout could not spare even Mandelstam.

#### **4. Is Decolonization Still Possible?**

So, what have we then to understand by decolonization? Or what does this decolonization achieve? It seems to me that the most widespread ascription of the word “decolonization” to a plethora of performative and theatrical expressions of solidarity with neglected voices hardly goes beyond the familiar occidentalist repertoire of Western academia’s “identity politics.”

So, is it possible to deepen and expand the “decolonization” call by intensifying the epistemological and historical critique of Russo-centrism and Occidentalism? I am rather skeptical in that regard. As I tried to show, a critique of Occidentalism has the potential to become a powerful research program of studying world history, but within the deeply occidentalist institutional structures. In that sense, it is not quite clear why to attach the word “decolonization” to something which is a routine academic enterprise.

So, what we are left with then? In the conclusion to his piece on Occidentalism, Fernando Coronil was asking how “can we articulate the future historically? How can we prefigure an emancipatory future, while tracking down its marks in the tensions of the present?”<sup>45</sup> Should we also add, by tracking down the limitations of the emancipatory drive, emancipatory wording, and emancipatory passion in the past? Sixty years ago, the global decolonization brought high hopes. Its promises, however,

where never fulfilled. Coronil was writing in the shadow of those defeats and his final remarks were brimming with a sense of broken and not tangible hope, when the prospects of the “disenchanted, inhospitable, and depopulated world” came to depend also on the “poetry of the present.”<sup>46</sup> Back then it was still possible to go along confidently with Benjamin’s wisdoms of fanning the “spark of hope in the past” and writing “history against the grain.”<sup>47</sup> After two decades of disastrous unraveling of the global *pax Americana*, writing history against the grain turned into a mundane academic genre, and it conjures up another and less hopeful Benjaminian imagery: that of playing a game of sophistication and artistry with a Turkish puppet.<sup>48</sup> No matter how high the pitch is or how neglected the voice, the puppet will respond promptly and efficiently. The contemporary puppet is more nuanced than the “historical materialism” of the past and clearly there is no point of trying to play a game of “decolonization” with it. Is decolonization then possible at all?

“Decolonization” as well as “colonization,” and “coloniality” are profoundly hybrid concepts and part of the modern conceptual grammar. The inquiry into their genesis and evolution reveals profound and often negative connection with the concept of universality. The present-day conceptual impossibility of decolonization reflects in a significant measure our inability to relate the traumas of the past to visions of the future, the increasing burden of vindictive particularism to fragile quest of the universal. Decolonization in this regard cannot be a matter of wording, of producing new radical and simultaneously domesticated knowledge, but one of searching for universality beyond too comfortable factories of radical knowledge, within the existing, newly imagined, and rarely attended spaces, and among a variety of publics. We might need new words for imagining decolonization, and decolonization itself is not one of them.

What we might be more confident about is that decolonization in the past and in the present was only a process of straightforward and liberatory movement into the future. As the prefix “de” indicates, it has also been about disintegration and traumatic decomposition. It might be helpful to avoid self-indulging into a hero-narrative while writing or reflecting about decolonization, and instead observe, archive, and narrate the debris that the process is leaving behind. The quest for universalism may well need such an archive in the future. And the awareness of this is something we owe, not least, to those who did not let Kyiv to fall.

