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RELIGION AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE: IMMEDIATE REFLECTIONS FROM THE
POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

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Religion and the War in Ukraine: thinking with a postcolonial perspective

In his introduction to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Jean -Paul Sartre appealed to French intellectuals, enjoying the freedoms and pleasures of their democratic metropolis:

“You who are so liberal, so humane, who take the love of culture to the point of affectation, you pretend to forget that you have colonies where massacres are committed in your name.”

There is something both deeply disturbing and sobering in the fact that this appeal seems to resonate with the thoughts and feelings of at least some academic colleagues reacting to the Russian army's invasion of Ukraine. Fanon's work greatly influenced what came to be known as the postcolonial perspective, though Sartre's advocacy for it did not come unchallenged by political scientists concerned about possible endorsement of violence in defence of human freedom and democratic institutions, Hannah Arendt among them. While the postcolonial perspective remains hotly debated in France and elsewhere, we are at a point when engagement with it has broader implications for our understanding and prognoses of the developments in our geographical region, defined either geographically (Eurasia) or politically (the 'post-soviet' world).

Why postcolonialism? And what postcolonialism?

In a nutshell, there appear to be close affinities between both moral and epistemological concerns of postcolonial thinkers and those of us seeking answers to the questions posed by the 'post-Soviet' or 'post-communist' world. First, some scholars of Eastern Europe are raising concerns that Russian Studies scholars are finding themselves in a privileged position to produce knowledge that shapes power relations in the post-colonial world. [Botakoz Kassymbekova and Erica Marat](#), for example, talk about the lion share of resources devoted to Russian studies at the expense of Russia's former colonies and the muted voices of scholars from these countries. Second, our reflections on this war call for a new analytical framework that could stimulate key questions for our research and to contextualise our observations of a series of unequal post-colonial power relationships in the 'post-Soviet' world.

However, in what sense and to what extent can we consider the ‘post-soviet’ world as postcolonial? So far, the central questions and categories associated with the post-colonial perspectives have focused on the effects of Western imperialism and colonialism; it was about the West and the Rest. Furthermore, in certain circles, the Soviet Union and Russia as its successor are still seen as an antidote to Western imperialism. Among other things, these ‘elective affinities’ can be –and indeed are – appropriated by anti-democratic and anti-liberal regimes to claim their imperial innocence and cover their expansionist ambitions. On the other side, blanket calls for accepting ‘collective responsibility’ for the imperial pasts, either ‘Western’ and Soviet/Russian, are fraught with the prospect of ostracising those – academics and otherwise – opposed to anti-democratic oppression *and* imperialism, and serving as a grist to the mills of ethnic nationalism. From these angles, we need to delve more deeply in the relationship between the processes of decolonisation and democratisation, both institutionally and in terms of our own awareness of the complex intersections between them.

So far, I am familiar with only few attempts directly to engage with post-colonial thinking in relation to the implications of Russia’s colonialism, most notably in Ewa Thompson’s *Imperial knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism* (2000), Alexander Etkind’s *Internal Colonisation: Russia’s Imperial Experience* (2011), and Viacheslav Morozov’s, *Russia’s Postcolonial Identity: A Subaltern Empire in a Eurocentric World* (2015). In addition, thanks to Marlene Laruelle (e.g. 2018) and Mikhail Suslov (2020) and we have excellent overviews of the post-Soviet irredentist utopias and dangerous ‘geopolitical’ entrepreneurialism. While reminding us of the constellation of approaches found in these works, the war in Ukraine brings up new and immediate questions of how we can decolonise our thinking about Russia’s imperial legacy.

Focusing on religion in the war on Ukraine from the postcolonial perspective: possible engagements

I’d like to point out possible themes where engagement with the postcolonial perspective can be useful.

One is the analysis of different types of religiously -infused political discourses that have been silent in the build-up to and during the war in Ukraine. One theme to explore is the ways in which the issues of democracy and post-colonialism shaped these discourses and their impact on political actions in contrasting ways in Ukraine and Russia. With reference to Morozov's thesis that Putin's regime has the endemic need to justify its legitimacy through the empty rhetoric of its counter-distinction from the West (Morozov 2015; see also Shterin 2016), the concept of the 'Russian world' appear to be instrumental for its both empire-expanding and regime-saving political manoeuvres, especially in its most weaponised, anti-NATO and anti-'Nazi' version used for justifying of the invasion of Ukraine. Consequently, having politically subservient religious institutions is not just a choice but a matter of political necessity. In contrast, in Ukraine, while establishing an institutionally independent (autocephalous) Church was initiated by post-colonial political and cultural elites, the state's legitimacy was increasingly based on civic and pro-democratic values, stemming from the 2014 'Revolution of Dignity, and its ability to organise national defence against Russian invasion, beyond religious and linguistic boundaries. It is hard to predict how the pro-democratic and post-colonial trends in Ukraine could develop after the war and depending on its outcomes, and what role religion could play in them.

Another theme is the position of ethno-religious minorities. For the moment, in both Ukraine and Russia we can see an overwhelming consensus among institutions representing Muslims, Jews and Buddhists, though its strikingly different ways, with supporting the 'special operation' in Russia and condemning the military aggression in Ukraine. In particular in Russia, the embrace by these minority institutions of the rhetoric of the Russian World in its crudest expansionist version could be usefully analysed through engagement with Homi Bhabha's (1994) work on cultural hybridity as reflecting the power relations between the imperial 'Master' and colonial 'Slave'.

Finally, the decolonising stance of many Ukrainian and Russian academics, provoked or revealed by the war, must lead to equal chances for scholars from all parts of the region to have equal access for research resources and for their voices to have equal chances to be heard. Not least this concerns new directions and areas of research that they propose, based on their local knowledge

and experience. Subdued subaltern voices are not only a moral but also an epistemological problem in social scientific research, not least in the study of religion in the area. Our support for Ukrainian scholars and their predicament must be firm and unequivocal. However, the postcolonial inequalities and injustices are not best addressed by excluding scholars associated with Russia who never compromised their academic integrity, or by ignoring Russian Studies. If anything, we need more and better knowledge of the entire area, including Russia, produced by these scholars.

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