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The Postcolonial Moment in Russia's War Against Ukraine

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Introduction

What does the world's forced return to the "Ukrainian question"¹ reveal about the state of the art in the modern study of international relations? What is to be learnt from the current predicament?

Russia's 2022 full-fledged invasion of Ukraine is many things at once: a war of aggression; an attempt at yet another territorial conquest after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the eight-year-long struggle for Donbas; a parading of an ontologically anxious state whose leadership appears obsessed with being a great power² through consolidating the idea of a *Russkii Mir* by ruthless violence and lies outperforming George Orwell's dystopic imagination. Most importantly, it is an imperial war in the world of nation-states, underpinned by Russia's open denial of Ukraine's political sovereignty and the Ukrainians' right to exist as an independent nation.³ The incompatible logics of sovereignty (Ukraine's) and imperialism (Russia's) are at the loggerheads in this conflict.

In this essay, I outline the contours of a multi-layered postcolonial moment constituted by Russia's war against Ukraine. For one, it is a moment revealing the distinctly Eurocentric character of theorizing in International Relations (IR) when it comes to the discipline's relative ignorance of Eastern European insights and the validity of their experiences throughout IR's formal existence since the aftermath of the First World War.⁴ Along with the Russian leadership, the strength and scope of the Ukrainian resistance has taken the world by surprise – pointing at a general lack of understanding in IR about "why the weak resist and the forms their resistance takes."⁵ Such an oversight indicates the practical price of intellectual indolence in appreciating the (supposedly) lesser

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¹ That is, "What is Ukraine?" For a comprehensive, yet compact historical account, see Serhii Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Allen Lane, 2015). See also Alexander Shubin, "The Ukrainian Factor in the Development of the International Situation, 1938–1939," in *Divided Eastern Europe: Borders and Population Transfer, 1938–1947*, ed. Aleksandr Dyukov and Olesya Orlenko (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 2–19.

² On the co-constitution of great powers' quest for greatness with the narrative construction of weakness, see Linus Hagström, "Great Power Narcissism and Ontological (In)Security: The Narrative Mediation of Greatness and Weakness in International Politics," *International Studies Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (2021): 331–42.

³ See also Timothy Snyder, "The War in Ukraine is a Colonial War," *The New Yorker*, 28 April 2022.

⁴ See further "Uses of 'the East' in International Studies: Provincialising IR from Central and Eastern Europe", Special Issue, ed. Maria Mälksoo, *Journal of International Relations and Development* 24, no. 4 (2021): 811–1013.

⁵ Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, "The Postcolonial Moment in Security Studies," *Review of International Studies* 32, no. 2 (2006): 329–52 at 332.

actors in world politics and failing to substantively populate these spaces in our mental maps.⁶

Secondly, the war has curiously exposed some ingenious argumentative alliances between offensive realists, who claim for the “law of anarchy” leaving some states less sovereign than others, and their agency in international politics accordingly more bound,⁷ and pacifists of various stripes,⁸ who are wary of Ukrainians’ rallying around the flag to be creating new waves of nationalism.⁹ Combined, in arguing for a quick ceasefire and a Russia-sensitive settlement to end the war, the unlikely fellow travellers symptomatically deny the agency of Ukraine in but subtly distinct ways.¹⁰ Besides the generally strong and emotive Western support to Ukraine, the calls for Ukraine’s neutrality¹¹ and a hasty peace in fear of Putin’s nuclear escalation have provided a fig leaf for the staple geopolitical “buffer zone” – argumentation, effectively negating the political right to sovereign choices of the Ukrainian nation and state. Insinuations of the dangers of Ukrainian “nationalism”¹² are another variation of the same theme. They are also a kneejerk symptom of the yet-to-be decolonized thinking pattern about Eastern Europe as a region which sovereign space of maneuver supposedly always comes determined by the more powerful, or allegedly more responsible and rational others.

Yet, and thirdly, the war is already proving to be a decolonizing moment of sorts: indeed, a game changer for the Central and East European (CEE) states more generally in their vocal countering of Russia’s attempted denial of Ukraine’s (and by extension, Russia’s former imperial subjugates’) sovereign political agency. The emboldened CEE states who have taken a moral and practical lead in supporting Ukraine’s cause – and thus also reasserting their own political agency, together with Ukraine’s in the battlefield, indicate a novel dynamic in intra-European politics where the tables of who is doing the talking and who is listening are being gradually turned with this war.¹³ The increased cultural capital of CEE member states in the European Union will be among the major political implications for the renewed European polity as it emerges out of this war.