## NOTES

- 1 <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/25/politics/kyiv-russia-ukraine-us-intelligence/index.html>
- 2 About the cycles of fascination and distancing in relationship between Russia and the West see: Martin Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999).
- 3 <https://www.aseees.org/convention/2023-aseees-convention-theme>
- 4 Fernando Coronil, "Beyond Occidentalism. Toward Nonimperial Geohistorical Categories" in *The Fernando Coronil Reader: The Struggle for Life Is the Matter*. Ed. by Julie Skurski et al., (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 329.
- 5 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978)
- 6 For a critique of Said and postcolonial theory in general see Vivek Chibber, "The Dual Legacy of Orientalism," In B. Abu-Manneh (Ed.), *After Said: Postcolonial Literary Studies in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 37-52; Vivek Chibber, *On Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (London, Verso, 2013).
- 7 Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- 8 Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004).
- 9 Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Fantacies of Salvation: Democracy, Nationalism, and Myth in Post-Communist Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).
- 10 Ukrainian attempts to articulate this trauma by using the language offered by Said and postcolonial thinkers reflected this dilemma, while postcolonial thinkers were approaching the subject from the timeless temporality of Western academia, transcending both the fallacies of Euro-centrism and of local nationalism, the Ukrainian intellectuals following the advanced fashion tried to recast the nationalist cause, but in a mild version of institutional affirmative actions, only to be rejected as black faces. See for example, Mykola Riabchuk, *Vid Malorosii do Ukrainy* (Kyiv: Krytyka, 2000).
- 11 See for example, Sadik Jalal al-'Azm, "Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse," *Khamsin* 8 (1981): 5–26; Aijaz Ahmad, "Orientalism and After: Ambivalence and Metropolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said" in *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992), 159–220
- 12 Manuela Boatcă, *Global Inequalities Beyond Occidentalism* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 81; Arturo Escobar, "Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise: The Latin American Modernity/Coloniality Research Program", *Cultural Studies*, 21 (2-3), 179-210;

- 13 Fernando Coronil, "Occidentalism," in *The Fernando Coronil Reader: The Struggle for Life Is the Matter*. Ed. by Julie Skurski et al., (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 320.
- 14 Coronil, "Occidentalism," 320.
- 15 Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
- 16 Coronil, "Beyond Occidentalism,"
- 17 For a recent intervention pointing in this direction see David Graeber's and David Wengrow's new interpretation of the sources of Rousseau's discourse on inequality: *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (London: Allen Lane, 2021); less thoroughly documented, but insightful reflection on Hegel and Haitian revolution by Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).
- 18 Coronil, "Latin American Postcolonial Studies and Global Decolonization," in *The Fernando Coronil Reader: The Struggle for Life Is the Matter*, 419.
- 19 Madina Tlostanova's insightful interventions and attempts to bring decolonial sensitivity to the understanding of Russia's place are characterized by a peculiar disregard for history as something known and useless. This nihilism, however, not only has detrimental intellectual consequences, but political limitations. See for example: Madina Tlostanova and Walter Mignolo, *Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and the America* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012)
- 20 See Dieter Groh, *Russland im Blick Europas. 300 Jahre historische Perspektiven* (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1988).
- 21 Riccardo Bavaj, The West: A Conceptual Exploration, *Europäische Geschichte Online* <http://ieg-ego.eu/en/threads/crossroads/political-spaces/riccardo-bavaj-the-west-a-conceptual-exploration>
- 22 Boris Groys, "Russia and the West: The Quest for Russian National Identity," *Studies in Soviet Thought*, 43:3 (1992), 185-198; Michael David-Fox, *Crossing Borders. Modernity, Ideology, and Culture in Russia and the Soviet Union* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2015).
- 23 Among the most exiting topics are Ukrainian church influences and the conceptualization of empire and sovereignty in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century and transcontinental exchanges and civilizational discourses. On the impact of civilizational discourses see Ricarda Vulpius, *Die Geburt des Russländischen Imperiums. Herrschaftskonzepte und -praktiken im 18. Jahrhundert*. Beitrage zur Geschichte Osteuropas. Koeln: Boelau Verlag, 2020).
- 24 Aníbal Quijano has proposed the term "coloniality" to designate the global system of power grounded in the histories and ideologies of colonial expansion, whose main facets persist even after "colonialism as an explicit political order was destroyed." Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality" *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 170. Although attentive

