

# Historians As Enablers? Historiography, Imperialism, and the Legitimization of Russian Aggression

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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## Résumé de l'article

This essay raises the issue of historians' responsibility to the communities that they study. While some purported version of history has been central to the Kremlin's justifications for Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the region's historians have failed to make a stand against this misuse of history. Moreover, in many instances they endorsed and disseminated the Kremlin's narratives about Ukraine's past and present. Aiming to explain the anti-Ukrainian biases that have become well entrenched in both Western academia and Western public opinion, this essay examines the regional subfield of area studies, to which Ukrainian studies are usually relegated, as well as the expectations and agenda of the Western-educated public. I argue that the subfield is dominated by Russian studies and frequently uncritically adopts the positions, concepts, and explanations of Russia's imperialist ideologists. At the same time, Western public opinion, while opening up to the historical injustices committed by Western empires, still sees the world through retrograde imperial lenses. The essay also discusses in detail what happens when researchers shaped by both these trends write Ukrainian history. Looking for ways forward, I suggest rethinking the issue of intellectual responsibility and "de-imperialization" of Ukraine's Western historiography.

# Historians As Enablers? Historiography, Imperialism, and the Legitimization of Russian Aggression<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This essay raises the issue of historians' responsibility to the communities that they study. While some purported version of history has been central to the Kremlin's justifications for Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the region's historians have failed to make a stand against this misuse of history. Moreover, in many instances they endorsed and disseminated the Kremlin's narratives about Ukraine's past and present. Aiming to explain the anti-Ukrainian biases that have become well entrenched in both Western academia and Western public opinion, this essay examines the regional subfield of *area studies*, to which Ukrainian studies are usually relegated, as well as the expectations and agenda of the Western-educated public. I argue that the subfield is dominated by Russian studies and frequently uncritically adopts the positions, concepts, and explanations of Russia's imperialist ideologists. At the same time, Western public opinion, while opening up to the historical injustices committed by Western empires, still sees the world through retrograde imperial lenses. The essay also discusses in detail what happens when researchers shaped by both these trends write Ukrainian history. Looking for ways forward, I suggest rethinking the issue of intellectual responsibility and "de-imperialization" of Ukraine's Western historiography.

**Keywords:** Ukrainian historiography, Russian imperialism, Russian aggression, Ukrainian nationalism, Western academia.

BLAME THE VICTIM, OR "MERELY ANOTHER NARRATIVE"

**W**hen in February 2022 Putin escalated his war against Ukraine to a full-scale invasion and genocide, academic journals scrambled to put together "special digital issues" of Ukraine-related articles from their archives. In the special issue published by *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*—a reputable peer-reviewed periodical that claims academic expertise in Ukrainian history—we find a repeat of its 2015 forum "The

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Ukrainian Crisis, Past and Present.” As I pointed out in my response to *Kritika*’s forum back in 2015, the articles published there fall short of the basic standards expected of historical scholarship (Zayarnyuk, “A Revolution’s History”). The tendentious language of the forum’s contributions duplicated, to a large extent, Putin’s propaganda. In the middle of a war started by Russia—in the wake of egregious violation of international law by Russia and an annexation unprecedented in the history of post-World War II Europe—the rhetoric and explanations in the *Kritika* forum’s articles gallingly shift the blame from Russia to Ukraine and its alleged problems with collective memory, identity, and nationalism.

Instead of looking at the brutal and unprovoked war that Russia started in Ukraine and the jingoistic frenzy in Russia that accompanied the war, historians continued to discuss torchlit processions and black-and-red flags in Ukraine, as if these symbols and aesthetics were the region’s most important problems and a terminal diagnosis for Ukraine. Instead of looking at Russian operatives and operations in Ukraine, at the millions of people taken hostage by Russia in the puppet pseudo-republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, and at the mass exodus of dispossessed and traumatized people from Russian-occupied areas, the contributors to *Kritika*’s forum debated the Donbas’ supposedly strong “regional Russian” identity and promoted the narrative of a spontaneous and grass-roots anti-Ukrainian movement in the region. Instead of verifying their evidence and subjecting it to basic documentary scrutiny, those historians used doctored citations, commissioned polls, and arbitrarily drawn numbers.