⁶ For a powerful criticism of Ukraine’s place in the (Western) academic community’s mental maps, see Dr Olesya Khromeychuk’s keynote lecture at BASEES 2022, 8 April 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJthJb1tK0Y>

⁷ Prominently John J. Mearsheimer.

⁸ Such as the German intellectuals and artists who pleaded in an open letter of the German chancellor Scholz to stop arms deliveries to Ukraine to avoid a risk of an escalation to a nuclear conflict and to curb the human suffering among Ukrainian civilians. “Worries about the Third World War: Intellectuals and artists address an open letter to Chancellor Scholz,” *The News 24*, 29 April 2022, <https://then24.com/2022/04/29/worries-about-the-third-world-war-intellectuals-and-artists-address-an-open-letter-to-chancellor-scholz/>

⁹ On the historical colourblindness in German popular culture imaginings of World War II (*Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter*, 2013), see Peter Pomerantsev, “What, Actually, Is Germany’s Problem with Russia?” *Die Zeit*, 13 February 2022, <https://www.zeit.de/kultur/2022-02/peter-pomerantsev-german-russian-relations-ukraine-conflict>

¹⁰ See Jan Smoleński and Jan Dutkiewicz, “The American Pundits Who Can’t Resist ‘Westspaining’ Ukraine,” *New Republic*, 4 March 2022, <https://newrepublic.com/article/165603/carlson-russia-ukraine-imperialism-nato>

¹¹ E.g., Richard Wilcox, “A New Diplomatic Off-Ramp for Russia,” *Politico*, 16 March 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/03/16/austria-offer-model-ukraine-nato-00017537>; Anatol Lieven, “The Horrible Dangers of Pushing a US Proxy War in Ukraine,” *Responsible Statecraft*, 27 April 2022, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/04/27/the-horrible-dangers-in-pushing-a-us-proxy-war-in-ukraine/>. On the contested meanings of neutrality, see Jan Smoleński and Jan Dutkiewicz, “‘Neutrality’ Won’t Protect Ukraine,” *New Republic*, 22 March 2022, <https://newrepublic.com/article/165824/neutrality-protect-ukraine-compromise>

¹² Andrew E. Kramer, “Armed Nationalists in Ukraine Pose a Threat Not Just to Russia,” *New York Times*, 10 February 2022.

¹³ Benjamin Tallis, “Are Czechia and Slovakia the EU’s New Radical Centre?,” *RUSI Commentary*, 20 April 2022, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/are-czechia-and-slovakia-eus-new-radical-centre>

The Ukrainian Version of the East European Problem

Insufficiently Postcolonial

If Eastern Europe in its various disguises¹⁴ has historically suffered from the problem of difference from its Western counterpart, Ukraine's version of being "secondary Europe with secondary colonial difference"¹⁵ (or an in-between zone "East of Europe, West of Russia"¹⁶) has been traditionally further exacerbated compared to its Central European neighbours. Until the Orange Revolution of 2004, the Revolution of Dignity of 2014 and the armed resistance in response to Russia's full-on invasion of 24 February 2022, Ukraine has featured as a territory "acted upon" in the realities and mindscapes of international relations, rather than an actor embracing autonomous agency on behalf of its own interests and agendas in the twentieth century. In the academic field, Ukraine has been "too European for a Russian history course, and too Soviet for a course on Eastern Europe."¹⁷

Ukraine is also among the most flagrantly neglected cases of Soviet colonialism due to the allegedly insufficient applicability of the label "postcolonial" to the former Soviet/Russian imperial space. Mainstream postcolonial studies have focused on the political construction of racial hierarchies along the colour lines, not among the white-skinned people themselves. The question about the postcoloniality of former Russian imperial subjects, including post-communist subjects in former Soviet republics and the outer fringes of the Soviet empire, remains fraught and contested in the scholarship.¹⁸ In David Chioni Moore's classification, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova are assigned to the "dynastic" type of colonization,¹⁹ where local elites were assimilated into the imperial project and colonial relations were ethnicized: "local language and culture became a stigma, a sign of backwardness, "blackness", and inferiority vis-a-vis the superior

¹⁴ Piotr Twardzisz, *Defining "Eastern Europe": A Semantic Inquiry into Political Terminology* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

¹⁵ Madina Tlostanova, "The South of the Poor North: Caucasus Subjectivity and the Complex of Secondary 'Australism,'" *Global South* 5, no. 1 (2011): 66–84.

