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Towards Post-Russian Studies: Decolonizing Imperial Knowledge in Western Academia

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A year and a half ago, Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine and Russian missiles started raining on Ukrainian cities. The initial shock has now perhaps subsided, opening some space for the much-longed-for intellectual reckoning in the field of East European/Eurasian Studies.

I have been lucky and privileged to attend various conferences in East European Studies in this year and a half, and I will try to summarize my impressions from the recent conferences of British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies (BASEES) and Center of Baltic and East European Studies (CBEEES) conferences, as well as expectations from the upcoming Aleksanteri and Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) conventions.

All of these conferences have had decolonization as their theme, and it seems that decolonization is becoming a new paradigm in the field. While this is a positive development, there are different drivers behind this decolonization movement. The first and vital driver comes from scholars of Eurasia and Central Asia who are showing solidarity with Ukraine. The decolonization approach, with tools developed by Franz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak and others, fits perfectly with the analysis of scholarship on Central Asia and the Caucasus.

The second driver comes from a different region, which I would call “greater Eastern Europe,” including Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova, with strong links to the Baltics, Poland, Central Europe, and the Balkans. This second impulse is more immediately related to the ongoing invasion of Ukraine. It is particularly connected to the postcolonial moment in Ukrainian literature and cultural studies that has been going on since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Works by Marko Pavlyshyn, Tamara Hundorova, Ewa Thompson, Mykola Riabchuk, Vitaly Chernetsky developed the necessary optic over the 30 years.

When we look at these two different traditions, we see that they deal with somewhat different situations and challenges. They are still called forth by the same force, Russian imperialism, and they share countless parallels and the same paradigm. Yet many problems they are facing are vastly different. Central Asia and the Caucasus are coping with centuries of Russian colonial rule, while Ukraine is resisting an armed Russian attempt at re-colonization; Ukrainians are also yet to

face their responsibility for their role in the creation of the Russian Empire.

We are dealing with two different fields that are entangled in epistemic empathy and embrace each other in solidarity, but still constitute two (or more) fields rather than one single, unified field. This makes it all the more relevant to give up on the old field of “post-Sovietology,” as we are dealing with different situations that require different approaches within the same decolonization movement. It is simply no longer relevant. Let’s bury this corpse.

Another observation is that, while we see these two separate areas of greater Eastern Europe and greater Central Asia/Caucasus arise in solidarity and come into a vibrant dialogue with each other, Russian studies proper does not seem willing to change and is currently engaging in what could be considered self-marginalization.

The panels on Russia felt isolated and out of touch, and honestly not very interesting. The word “war” was rarely mentioned at all, there was little self-reflection and criticism of the old paradigms. Given the enormity of the shift underway in Russia as we speak, I was struck by the triviality of the Russian-themed panels. Many voices were surely decrying their loss of archive access and cozy funded field trips to Russia. Many junior colleagues certainly looked up to the “greats” in the field for guidance, but, in all honesty, have all the “greats” really spoken clearly, without stumbling and guilty silences over old papers about how Putin is actually a reformist/postmodernist/postcolonialist/you-name-it-ist, but certainly not as a bad as “the West” or the phantom of bloodthirsty Ukrainian nationalism?

This triviality is not bad per se. We need to provincialize Russia and Russian studies and put it on the periphery while centering the subaltern nations of the former Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and now also the federative Russia that is quite likely on its way to the next collapse. Russia, in this decaying field, has literally to become a “little Russia.” In a very literal sense—not the one we are used to hearing about.

My third observation is a warning that decolonization can be but a passing moment, a hype that may give way eventually to something else and not leave the mark that it should. Many scholars who have worked within the very traditional paradigm of Russian studies are now trying to jump on the bandwagon and move on

to the next trendy topic: Ukraine and subaltern nations and decolonization.

There is thus a risk that the true decolonization that many scholars from subaltern nations have been working on may be drowned in the flood of superficial “decolonizing” (in fact, “re-colonizing”) studies. By this I mean studies that apply decolonial language and schemes on the surface while aiming at recasting the Russian colonial experience as something almost benign (of this we have now seen enough!) and, above all, preserve the limits of the post-Sovietological field, this Gulag or kolkhoz of sorts where all the subalterns are forced to work on their petty fields within the barbed-wire fence of “Eurasian studies” heeding to the most recent party line from Moscow. The substitution of postcolonialism for Marxism-Leninism and the new and very liberal Muscovite ideologues now broadcasting from the beacons of New York and London are but a change of clothing for an outdated field, rather than the needed change in paradigm.

Finally, there is the question of responsibility. We have failed as a field of area studies, regardless of how we view knowledge epistemologically: whether we con-

sider it a representation of reality that must be true to it, or a constructive process through which we arrive at something and create new knowledge that changes the world. We have failed because our representations of reality were either crude, poor, and inadequate, or we failed to create the new knowledge that could have changed our reality enough that this war wouldn't have happened.

I am concerned that, without any tangible responsibility for the people who knowingly spread false narratives, inadequate theories, caricatures, and ideological rubbish disguised as expertise and knowledge, we will not be able to move forward and make decolonization a reality. I am not talking about legal responsibility, although suing for defamation and libel may make sense in some cases. As scholars, we are supposed to be autonomous and self-regulating, and we should be able to sort out these failures on our own. The question is more how we ensure that those who willingly became agents of influence for the Kremlin are held responsible and accountable for their actions, so that this can serve as a warning for future generations and the future of our very field(s).

About the Author

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