Apparently, *Kritika* editors are willing to stake their professional reputation on the trope of the “Ukrainian crisis” instead of “Russia’s war,” as the most suitable explanatory framework for understanding not only the revanchist Russian intervention of 2014 but also the brutal all-out invasion of Ukraine by Russia that began in February 2022. Mykola Riabchuk argues that the discourse of the “Ukrainian crisis” in Western academic publications serves only one function: “to obscure the real role of Russia” and to blame “Ukraine’s choice.”<sup>2</sup> Academic experts participating in such a discourse are hardly neutral observers or bystanders in relation to the dramatic and bloody events unfolding before our eyes. Their position is akin to that of Western governments that have tolerated or funded Russia’s aggressive behaviour toward its neighbour along with the Russian government’s crimes against its own citizens and abroad. Without explicitly supporting or endorsing the Russian regime, both academics and governments have played the classic role of *enablers*: they created, allowed, and/or sustained a framework in which Russia’s actions have been seen as either legitimate or

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this essay are my own.

at least acceptable and tolerable. The prevailing academic discourse has served to assure the Russian government of its impunity and emboldened its aggressive and violent political course.

Historians have played a special role in the academic enabling of Russian crimes because history is absolutely central to the ideology that underpins Russia's genocidal war in Ukraine. Putin's justifications of Russian aggression have repeatedly resorted to history and purported historical arguments. Putin's decision to escalate the invasion was preceded by his infamous article "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians." On the very eve of the invasion, he reiterated his denial of the existence of the Ukrainian nation, supporting it with references to the past (Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation"). It is small comfort that the unprovoked and shockingly brutal Russian invasion and the absurdity of Putin's claims about the "Nazi" nature of the current, democratically elected Ukrainian government have helped to discredit Putin's false historical narratives. While Timothy Snyder rightly said that no academic historian should be engaging with Putin's version of history as intellectually defensible, I would argue that Putin's claims about the history of Ukraine did resonate with broad segments of academic discourse and were ultimately derailed only by Ukraine's determined resistance. Indeed, I would assert that without this resistance and despite the best efforts of a few influential historians, Putin's narratives might have been either upheld or tacitly accepted by both the Western academic community and the Western public.

Putin's obsession with the history of Ukraine as well as his attempts to manipulate the historical narrative were already evident in 2014 without any reaction from the majority of the region's historians (Zayarnyuk, "Putin's Lessons"). Even in 2022, a month after Russia's all-out invasion—a month of massive, well-documented Russian war crimes—Sheila Fitzpatrick, the doyenne of Soviet history in the West, saw Putin's claims about Ukraine as a legitimate "competing narrative" and lamented that President Zelens'kyi succeeded in "seizing control of the story in Western media" while the Russians "failed utterly to get their message across." This paper will demonstrate that historians are culpable for the narratives that have been used as historical justification for Russia's aggression. Indeed, they helped to create an intellectual framework in which Putin could make his claims about Ukrainian history with a high degree of credibility and expectation of acceptance. This paper also seeks to understand how this situation became possible and why scholars of Ukrainian history have failed in their duty of academic responsibility to the community they study.

Back in 2015, I struggled to explain the ease with which professional historians embraced a one-sided interpretation of the events of the 2013–14 Euromaidan and subsequent Russian invasion of Crimea and the Donbas, showing no qualms about blaming Ukraine for the most traumatic event in

the country's post-World War II history. One could see how Russia-based historians succumbed to the temptation to ally with their state, co-shaping history instead of merely studying it. We all witnessed the trajectory of those Russian academics who joined Putin's think tanks and government bodies, becoming Putin's ideologists and apologists for his policies. Alexey Miller, for instance, started as Russia's only reputable historian studying modern Ukraine. His *opus magnum*, written in the 1990s, reveals a barely detectible contempt for those concerned about the preservation and survival of that minority culture and regret that the nineteenth-century Russian Empire was *not modern enough* to assimilate its Ukrainian population (Miller, *The Ukrainian Question*). After joining the Valdai Discussion Club and that club's Council on Defence and Foreign Policy, Miller turned into a combatant of Putin's "cultural front" and a critic of Ukraine's allegedly "nationalist" "historical policies." By the time Russia was amassing its troops at the Ukrainian borders in 2021, Miller was defending and "developing" Putin's claim that the Ukrainian state was invented by Lenin, as if it were a legitimate historical interpretation ("Novaia etika' i istoriia Ukrainy"). Similar behaviour by Western historians—who live in democratic countries, enjoy academic freedom and the security of tenured appointments, and have unhindered access to all kinds of information—was rather more difficult to explain, especially since many of them either identify with or are sympathetic to the Left and therefore should be committed to equality, justice, and social responsibility.