- to the material and economic aspect of coloniality, Quijano also places emphasis on its cognitive and cultural power: “in spite of the fact that political colonialism has been eliminated, the relationship between the European also called ‘Western’ culture, and the others, continues to be one of colonial domination. It is not only a matter of the subordination of the other cultures to the European, in an external relation; we have also to do with a colonization of the other cultures, albeit in differing intensities and depths. This relationship consists, in the first place, of a colonization of the imagination of the dominated; that is, it acts in the interior of that imagination, in a sense, it is a part of it,” Quijano, 169.
- 25 Superiority and lack of nuance and certain epistemological arrogance are particularly evident in Tlostanova’s treatment of Ukrainian material, her dismissal of the reflection as not decolonial enough. See Medina Tlostanova, *Postsovetskaia literatura i estetika transkul’turatsii: Zhit’ nikogda, pisat’ niotkuda* (Moscow: Editorial URSS, 2004).
- 26 Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
- 27 This is a quotation from a 1975 hit *Entire Life is Ahead of You* by a popular band *Samotsvety*.
- 28 See for example Mark Blok, *Remeslo istorika* and Lucien Febvre *Combats pour L’Histoire* with prefaces by Gurevich.
- 29 ARAN f.1514, op.1, d.112, l.27.
- 30 On Maine see: Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of Empire. Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).
- 31 Vinogradov’s essays on these issues are collected in Antoshchenko, A.V., ed. *Pavel Gavrilovitch Vinogradov. Izbrannye trudy*. Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2010.
- 32 On these efforts see: Tomas Bon, *Russkaia istoricheskaia nauka 1880 g. - 1905 g.: Pavel Nikolaevich Miliukov i Moskovskaia shkola*. St.Petersburg: Olearius Press, 2005; Wladimir Berelowitch, “History in Russia Comes of Age. Institution-Building, Cosmopolitanism, and Theoretical Debates among Historians in Late Imperial Russia,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 9:1 (2008), 113-134.
- 33 A.N. Savin., *Voina imperii i mir islama* (Moscow: Trud, 1915), 8.
- 34 I pursued this argument at length in my dissertation. Volodymyr Ryzhkovskyyi, *Soviet Occidentalism: Medieval Studies and the Restructuring of Imperial Knowledge in Twentieth-Century Russia*, Georgetown University, 2019.
- 35 Faith Hillis *Utopia’s Discontents: Russian Exiles and the Quest for Freedom, 1830s – 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021) specifically explores the effects that the experience of Russian revolutionary exiles in Europe had on the creation of the Bolshevik regime.
- 36 ARAN f.1577, op.5, d.30, l.88-90.

- 37 Mayhil Fowler, *Beau Monde on Empire's Edge: State and Stage in Soviet Ukraine* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).
- 38 See discussion of this turn in Ukraine in Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 211-254, 345-372; and in Uzbekistan in Adeeb Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 342-389.
- 39 See a fascinating exchange between the Ukrainian artist Nikita Kadan and Russian artist Dmitrii Vilenskii, revealing the dynamic that I am writing about here. Dmitry Vilensky, "Letter to Nikita," <https://syg.ma/@dmitry-vilensky/letter-to-nikita>; Nikita Kadan, "On Words That Do Not Save Lives," [https://artterritory.com/en/visual\\_arts/topical\\_qa/26363-on\\_words\\_that\\_do\\_not\\_save\\_lives/](https://artterritory.com/en/visual_arts/topical_qa/26363-on_words_that_do_not_save_lives/);
- 40 See for example Susan Smith-Peter, "How the Field Was Colonized: Russian History's Ukrainian Blind Spot" <https://networks.h-net.org/node/10000/blog/decolonizing-russian-studies/12015665/how-field-was-colonized-russian-history%E2%80%99s>
- 41 For example "Imperial Turn," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 7:4 (2006), 705-712.
- 42 On the ironic mode of the late Soviet intelligentsia see Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More. The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton university Press, 2005).
- 43 Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism." *Slavic Review*, vol. 53, no. 2 (1994), 414-52; Yuri Slezkine, "Can We Have Our Nation State and Eat It Too?" *Slavic Review*, Vol.54, no.3 (1995), 717-719; Yuri Slezkine, "Commentary: Imperialism as the Highest Stage of Socialism." *The Russian Review* 59, no. 2 (2000), 227-34; Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).
- 44 Kevin Platt, "The Profound Irony of Canceling Everything Russian," <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/22/opinion/russian-artists-culture-boycotts.html>
- 45 Coronil, "Beyond Occidentalism," 361.
- 46 Coronil, "Beyond Occidentalism," 361.
- 47 Coronil, "Beyond Occidentalism," 361.
- 48 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 225.

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