¹⁶ Compare: Amitav Acharya, *East of India, South of China: Sino-Indian Encounters in Southeast Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹⁷ Khromeychuk, BASEES 2022 Keynote.

¹⁸ Henry F. Carey and Rafal Raciborski, "Postcolonialism: A Valid Paradigm for the Former Sovietized States and Yugoslavia?," *East European Politics & Societies* 18, no. 2 (2004): 191–235; Janusz Korek, ed., *From Sovietology to Postcoloniality: Poland and Ukraine from a Postcolonial Perspective* (Huddinge: Södertörns Högskola, 2007); Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery, "Thinking between the Posts: Postcolonialism, Postsocialism, and Ethnography after the Cold War," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51, no. 1 (2009): 6–34; Neil Lazarus, "Spectres haunting: Postcommunism and post-colonialism," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48, no. 2 (2012): 117–29; Jill Owczarzak, "Introduction: Postcolonial Studies and Postsocialism in Eastern Europe," *Focaal* 53 (2009): 3–19; Dirk Uffelmann, "Theory as Memory Practice: The Divided Discourse on Poland's Postcoloniality," in *Memory and Theory in Eastern Europe*, ed. Uilleam Blacker, Alexander Etkind and Julie Fedor (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 103–24; Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011); Madina Tlostanova, "Postsocialist ≠ postcolonial? On post-Soviet imaginary and global coloniality," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48, no. 2 (2012): 130–42; Cristina Sandru, *Worlds Apart? A Postcolonial Reading of Post-1945 East-Central European Culture* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012). For criticism about the easy analogy between the postcolonial and postcommunist conditions, see James Mark and Slobodian Quinn, "Eastern Europe in the Global History of Decolonization," in *Oxford Handbooks Online: The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire*, ed. Martin Thomas and Andrew Thompson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Michał Buchowski, "The Specter of Orientalism in Europe: From Exotic Other to Stigmatized Brother," *Anthropological Quarterly* 79, no. 3 (2006): 463–82; Claudia Snochowska-Gonzalez, "Post-colonial Poland – On an Unavoidable Misuse," *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 26, no. 4 (2012): 708–23.

¹⁹ David Chioni Moore, "Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique," *PMLA* 116, no. 1 (2001): 111–28.

Russophones who represented both wealth and power – a relative, largely fictitious wealth of the Soviet cities, and absolute, highly coercive power of the totalitarian state.²⁰ Consequently, Ukraine became one of the notable Soviet internal colonies, “an intermediate case between rather standard colonialism in the Russo-Soviet Asia and Caucasus and a rather light neocolonial rule over Central and Eastern Europe.”²¹

Modern Manifestations

The reactions to Russia’s current war against Ukraine, general support to Ukraine aside, have also revealed some long and unprocessed legacies of Russian imperialism in the mindscapes of many in various western quarters of the world when it comes to the difficulty of seeing and acknowledging a distinct Ukrainian subjectivity that is not defined by another power laying a historical claim to Ukrainians as “Little Russians.”²² Up until this war, Ukraine’s history has not really been considered worthy of becoming data points in the study of international politics.²³ Russian imperialism and colonialism are among the many blind spots of the academic field of IR and the broader postcolonial studies. The former suffers generally from West-centrism and a very short memory, bordering on presentism; a tendency towards abstract theorizing at the expense of mastering historical detail, and an odd set of (im)moral principles masked as “rules of international conduct” – at least in its mainstream version of crude realism, which tends to be the most opinionated of the many theoretical streams of the discipline whenever a war breaks out anywhere in the world with a “great power” participation.²⁴ The latter tends to reduce the intra-European struggles to the self-infatuated “narcissism of minor differences,”²⁵ neglecting to discuss Russian colonialism on par with the Western colonial practices in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. Combined, the two fields end up pigeonholing Russia and its former imperial subjugates under the banner of the Russian/Slavonic and East European area studies (or postcommunist studies in the IR’s historically shorter-sighted version of the subfield) with a clear privileging of the Russian part and to the general detriment of understanding the “eastern world” in the study of international politics.

Regardless of the general outpouring of sympathy and solidarity with the Ukrainians’ plight in the western world, the war has also allowed for some old tropes about East European states as objects, rather than full-fledged subjects in international relations to resurface. Encouragements of the attacked party to negotiate a ceasefire at all cost and

²⁰ Mykōła Riabczuk, “Colonialism in Another Way. On the Applicability of Postcolonial Methodology for the Study of Postcommunist Europe”, *PORÓWNANIA* 13 (2013): 47–59 at 57.

²¹ Riabczuk, “Colonialism in Another Way”, 56.

²² On the history and treatment of “Little Russians” as a branch of a greater Russian nation that also included Great Russians and Belarusians, see Roman Szporluk, “The Making of Modern Ukraine: The Western Dimension,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 25, no. 1/2 (2001): 57–90.

²³ See further Jessica Aughter, “Voices and storytelling: who speaks as historical IR?” in “Forum: doing historical International relations,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, forthcoming, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2022.2044754>

²⁴ “John Mearsheimer on Why the West is Principally Responsible for the Ukrainian Crisis,” *The Economist*, 19 March 2022; John J. Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West’s Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin,” *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 2014), <https://www.mearsheimer.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Why-the-Ukraine-Crisis-Is.pdf>

²⁵ For the discussion of the theoretical implications of the idea of Freud’s, according to which it is precisely the small differences between people who are otherwise alike that form the basis of feelings of strangeness and hostility between them, see Anton Blok, “The Narcissism of Minor Differences,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 1, no. 1 (1998): 33–56.

questionably timed proposals for settlement options²⁶ disregard otherwise West-promoted international law with its emphasis on the prohibition of the use of force and the invalidity of coerced treaties. Further, neglecting the mutually exclusive existential objectives of Ukrainians (who want to peacefully execute their sovereign right to choose their own political fate in the world) and Russia (that under its current leadership wants to deny the very right of Ukraine to sovereign conduct, if not to deny the existence of Ukrainians as a nation and the Ukrainian statehood as anything but a temporary geopolitical whim altogether), such proposals are not helping the side under attack. Instead, they are serving to mitigate the bystanders' understandable human fear for the potential spill-over effects of this tragic war beyond Ukraine's borders, ultimately feeding the idea of Ukraine's bounded sovereignty by keeping the country on an effectively colonial leash. The abstract legalese of universal international law tends to be impervious to its very local interpretations and their complex histories.²⁷ Assumptions about the Austrian-style neutrality working at the "heartland" of Russia's former imperial space are neglecting the historical record of Russian imperial practices. Ukraine's neutrality thus emerges as a *commel-faut* label for the effective rekindling of an old idea for an East European buffer zone to keep the Russian menace at bay from the West. It thus appears as a die-hard face of geopolitics not just on the side currently wreaking havoc in Ukraine, but the supposedly well-wishing West as well.

The Political Imperative of Decolonizing Russia's Historical Memory

Russia has demonstrated almost religious fervour in its current war against Ukraine, seeking to restore the political community in the historically "Russian" areas. The outsiders' understanding of the Russian regime's motivation for and framing of this war has only been piecemeal and frequently clouded by the Western parameters of "normal" modern politics. The public displays of the effective readiness for an extended suicide on Russia's part along the lines of Putin's earlier suggestion that a world without Russia would be meaningless²⁸ send a chilling reminder of the stakes of the current conflict, together with Russia's untimely diplomatic practices.²⁹ With the West effectively bound by a "nuclear taboo" (or the normative prohibition on the first use of nuclear weapons),³⁰ Russia is throwing around threats of nuclear escalation much more readily – thereby further incentivizing its silk-gloved treatment by the international community. But the ready threats of the Third World War³¹ also serve as a grim reminder

²⁶ Ukraine Peace Settlement Project, University of Cambridge: Lauterpacht Centre for International Law, <https://www.lcil.cam.ac.uk/researchcollaborative-projects-housed-icil/ukraine-peace-settlement-project>

²⁷ Lauri Mälksoo, *Russian Approaches to International Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Anthea Roberts, *Is International Law International?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

²⁸ Андрей Афанасьев, "Россия управляется Богом". Интервью Путина расставило точки над и, 7 March 2018, https://tsargrad.tv/articles/rossija-upravljaetsja-bogom-intervju-putina-rasstavilo-tochki-nad-i_116361; "Why Do We Need a World if Russia Is Not In It?": State TV Presenter Opens Show With Ominous Address", *The Moscow Times*, 28 February 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/02/28/russians-race-for-cash-as-ruble-plummets-a76655>

²⁹ On Russian "untimeliness," see Iver B. Neumann and Vincent Pouliot, "Untimely Russia: Hysteresis in Russian-Western Relations over the Past Millennium," *Security Studies* 20, no. 1 (2011):105–37.

³⁰ Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); see also T.V. Paul, *The Tradition of Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

³¹ Milo Boyd, "Russian state TV says nuclear strike 'more probable' than Kremlin losing Ukraine war," *Mirror*, 28 April 2022, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/russian-state-tv-says-nuclear-26818825>

of an observation featuring in Svetlana Alexievich's collection of oral histories on suicides and suicides attempts by the Soviet people after the fall of their state: "But who are we? We are people of war. We have either fought or prepared for war. We have never lived in any other way."³²

Russia's fervour speaks of the denial of genuineness of the Ukrainian nation, culture, history and the state, on the one hand, and reveals the ontological void of the Russian nation, the fact that any politically meaningful Russian state identity is perceived to be viable only when linked to the empire, on the other. The political fate of Ukraine hence appears as the ultimate test of Russia's brand of imperial nationalism: that the Russian state and nation have been conceived as imperial, and need to be continuously policed, defended and substantiated as such.³³ Russia's messianic undertones have framed this war as an operation to "demilitarize" and "denazify" Ukraine, to "protect people ... who have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime".³⁴ "Genocide" is thereby appropriated to correct the allegedly mistaken cultural code of Ukrainianness which does not recognize the superiority of Russianness, the Russian nation, culture, history and language – and hence also Ukraine's as if by default belonging to the sacred-cum-political community of the *Russkii Mir*, ruled by Russia and its cultural-linguistic dominance.³⁵ The opponents of this dominance do not simply make sense in the modern Russian rulers' minds, and thus they get automatically labelled as "Nazis" – meaning, the opponents of Russia.³⁶

Notably, Russia's kinetic war against Ukraine has been preceded by, and has run in parallel to an intense "memory war," probing Ukraine's political subjectivity and sovereignty at various critical juncture points in the twentieth-century past.³⁷ In one of his most memorable televised "history lectures" from 21 February 2022 in the run-up to the invasion, Putin famously claimed that:

Modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia, more precisely, Bolshevik, communist Russia. This process began immediately after the revolution of 1917/–/ As a result of Bolshevik policy, Soviet Ukraine arose, which even today can with good reason be called 'Vladimir Il'ich Lenin's Ukraine.' He is its author and architect/–/ And now grateful descendants have demolished

³² Cited in Svetlana Alexievich, *Boys in Zinc* (London Penguin Random House, 2017), 289.

³³ Emil Pain, "The Imperial Syndrome and its Influence on Russian Nationalism," in *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000-2015*, ed. Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

³⁴ Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," 24 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>

³⁵ "I am confident that true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia. Our spiritual, human and civilizational ties formed for centuries and have their origins in the same sources, they have been hardened by common trials, achievements and victories. Our kinship has been transmitted from generation to generation. It is in the hearts and the memory of people living in modern Russia and Ukraine, in the blood ties that unite millions of our families. Together we have always been and will be many times stronger and more successful. For we are one people." Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," 12 July 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>

³⁶ As maintained by Sergey Karaganov, a multi-time Russian presidential advisor, "Nazis were not only about killing Jews. Nazism is about supremacy of one nation over another. Nazism is humiliation of other nations." Interview with Sergey Karaganov, "We are at War with the West. The European Security Order is Illegitimate," 15 April 2022, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytcs-and-comments/comments/we-are-at-war-with-the-west-the-european-security-order-is-illegitimate/>. For further discussion, see Marlene Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist? Unraveling Propaganda East and West* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2021).

³⁷ Julie Fedor, Markku Kangaspuro, Jussi Lassila, Tatiana Zhurzenko, *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Olga Malinova, "Politics of Memory and Nationalism," *Nationalities Papers* 49, no. 6 (2021): 997–1007.

monuments to Lenin in Ukraine. This is what they call decommunisation. Do you want decommunisation? Well, that suits us just fine. But it is unnecessary, as they say, to stop halfway. We are ready to show you what real decommunisation means for Ukraine.³⁸

An explicit threat and a promise of rightful punishment transpires from this: a suggestion of Ukraine owing its statehood to the USSR whose “state continuator” (*gosudarstvo-prodolzhatel'*) Russia identifies itself as in international legal terms. The effective warning to take life (sovereignty) once given signals Russia’s arguable older brother rights to bring the allegedly erred younger sibling back into the fold of the “normal” path of political development – that is, one supposedly defined by Russia.³⁹

Russia’s current war in Ukraine is an epitome of its struggle to reconnect with its past imperial self which serves “as the key identity standard ... against which the self attempts to verify its present identity.”⁴⁰ This war demonstrates tragically the international implications of Russia’s state-level neglect to work through its repressive past domestically.⁴¹ Russia has never conducted anything akin to a systematic state-level coming to terms with the past after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. The closure of Memorial International, a civil society organization dedicated to human rights and the study of Soviet state terror just a couple of months shy of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine symbolically completes the state-sanctioned politics of selective amnesia.⁴² Post-Soviet Russia has had a severely limited politics of accountability towards the repressions of its antecedent regime: there has not been any punishment of perpetrators of the political repressions and gross human rights violations of its antecedent regime. Instead, there has been a growing rehabilitation of the positives of the Soviet legacy during the long Putin era, in combination with Russia’s increasingly self-assertive and confrontational stance in contemporary international politics. Instead of a systematic reckoning, Russia’s post-communist answer to the challenge of the ontological rupture created by the collapse of the Soviet Union and its effective defeat in the Cold War has been to dig the heels in and seek mnemonical security and justification of its great power claim in the heroic myths of its Second World War/Great Patriotic War-experience as the saviour of Europe.

³⁸ “Extracts from Putin’s Speech on Ukraine,” *Reuters*, 21 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/extracts-putins-speech-ukraine-2022-02-21/>

³⁹ Recall Nikolai Gogol’s *Taras Bulba*, trans. Peter Constantine (Penguin Random House, 2003): “I brought you into this world and I can take you out. /--/ I gave you life. It is on me to take it away from you.” On Russia’s vision of international law whereby Russia arguably possesses a historically justified right to intervene in post-Soviet states and to re-allocate their territories, see Lauri Mälksoo, “Post-Soviet Eurasia, *uti possidetis* and the Clash between Universal and Russian-led Regional Understandings of International Law,” *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics* 53, no. 3 (2021): 787–822.

⁴⁰ Anne Clunan, *The Social Construction of Russia’s Resurgence: Aspirations, Identity, and Security Interests* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009). In that regard, Dmitry Trenin’s narrative of “post-imperial Russia” has failed the reality test as miserably as John Mearsheimer’s famous prediction about instability in post-Cold War Europe. Dmitri Trenin, *Post-Imperium: A Eurasian Story* (Moscow: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011); John J. Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War,” *International Security* 15, no. 1 (1990): 5–56.

⁴¹ For an extended theoretical argument on the international repercussions of Russia’s deeply ambivalent state-level settlement of its relationship toward the repressive legacy of the Soviet state, see Maria Mälksoo, “The Transitional Justice and Foreign Policy Nexus: The Inefficient Causation of State Ontological Security-Seeking,” *International Studies Review* 21, no. 3 (2019): 373–97.

⁴² Masha Gessen, “The Russian Memory Project that Became an Enemy of the State,” *The New Yorker*, 6 January 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-russian-memory-project-that-became-an-enemy-of-the-state>

The emphatically prescribing and proscribing memory laws have been a prominent symptom of Russia's increasing attempts to police and punish acts countering its own state-sanctioned version of "historical truth" and memory extraterritorially.⁴³ The readiness to jump at the defence of the state-defined version of Russia's "historical truth" is evident in Russia's opening of a criminal investigation after the Czech authorities dismantled the statue of the Soviet World War II Marshal Ivan Konev in Prague in 2020.⁴⁴ More recently, an imperialist imaginarity was demonstrated to be in action on 17 April 2022 when Russia's Investigative Committee opened a felony case against those who toppled the monument to Soviet Marshal Zhukov in Kharkiv, Ukraine, with an argument that "These criminal actions are directed against Russia's interests in the field of preserving historical memory of the activities of the USSR during the Second World War and the decisive role in the victory over fascism."⁴⁵

That modern Russia is an antipode of a "sorry state"⁴⁶ for its brazen lack of contrition for past and present wrongdoings is evident from Russia's President recent rewarding of the brigade stationed in Bucha for their "heroism and courage."⁴⁷ Such recognition flies in the face of the global outcry of the atrocities committed against the civilians by the Russian troops in this Ukrainian town. The international implications of Russia's troubled relationship towards its past and ready violence in defending its highly selective "state story"⁴⁸ underscore the political need for a major structural *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* programme for the Russian society and state after the war in Ukraine: both as post-conflict transitional justice to process the aggression against and the war crimes conducted in Ukraine, as well as further-going retrospective justice when it comes to reckoning with the broader legacies of the Soviet communist regime and Russian imperialism more generally.⁴⁹

The East European Moment for IR?

In which ways could recognizing Russia's war against Ukraine as a fundamentally imperial war serve as a progenitor for decolonizing the study of war and provide an impetus for a

⁴³ These include the 2020 constitutional amendments which prohibit "diminishing the significance of the heroism of the people in defence of the Fatherland," and the 2014 and 2020 amendments to the Russian Criminal Code, criminalizing public dissemination of "knowingly false information" about the activities of the USSR during the Second World War, and damaging war graves, monuments, memorial plaques, or obelisks that are dedicated to Russia's military glory or the defence of Russia's fatherland and its interests, respectively. For historical and legal discussion of Russia's memory laws, see Nikolay Koposov, *Memory Laws, Memory Wars: The Politics of Memory in Europe and Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Uladzislau Belavusau, Aleksandra Gliszczyńska-Grabias, and Maria Mälksoo, "Memory Laws and Memory Wars in Poland, Russia and Ukraine," *Jahrbuch des Öffentlichen Rechts*, ed. Oliver Lepsius, Angelika Nußberger, Christoph Schönberger, Christian Waldhoff (2021): 95–116. For a political conceptualization attempt, see Maria Mälksoo, "Militant Memocracy in International Relations: Mnemonical Status Anxiety and Memory Laws in Eastern Europe," *Review of International Studies* 47, no. 4 (2021): 489–507.

⁴⁴ "Russia opens criminal case after Czech officials remove Soviet statue," *The Guardian*, 10 April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/10/russia-opens-criminal-case-after-czech-officials-remove-soviet-statue>

⁴⁵ "Возбуждено уголовное дело по факту сноса памятника маршалу Г.К. Жукову в Харькове," <https://sledcom.ru/news/item/1674971/>, 17 April 2022.

⁴⁶ Jennifer Lind, *Sorry States: Apologies in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

⁴⁷ "Russian Brigade Accused of Bucha War Crimes Awarded Honorary Title," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 18 April 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-bucha-brigade-honorary-title-war-crimes/31809612.html> On post-Soviet Russia's despicable practices in international humanitarian law more generally, see Michael Riepl, *Russian Contributions to International Humanitarian Law: A contrastive analysis of Russia's historical role and its current practice* (Nomos: Institute for International Peace and Security Law, 2022).

⁴⁸ Jennifer M. Dixon, *Dark Pasts: Changing the State's Story in Turkey and Japan* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 2018).

⁴⁹ For an earlier perspective, see Ilya Nuzov, "The Dynamics of Collective Memory in the Ukraine Crisis: A Transitional Justice Perspective," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 11, no. 1 (2017): 132–53.

less parochial study of international politics more generally in the future? Decolonizing war means “asking a straight-up postcolonial question about war: what would we learn about war in general if we started with the history of imperial war? What if we started thinking about war theoretically from the point of view of small wars?”⁵⁰ Decolonizing the study of international relations would entail attentiveness to the memory politics behind IR’s standard categories of subjectivity and agency. Russia’s war against Ukraine has revealed much about who has been historically able, and who not, to speak for themselves in the practice, speaking and writing on international politics.

Considering International Relations theory as a storage space of some historical narratives and epistemologies over others, one is struck by a standard lesson that politics of memory offers to its observers: namely, that any remembrance always entails forgetting; and probing memory is thus also bound to bring up various – and indeed curious – silences and absences. The idea that “we all lost the Cold War” which has resurfaced in contemporary soul-searching about the allegedly missed opportunities to build a new European security order post-Cold War, more inclusive of Russia, is a good example of the pattern. This idea was captured originally by Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein in their eponymic book, according to which the strategy of deterrence had prolonged rather than ended the conflict between the superpowers, and it was due to the prevalence of such logic that the Cold War had arguably only losers, including the jubilant West.⁵¹

Now, a voice from an Eastern European state, newly emancipated with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR, would likely respectfully disagree with the gist of this assessment – and promptly question whether the loss of the Cold War was indeed such a universally shared experience after all. Or perhaps the trope of “we all” focuses rather symptomatically to much of IR, on the experiences of the bigger players over the “little security nothings,” to paraphrase Jef Huysmans’ memorable turn of phrase here.⁵² The Baltic states, for instance, certainly consider themselves among the winners of the Cold War (just as they did with the end of the First World War) since they re-emerged as sovereign actors on the international stage and ultimately achieved their goals of joining the key Euro-Atlantic institutions in the 2000s. Countering the voices who criticize the allegedly “lost opportunities” of the 1990s to build a new inclusive European security order with Russia, for instance on the basis of the OSCE, representatives from the CEE region might argue that their own very re-emergence as sovereign states signified anything but *status quo* in the post-Cold War world and thus marked a major change, rather than a stasis, or a fall back onto some habitual patterns in world political development. This runs against the grain of various voices that have mused about the allegedly unused window of opportunity for building a novel security architecture in Europe post-Cold War – voices that have most recently resurfaced in the run-up to Russia’s current war against Ukraine, in the

⁵⁰ *EJIS conversations* – Decolonising war, Juliet Dryden’s interview with Tarak Barkawi, 23 March 2022, <https://www.bisa.ac.uk/articles/ejis-conversations-decolonising-war>. See further Tarak Barkawi, “Decolonising War,” *European Journal of International Security* 1, no. 2 (2016): 199–214.

⁵¹ Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

⁵² Jef Huysmans, “What’s in an Act? On Security Speech Acts and Little Security Nothings,” *Security Dialogue* 42, no. 4–5 (2011): 371–83.

context of the usual allegations about NATO “expansion” having “encroached” Russia’s sense of security.⁵³

From the perspective of again-emancipated CEE states, a post-Cold War international and regional security order that would have prioritized inclusiveness of the self-proclaimed “state continuator” of the USSR and superseded their own respective security concerns was hence an anathema – rather than a sign of some progressive end-of-history security architecture design. From a CEE perspective, such a move would have signalled but a normative and political failure of the West instead of an allegedly bold reimagining of the international order after the end of the Cold War. All the more so since the repentance by their former oppressor that should have preceded any collective reimagining and reconfiguring of the regional security architecture did not materialize then – nor has it since.

Hence, the IR theorists’ and policy commentariat’s debating of the allegedly “lost opportunities” of the 1990s is also a way of practicing IR that standardly has forgotten about the agency of CEE states and generally envisioned them as a buffer zone between Europe and Russia. The argument according to which the world fell back onto a pattern of restored great power habitualities instead of capitalizing on the common security opening at the end of the Cold War thus conveniently glides over the perspective of the states in-between the major players.

But this story remains yet to be told as part of the modern history of the many endings of Cold War by the contemporary history-oriented IR scholars, seeking to expand the IR’s historical grasp and imagination. Alike to the Cold War and its many endings being perceived differently in the centre and various peripheries of the world,⁵⁴ the war in Ukraine challenges the discipline of International Relations with a difficult postcolonial moment. It calls the IR to systematically face up to the tensions between an imperial order and a nation-state order in its long-neglected East European periphery. It also forces the field to probe the moral weight of asking another state to serve as one’s buffer zone. If “the Cold War is what we make of it,”⁵⁵ so is logically the end of the Cold War, the post-Cold War international order, and the post-Ukraine war one. But the IR’s traditional understanding of the “we” needs a critical revision.

Conclusion

The current Ukrainian freedom war is proving the point of reality being what we make of it on a daily basis, as the Ukrainian resistance to Russia’s aggression has exceeded any outsiders’ expectations prior to 24 February 2022. The hard-nosed realist truisms and its seemingly more benign variants about the imperative to compromise for global peace persist until human agents decide to contest them. As any war, Ukraine’s struggle against Russia’s aggression also reminds us that war is not an abstract board game – as it has, alas, traditionally been conceived as through much of the classical IR theorizing.

⁵³ “Was NATO Enlargement a Mistake? *Foreign Affairs* Asks the Experts,” *Foreign Affairs*, 19 April 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ask-the-experts/2022-04-19/was-nato-enlargement-mistake>

⁵⁴ Heonik Kwon, *The Other Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

⁵⁵ Stefano Guzzini, “The Cold War is what we make of it’: When Peace Research Meets Constructivism in International Relations,” in *Contemporary Security Analysis and Copenhagen Peace Research*, ed. Stefano Guzzini and Dietrich Jung (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 56–68.

Instead, it is an intensely existential experience for those dragged into this reality.⁵⁶ For the bystanders, the war is mostly a tragic spectacle in the age of constant news and an overabundance of images, with a tangible emotional toll as well, albeit of course not quite at a comparable level to those directly affected by the violence. The least the onlookers can do is to learn to empathize better with the perspective of the murdered, and not of the murderers⁵⁷ – politically, analytically and disciplinarily.

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⁵⁶ Christine Sylvester, *War as Experience: Contributions from International Relations and Feminist Analysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

⁵⁷ Andrzej Wajda, *Katyn* (2007).