In 2015, I was inclined to excuse the obvious myopia of these "experts" by the limitations inherent in the historical profession. They might have followed social media uncritically and become easy prey for fraudsters and "political technologists" of the digital age. I also suspected that they relied too heavily on their own social networks, including information from their Russian friends and acquaintances, and they were too immersed in the historical contexts that they studied and too quick to draw direct connections with the present, failing to acknowledge changes and contingencies.

However, as I worked through the stream of academic publications about Ukraine that has been churned out since 2014, I realized that the tendency to blame the victim and justify Russia's war was no mere oversight. No unbiased observer could remain blind to the fact that for over twenty years of its independent existence Ukraine was a remarkably peaceful country, steadily reducing its military budget and army, while Russia fought war after war, both on its own territory and outside its borders. Ukraine remained a true democracy with contested elections and free media, while Russia solidified into a repressive authoritarian regime that assassinated its enemies at home and abroad. While Ukraine was working toward decentralization, granting autonomy to Crimea, Russia under Putin became

a federation in name only, tightly controlled by the “power vertical.” Until 2014 Ukraine saw virtually no political violence, while Russia became a breeding ground for hate crime, sadism, and brutality in its army and various police forces.

#### EMPATHY, ANTIPATHY AND TAINTED CONCEPTS

Why was Ukraine’s bumpy but peaceful negotiation of conflicting and traumatic memories so inimical to historians, while they were ready to tolerate the embrace of aggressive militarism by the Russian state and society, celebrating state power and even weapons of mass destruction? Why was Ukraine’s decision to call the Holodomor with its four million starved-to-death victims a genocide so unacceptable to some historians, who rallied against this “nationalistic manipulation” of collective memory? As Andrii Portnov demonstrates, the actual historical events of the Holodomor easily qualify as a genocide, and rejecting the term in this case constitutes as much a political decision as endorsing it (“Der Holodomor als Genozid”). The same historians have shown little to no concern about Russia’s instrumentalization of the Allied victory in World War II, the creeping justification of state violence and mass murder happening there. How could historians ignore the resurgent cult of Stalin in Russia—whose grave and bust remain in Moscow’s Red Square, in Russia’s symbolic centre, daily covered with heaps of fresh flowers—while being so concerned with the alleged “cult” of Stepan Bandera in Ukraine?

As the Russo-Ukrainian war in the Donbas dragged on, I realized that a strong anti-Ukrainian sentiment was well entrenched in Western academia. I would even call it “Ukrainophobia,” except that those who share the sentiment do not really fear Ukrainian nationalists. On the contrary, they pick on Ukraine and Ukrainians because they know that they can do so with impunity. Moreover, this sentiment is not limited to Russian (or “Eurasian”) Studies. I watched with dismay as colleagues from the University of Manitoba, Radhika Desai and Alan Freeman, went to a conference in occupied Crimea, in violation of the laws of Ukraine and internationally recognized borders. I doubt that they would have dared to flout Canadian or US laws in the same fashion. The same professors, in 2016, published an article titled “The Conflict in Ukraine and Contemporary Imperialism” (Desai et al.) Make no mistake here: the imperialism they want to talk about is not Russian, it is American. So-called academic experts who do not even speak Ukrainian thought that they were qualified to define the Revolution of Dignity as a Western coup or characterize Russia-backed separatists as “rebels” fighting for social equality (Desai et al. 489). It is symptomatic that in their only reference to a real expert on Ukraine, they managed to misspell

the latter's name (Desai et al. 490).<sup>3</sup> Writing in the third year of Russia's aggression against Ukraine and during the Russian airstrikes that were killing thousands of civilians in Syria, Desai, Freeman, and Kagarlitsky were assuring their readers that "Russia's capacity to undertake foreign adventurism is tiny" (505). (A Princeton-based historian of Russia, Stephen Kotkin, made a similar assessment in 2008, claiming that "today's authoritarian Russia and China are not militarily aggressive" ["Myth," 44]. At least he said that before the Russian invasion of Georgia, not after.)

While Russia was finalizing preparations for its all-out invasion of 2022, many of the region's historians kept downplaying the threat. In their social media posts (some of them now deleted), the historians competed in glib demurs about the satellite images of Russian troops, their numbers, and maps published in Western media that showed possible invasion routes. This mood was contagious, and the comments of some Western pundits and lawmakers were equally deplorable. In particular, at the end of January 2022, while foreign investors were fleeing Ukraine, the Canadian government still refused to sell weapons to Ukraine. When the Canadian government managed to approve a loan of a mere 120 million dollars toward Ukraine's economic development, Leah Gazan, an NDP MP from Winnipeg, tweeted that "the Canadian government's 120 million of funding for an anti-Semitic, neo-nazi & fascist militia is horrifying" (ProudLakota). As Ukraine was facing an existential threat, an MP from a Canadian province in which every sixth citizen is of Ukrainian descent libelled the entire nation as anti-Semites and neo-Nazis. Gazan has yet to apologize to Ukrainians for this tweet.

Even when the 2022 invasion started and Russian missiles were raining on Ukrainian cities, the doyen of Western historians studying the region, Ronald Grigor Suny, was repeating Putin's mantras, insisting on "a forceful appeal to Ukraine and the West to recognize the security interests of Russia and provide guarantees that there will be no further moves by NATO toward Russia and into Ukraine." As a historian, Suny is well aware of George F. Kennan's "Long Telegram," which explains Russia's alleged security concerns by their "neurotic view of world affairs." Moreover, many experts have convincingly argued that Putin's "security concerns" were merely a pretext (Pifer). There has been no evidence that either NATO or Ukraine ever threatened the security of the Russian Federation in any meaningful sense. As for actual acts of aggression, real historical events show that the only security threat to the region in the last thirty years has been from Russia. The threat of Russian neo-imperial expansionism explains the movement of Russia's neighbours toward NATO much better than any imagined "NATO

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<sup>3</sup> "Yekelchuk" instead of Yekelchyk.

moves.” Russia’s behaviour is a classic example of Joseph Schumpeter’s definition of imperialism: “aggressiveness for its own sake,” which is otherwise impossible to explain by logical factors such as the aggressor party’s concrete goals and interests (5).

While the anti-Ukrainian bias of numerous “academic experts” is easy to demonstrate, it also needs explaining. Already in 2015, Tomasz Hen-Konarski noticed that some historians posing as experts on Ukraine and publishing influential opinion pieces were in fact historians of Russia, who do not read Ukrainian historiography and are not familiar with Ukrainian history (713–15). Since the beginning of the 2022 Russian invasion, numerous Ukrainian scholars who detected a widespread anti-Ukrainian bias among Western intellectuals also identified a problem in the structures and frameworks that shape the multidisciplinary subfield of regional studies in Western academia (Kulyk; Khromeychuk).

The name of the journal mentioned at the start of this paper is itself symptomatic of a serious and chronic problem with the field. The “Eurasia” part of the scholarly title *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* has nothing to do with the purely geographic notion of Eurasia as a continent. We know for a fact that there are no articles on Vietnam, India, Iraq, or Spain in this journal. Thus, the “Eurasia” in this journal’s name seems to refer not to the actual continent (though even in that case the title would be pretentiously absurd) but to a land in the dreams of Russian imperialists—a space they imagine as destined for domination and colonization by Russia.

We find this space in Fedor Tiutchev’s poem “Russkaia geografiia” (“Russian Geography”), dated 1848–49:

Seven internal seas and seven great rivers / From the Nile to the Neva, from  
the Elbe to China, / From the Volga to the Euphrates, the Ganges to the  
Danube. / This is the Russian Empire and it will never pass away, / Just as  
the Spirit foretold and Daniel prophesied.

The founders of Russian “Eurasianism” conceptualized this space of Russian imperial expansion as “Eurasia.” They acknowledged frankly that their Eurasia was “a special cultural world led by Russia”; it was “Eurasia-Russia,” which aspired to “the leading and dominant role in the series of human cultures” (“Evrasiistvo” 134). It is no coincidence that today’s best-known Eurasianist thinker is the fascist pseudo-philosopher Aleksandr Dugin.

If a German history journal was to come up with an analogous title, the closest parallel would be *Explorations in the History of Germany and Its Lebensraum*. The origins of both “Lebensraum” and “Eurasia” (as cultural or geopolitical entities different from the purely geographic continental



landmass) can be traced back to the same intellectual currents, the same period, and the same pseudo-science of geopolitics. The use of such a tainted concept is symptomatic of a field that has failed so far to come to terms with its own political origins and heritage, its blind spots, hierarchies, and complicity. The fact that *Kritika* has also published a fair share of first-rate historical scholarship does not somehow grant it absolution for using this ethically problematic historical concept. It is especially ironic if one considers how strongly the articles in *Kritika's* special issue condemn the presence of allegedly compromised historical symbols, figures, and slogans in the Ukrainian public discourse and public space. Given the implications of the term “Eurasian,” perhaps the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) and its flagship journal should rethink their choice of name.

Since the beginning of Russia’s all-out invasion of Ukraine, several persuasive appeals to decolonize the field of Russian or “Eurasian” studies have appeared (Portnov, “Full Historiographical Legitimacy”; Mogilner, “There Can Be No ‘Vne’”; Smith-Peter). While decolonization could be a good starting point, the problems with Western expertise about Ukraine are not limited to just colonialism or the regional subfield represented by the ASEEES. This subfield is part and parcel of the broader global academia, dominated by the universities and research institutions of the developed West, and, in turn, incorporates Ukrainian studies proper as one of its subfields. To explain the pervasiveness of the anti-Ukrainian bias, we should consider all three levels.

#### LIMITS OF ANTI-EUROCENTRISM AND IMPERIAL IMAGINATION

Let us start with the broadest one: the Western academia and Western intellectuals who are *not* experts on the region. Even though their opinion about Ukraine and the region in general is informed by the work of experts who do specialize in the area, the transfer of knowledge in this case is not unidirectional. Prevailing concerns and agendas of the broader intellectual public, in their turn, shape research priorities and activities in the more narrow, region-specific subfields.

In the developed West, coming to terms with the dark and insufficiently addressed aspects of its past has been conceptualized as overcoming the “Eurocentric focus of our predecessors” (Wickett 15). In Canada, Eurocentrism has been blamed for the marginalization if not outright suppression of Indigenous history and Indigenous studies. Similar debates have been taking place in the United States (Wasserstrom). The Europe of those critics’ imagination is hardly the European continent whose geographic centre is located in Ukraine or Lithuania. While Ukraine is

frequently assigned the blame for Europe's sins, its history and culture have hardly been the focus of serious North American historical education and research.

I suspect that hardly any prominent critics of Eurocentrism have ever actually travelled to Ukraine or Lithuania, even though their academic itineraries take them regularly to London and Paris, Berlin and Vienna. The extant "Eurocentric" research and knowledge as well as anti-Eurocentric reactions to them are often tied to the historical experiences exemplified by these very centres of transatlantic modernity. When the West thinks of the historical injustices that are inseparable from that modernity and its own identity, it looks at the enslavement and extermination inflicted by the selfsame, familiar centres of transatlantic modernity—in most cases across the colour line.

Structural racism, which can be traced back to black slavery as one of the foundations of the transatlantic capitalist economy, as well as the subjugation and murder of Indigenous populations are inextricable and crucial elements of the historical experience of this transatlantic modernity. Since that modernity is often labelled "European," the Western public approaches Ukraine as co-culpable of "Europe's" crimes by default. Moreover, since Eastern Europe is also seen as archaic and unreformed, Ukraine is preconceived as a place where the old demons of Europe, long since exorcised in the West, still thrive. In a way, until 2022 Ukraine had been associated with the role that since the eighteenth century Western intellectuals had assigned to "Eastern Europe": a backward and permanently underdeveloped periphery, stuck at a stage long left behind by the rest of Europe (Wolff 34–35). However, this imagining was also accompanied by ignorance about the realities of Ukraine's present and Ukraine's past—experiences that indeed were markedly different from those of Western Europe.

Even before the destruction wrought by the 2022 Russian invasion, taking GDP per capita as a measure of wealth placed Ukraine as not only Europe's poorest country but also lagging behind most of Latin America. The birth pangs of transatlantic modernity in Ukraine resulted in serfdom, prompted by rising grain prices in Western Europe that were caused by the influx of bullion from the recently conquered Americas. In Ukraine with its fertile soils, the serfdom manifested as a brutal system of merciless exploitation and nearly unlimited power of landlords over their subjects. Its central element was the serfs' unpaid labour, extracted through direct coercion, violence, and abuse. This system lasted as long as southern slavery in the United States, being abolished in the Russian Empire only in 1861. Earlier still, actual slavery was also an integral part of Ukraine's modern historical experience, leaving an indelible mark on its culture and folklore—but unlike Europe's maritime Atlantic countries, Ukraine provided the

supply for this brutal trade. From the late fifteenth to late eighteenth centuries Ukraine was a hunting ground for Turkic slavers of the steppes, who would sell Ukrainian slaves in the slave markets of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Considering Ukrainian nationalism, let us recall that it appeared in the nineteenth century as an emancipatory movement of the cultural community, which had been reduced to oppressed and enslaved commoners. It was about the emancipation of a culture conceptualized as one of a socially inferior people, supposedly unsuitable for the pursuit of either knowledge or beauty. Ukrainian nationalism was about a two-pronged emancipation of the Ukrainian community: social and cultural. It was a “nationalism of the plebeian nation,” to use the term coined by the great Ukrainian socialist thinker Mykhailo Drahomanov. Ukrainian nationalism claimed sovereignty for the cultural community that had been divided by the imperial border between the Habsburg and Romanov empires and defied that border. In this, Ukrainian nationalism both resembled and differed from other colonial nationalisms. While the confluence of the social and national in Ukraine’s emancipatory struggles resembled that of many other colonies and semi-colonies of European empires (Graziosi), its refusal to accept imperial boundaries and its efforts to create a nation on the basis of a cultural community that stretched across imperial borders were unusual from the global colonial perspective. However, this was also potentially the most viable solution to the problems of cultural oppression, cultural inequality, and cultural sovereignty.

In popular use and in the works of some scholars, the complex semantics of the term “nationalism” are often effaced. Nationalism is often understood as an idea that assigns ultimate value to a nation and the priority of national interests over all others. Such a use of the term “nationalism” obscures the fact that nationalism is not just an ideology, not just a political movement; it is a global process that transformed the modern world, akin to capitalism or industrialization. It produced the world of nation-states, the world we still live in. It has also transformed our cultural and political imagination, creating the global landscape of “both inherently limited and sovereign” communities, to use Benedict Anderson’s famous definition (6). To help avoid confusion over nationalism’s many meanings and connotations, in Ukrainian the nineteenth-century struggle for cultural emancipation, as well as the armed struggle in defence of Ukrainian statehood in which Ukrainians of various political persuasions participated, would not be called “nationalist” (“*natsionalistychni*”) but rather “national” (“*natsional'ni*”). English-speakers may find this distinction useful in avoiding the trap of narratives where everything distinctly Ukrainian is labelled as “nationalist” and every assertion of Ukrainian distinctiveness is reduced to nationalism.

Back in the nineteenth century, Drahomanov was trying to combat a similar misrepresentation of the Ukrainian socialists as “nationalists”:

One cannot call “nationalist” the wish to work independently and on the basis of intimate knowledge of local conditions, the wish to teach people universal ideas in their own language and not a foreign one. Otherwise, all the groups of the International should be called “nationalist” . . . . The only difference between Ukrainian and, let’s say, French socialists is that the French state has existed since ancient times and without interruption. (426)

In the case of Ukrainians, the various imperial centres that laid claim to them and their land were not necessarily Western. For the last three centuries Moscow and St. Petersburg have loomed at least as large. A completely different optic governs Western perceptions of these capitals. Western powers have seen Russia alternately as an underdog, a rival, or a threat, but regardless, Western intellectuals of the last two centuries have overwhelmingly looked at Russia with fascination. These intellectuals have seen a relatable and at the same time palpably different Russia as an attractive alternative to the West—sometimes even as a solution to the West’s problems, which are so pressing locally and seemingly absent over there.

Historians are no exception. In Kotkin’s memorable turn of phrase, the Soviet experience could serve as “a mirror in which the various elements of modernity found outside the USSR are displayed in alternately undeveloped, exaggerated, and familiar forms” (“1991” 387). Arguably, an important and much overlooked element of the “familiar” is imperialism. The power of the state and the status of a great power—both have been an important part of imperial Russia and the Soviet Union’s appeal to Western intellectuals. George Orwell noticed the fascination of the British Left with foreign “real” powers as the only viable alternative to the state of their own:

Left-wing intellectuals do not think of themselves as nationalist because as a rule they transfer their loyalty to some foreign country, such as the USSR, or indulge it in a merely negative form out of hatred of their own country and its rulers. But their outlook is essentially nationalist in that they think entirely in terms of power politics and competitive prestige. (297–98)

Trying to overcome the limitations of Eurocentrism, searching for alternatives to the global domination of Western capital, Western intellectuals have oftentimes placed their hopes in an alternative imperial centre, precisely because its imperial character is so familiar. The shared culture of imperial cosmopolitanism of empires’ elites is now centuries long. When directed eastward toward the Russian capitals, the Western gaze often skips over the “non-historic” peoples of Central and Eastern Europe, a Hegelian concept picked up by Friedrich Engels that is still informing the

political imagination of the Western Left (Rosdolsky). In this imagination, those peoples are backwardness incarnate, in a land of archaic obscurantist beliefs and cannibalistic ideologies that imperial metropolises had left in the past. In the circular logic of this imagination, nationalism is one of those archaic ideologies of exclusivity and common ancestry, while any assertion of independent identity by “non-historic peoples,” any rebellion against imperial masters, becomes (mis)labelled as nationalism.

In recent decades we see this dismissive imperialist gaze in many Western academic publications on Ukrainian history, shaping their focus, interpretation, and narrative. It forms the basis for the misrepresentations that have been fed to the Western-educated public with the mediation of Slavic/Eurasian studies. Putin’s fundamental claims about Ukrainian history have been legitimized by tendentious works produced at this level that support his main ideas: that there is no Ukraine other than a regional variant of Russia, that Ukrainian identity and history are an invention of Ukrainian nationalism, and that nationalism equals xenophobia and Nazism. A similar scheme can be found in the writings of several historians working on Ukrainian “nationalism.” The irony is that these historians are relentless in their insistence on responsibility and accountability in representations of the past while failing to notice their own complicity in Putin’s project of solving the Ukrainian question once and for all. Some of those historians, whose tendentious work I have criticized elsewhere (Zayarnyuk, “Paradox Illusions”), have openly contributed to known Russian propaganda outlets (Amar). Others were instrumental in preparing the ground for Putin’s claims with their framing of Ukrainian history. In many cases we encounter a simple discursive operation: the reduction of Ukrainian identity to Ukrainian nationalism, conflating the Ukrainian movement of national emancipation with right-wing Ukrainian nationalist politics under a single category of “Ukrainian nationalism” and (mis)representing the latter as an ideology of groupness, exclusivity, and hatred.

#### REDUCTIONISM AND DEMONIZATION AT WORK

Let us take a look at how this intellectual manipulation works in a specific case. Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe’s *Stepan Bandera: The Life and Afterlife of a Ukrainian Nationalist: Fascism, Genocide and Cult* achieved a broad public resonance. In 2014 the Heinrich Böll Foundation, the German Academic Exchange Service, and the German Embassy in Kyiv decided to enlighten Ukrainians about their own history by organizing and funding a series of Rossoliński-Liebe’s lectures in Ukraine. Perhaps the idea was that the book would help Ukraine to develop a more critical approach to its own past, especially the radical nationalism exemplified by Stepan Bandera. After

Ukrainian right-wing groups opposed the event and Rossoliński-Liebe claimed to have received telephone threats, most of the lectures were cancelled. The international academic community and global media raised the alarm and expressed their concerns about the state of academic freedom and freedom of speech in Ukraine.

This is not the place for a comprehensive review of Rossoliński-Liebe's book; instead, I would like to focus on how it presents to readers a broad outline of modern Ukrainian history. Rossoliński-Liebe's narrative about Bandera begins in Eastern Galicia ca. 1909, the year of Bandera's birth. Describing Bandera's people as "Ukrainians," Rossoliński-Liebe uses quotation marks to allege that these "people began to perceive themselves as Ukrainians as a result of the invention of Ukrainian national identity" (15). We note that he does not use quotation marks when talking about Poles or Russians of the time, creating the impression that unlike the case of Ukrainians, the national identity of those two groups was not invented but natural. This is a dirty trick intended for readers not well versed in the literature on nationalism and unfamiliar with the idea that all modern national identities are invented. Polish peasants at the beginning of the twentieth century identified with various ethnic subgroups, such as "*górale*" or "*mazury*," and had to be convinced that they were Poles. As the future peasant leader Wincenty Witos recalled, in his Galician village "the majority of peasants feared Poland tremendously, believing that with its return serfdom will come back surely" (132). In reality, Polish authors at the beginning of the twentieth century observed that national identification among the Ukrainian peasants was much stronger than among their Polish counterparts (Bujak 84).

Rossoliński-Liebe claims that the very name "*Ukraïna*" "as a term for a nation" was an invention of Ukrainian nationalists and "only came into use in Galicia in about 1900" (50). Neither of these statements is true. First of all, "*Ukraïna*" was used extensively and simultaneously with "*Rus*" as far back as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to denote the land and the people of present-day Ukraine (Yakovenko). In 1909, like in 1861, Galician Ukrainians used the term "*Rus'-Ukraïna*" as an official designation of their nation (Sereda 291-97). The first Ukrainian political party, founded in Galicia in 1890, identified itself as "Ruthenian-Ukrainian." Moreover, when in 1848 Ruthenian patriots in Galicia used terms like Rus', Southern Rus', and Little Rus', they used them in contradistinction to Northern Rus' or Great Rus' and Muscovy, indisputably denoting a separate national community (Turii 64). Apparently, Rossoliński-Liebe is tying "Ukraine" with "invention" in order to stress the alleged artificiality of Ukrainian identity and the Ukrainian movement. (Throughout this work he uses the same rhetorical strategy to tie "Ukraine" with "fascism.")

Not only are Ukraine and the Ukrainian nation presented as a twentieth-century invention, according to Rossoliński-Liebe the border separating the Russian and Austrian empires “caused Galician Ukrainians to become a quite different people from the Ukrainians in the Russian Empire” (49). Somehow the author’s apparent belief in innate differences impressed upon the population by political regimes again applies only to Ukrainians but not to the Poles divided during the same period—not only between Austria and Russia but also in Prussia (Germany). Stylizing himself as an expert in history as well as in linguistics, Rossoliński-Liebe posits that “the Galician dialect of Ukrainian differed substantially from the Ukrainian language in Russian Ukraine” (49). If it actually existed, the Galician “dialect” would be a major discovery in Ukrainian linguistics, since linguists have always considered the languages on both sides of the imperial borders to be essentially identical (Bevzenko 7). Moreover, Galicia and particularly its mountains are home to a prodigious number of significantly distinct local idioms that no linguist would ever lump into a single dialect.

The author argues that the borders split the Ukrainian ethnos in the nineteenth century and then also argues that the disappearance of those borders in the twentieth century only exacerbated the division: even though both ended up in Soviet Ukraine, “Galician” Ukrainians became even more different from their “eastern” brethren (Rossoliński-Liebe 50). To resolve this apparent contradiction, Rossoliński-Liebe turns to culture: “Galician Ukrainian culture was for centuries deeply influenced by Polish culture, while eastern Ukrainian culture was strongly influenced by Russian culture” (52). Any true historian of the region would recognize this statement’s absurdity because there is no single and apparently national “culture” that lasts unchanged for centuries. Numerous regional sociological, confessional, and linguistic differences in modern Ukraine can hardly be reduced to the Galician/“Eastern” divide, especially since Rossoliński-Liebe’s “eastern Ukrainian culture” apparently encompasses regions as diverse as Volhynia and Donetsk, Polissia and the South, villages of Central Ukraine and industrial cities of the Donetsk region.

In terms of the influences that came to Ukraine with Catholicism and the Polish language, they were just as strong in central Ukraine as they were in Galicia. In fact, the Ukrainian eparchies of Lviv and Przemyśl remained Orthodox for another century after the Kyiv eparchy accepted the 1596 Church Union of Berestia. Moreover, the Ruthenian-Ukrainian tradition had co-shaped the culture of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which should not be equated with Polish culture. This was a historical fact that even nineteenth-century Polish historians acknowledged (see, for instance, Bobrzyński). Maciej Janowski has shown convincingly that blindness to the Ukrainian heritage in Polish culture is typical for proponents of national

purity, be they Poland's Communist-era leaders or nationalist politicians of today.

Having posited the non-existence of Ukrainians in the 1900s, