

Russia's Status as a Colonial Power

Written by Kseniya Oksamytna

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KSENIYA OKSAMYTNA, NOV 1 2024

Since February 2022, Russia has waged a full-scale war against Ukraine that combines conquest, mass atrocities, terrorism, and settler colonialism. It follows more than a decade of Russian military aggression against Ukraine, which began with the seizure of Crimea and the intervention in Ukraine's eastern regions. The war has been enabled by the "discourses of Russian supremacy and Ukrainian 'inferiority'", yet the colonial character of Russia's war often remains obscured. The invasion of Ukraine is, of course, not the first war of aggression waged by contemporary Russia, the Soviet Union, or the Russian Empire. What is unusual about it is that it takes place in an era when blatant land grabs are universally condemned: Russia has attacked an independent, universally recognised country. Yet Russian atrocities against nations and peoples that lacked statehood were no less tragic, such as the massacres of Turkmens by the Russian Empire, Qazaqs during the Soviet era, and Chechens in the post-Cold War era – under both Yeltsin and Putin. The list of examples is much longer.

Still, Russia continues to claim "imperial innocence". Prime Minister Lavrov has maintained that Russia "has not stained itself with the bloody crimes of colonialism". However, the reluctance to recognise Russian colonialism runs deeper than susceptibility to Russian propaganda. This essay examines Russia's imperial past and present, explores how it has been obscured, and suggests implications for the international studies discipline.

Colonialism is typically associated with European powers, but Russia – partly in Europe geographically and a key diplomatic player on the continent – is often left out from those discussions. However, both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union were no less brutal than other empires, committing mass atrocities that are recognised as genocide by one or several states, including the massacres of Muslim Circassians and Holodomor in Ukraine. Furthermore, the Russian Empire had significant aspirations but limited capacity to pursue colonisation of Africa. Thwarted in its ambition, it treated the territories it had acquired through overland expansion as colonies by drawing on European orientalist discourses.

While the notion and practice of colonialism has many manifestations, its distinguishing features include the coloniser's self-perceived superiority, the "civilising mission", and dehumanisation. Superiority is the belief that some peoples are more "advanced" or "deserving" than others. Contemporary Russian colonialism is rooted in the same premise: the idea that Russia is the natural "leader" of all Slavic nations – or possibly all nations once under the Russian or Soviet rule – and that Russian culture is superior to the culture of its neighbours.

The notion of "advancement" has been traditionally associated with modernity, rationality, and Christianity. Russia has similarly relied on the discourse of modernisation to justify its claim to "great power" status, and some Russians have denigrated Ukraine for allegedly being poor and low-skilled. Russia has stressed the "rationality" of its rulers and people while portraying Ukrainians as sentimental and unsophisticated – a "singing and dancing tribe" as opposed to martial Russians. Christianity has also become increasingly central to Russia's colonial project, with the Russian Orthodox Church supporting Russia's war.

Colonialism rests on colonisers' self-perception of being not only more "advanced" but also more "deserving". When discussing buying up cheap property in destroyed and occupied Mariupol – where up to 25,000 civilians died during the Russian onslaught – Russian settlers admit that they are drawn to Mariupol for its favourable location and climate. Others admit that they move to the occupied lands to realise their aim of having their "own house of no less

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than 180 sqm". The sense of entitlement to more space and better climate mirrors the colonisers' motivations throughout history.

The second element of colonialism is the "civilising mission", or the belief in the benevolence of the metropole that seeks to "better" colonised lands or people. Russia argued that it invaded Ukraine to "fix" it: to "save" it from imaginary "Nazis", politicians deemed "corrupt" or "inept", or simply the risk of forgetting "Russian roots". (Russians have a term, *vyrus*, for those who have allegedly "lost their Russian identity", such as Ukrainians who have switched to speaking Ukrainian after the full-scale invasion.) The project to attract Russian settlers to the newly occupied areas in southern Ukraine is called the "virgin lands" programme, echoing similar the Soviet-era in Qazaqstan. "Virgin lands" is a classic colonial trope: "[c]laiming land to be uncultivated and indigenous people idle" has been used by settlers to justify land expropriation.

Metropolises persuade subjugated people that they can get "civilised" by forsaking their language and culture and adopting those of the coloniser. Before the discussions on decolonisation gained pace across the region, in Qazaqstan some looked down on fellow citizens who spoke Russian with an accent. Similar attitudes were internalised by some Ukrainians (although they started to disappear after the full-scale invasion) as the society reflected on the meaning of decolonisation in the Ukrainian context.

The third element of colonialism is dehumanisation. In the Soviet Union, the request to speak Russian was framed as a demand to "speak human", implying that the languages of other peoples within the empire were somehow less-than-human. In Ukraine in 2022, the massacres such as Bucha were clear manifestations of dehumanisation, with the Russian forces leaving the graffiti in occupied houses reading "It is not considered a war crime if you had fun", privileging colonisers' "fun" over Ukrainians lives. Instead of condemning the war crimes, some Russian social media users celebrated and further encouraged them – a persistent and possibly accelerating trend.

Russian discourse towards Ukrainians is in part assimilationist and in part eliminationist. During the occupation, Ukrainians willing to abandon their identity (linguistic and cultural, but also political) could survive through russification. The unwilling ones, as a Russian collaborator in Ukraine's east bluntly stated, were to be eliminated: he said that "if you don't want to be convinced, we'll kill you. We'll kill as many as we have to: one million, five million, or exterminate all of you". This is typical of colonialism that sought to either "convert", "uplift", or "enlighten" – or exterminate. Russian discourse has also likened the Ukrainian identity to a "virus", reminiscent of colonial authorities' trying to "medicate" subjugated populations out of their perceived "illnesses". A headline of a Russian newspaper declared that "Ukrainiannes cannot be civilised".

Beyond Ukraine, Russian private military companies – an arm of the Russia state – have committed murders, rapes, and displacement in Mali and the Central African Republic. However, even this is rarely recognised as (neo)colonialism. With so much evidence in history and today, why is Russian colonialism obscured, doubted, or even denied?

There are three reasons behind the resistance to recognising Russian colonialism. The first one is the historical legacy of early decolonisation efforts of the 1950s and 1960s. During that era, the so-called "saltwater" or "blue water" thesis limited decolonisation activism to overseas territories. This excluded both Indigenous communities and peoples colonised by land empires. At present, it serves to exclude Ukraine from the debates on colonialism.

The second reason is the association of colonialism with racial domination. Mainstream postcolonial studies have focused on "the construction of racial hierarchies along the colour lines, not among the white-skinned people themselves". However, considering that Europe's peripheries – for instance, 'the Balkans' – have been only partially and contingently included within dominant (Western) European whiteness, there is no reason to dismiss Russian colonialism because hierarchies in the region operate differently. In the region, Russia attempts to lay claim to what could be called 'hegemonic Slaviness', while also racialising peoples of the Caucasus and Central Asia.

The third reason why Russian colonialism is not recognised is ideological. The Soviet Union's association with anti-capitalism and contemporary Russia's association with anti-Westernism has endeared it to various critics of existing

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political and economic systems, both in the so-called “Global South” and on Europe’s political fringes. The general tendency to ignore non-Western colonialism has contributed to it. Furthermore, the “unease felt about Ukrainian militarism and nationalism” – essential for Ukraine’s survival at the moment – has won Ukrainians few friends among either pacifists or cosmopolitans. Ukraine’s specific historical experiences have often precluded dialogues across various divides.

The academic disciplines leading the debate on Russian imperialism in the wake of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine have largely been history and comparative politics. Yet in international studies, too, each subfield has also made progress – at its own pace – towards recognising Russian colonialism.

In international law, the debate has centred on whether the Russian conduct in Ukraine constitutes genocide and on issues of accountability, with some scholars taking an explicitly postcolonial perspective. In International Relations and international security, the debate has focused on the implications of the full-scale invasion for the global order and on the politics of knowledge production about the war, including the reasons behind the failure to anticipate it.

Peace and conflict studies for the last three decades have focused mostly on peacebuilding in internal conflicts. This might have contributed to the misdiagnosis of the first stage of the Russian intervention in Ukraine (2014-2022) as a “civil war”. The attachment to peace could at times take the form of “privileged pacifism”, and the discussions have often focused on how to force Ukraine into territorial concessions as opposed to how to enable it to withstand and rollback the Russian aggression. There are, however, efforts to conceptualise Ukraine’s victory as the path to a sustainable peace.

As the question of Ukraine’s reconstruction enters the research agenda, the field of international development is likely to address it as well. This might be especially the case since international financial and development institutions will be slow to re-engage with Russia (there was a backlash against the IMF’s plans to reopen the Moscow office). Second, Ukraine is attractive as a fieldwork destination due to its accessibility, English fluency among elites, high quality of life for expats, and vibrant cultural life. Like the Balkans, Ukraine might become “a kind of very good laboratory for various experiments...by the academics”, with the associated ethical and methodological challenges.

An interesting evolution is taking place in area studies. The field of Eastern European studies has traditionally been Russo-centric, and attempts to decenter Russia have at times been seen as a form of what Russia describes as “Russophobia”. This did not prevent such developments as the founding of a new association – RUTA, the Association for Central, South-Eastern, and Eastern European, Baltic, Caucasus, Central and Northern Asian Studies – that has judiciously avoided centering Russia in its name and practice. Moreover, there are indications that the subfield of Ukrainian studies is becoming increasingly integrated into European studies.

In Russian studies, scholars have debated the question of whether Russia is fascist, with some scholars answering in the affirmative and others having doubts. Yet democracies have in the past also engaged in colonialism, which should dampen the optimistic assumption that Russia’s potential future democratisation would lead to “de-imperialisation, decolonisation and re-federalisation of the state and a clear break with Russia’s imperial past” – something that several Members of the European Parliament have called for.

Every discussion of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine these days ends with the cliché that everything hinges on the outcome of the war. Whether our discipline will have to study occupation, a “frozen conflict”, and a new era of conquest or the revitalisation of a world order based on the UN Charter remains to be seen.

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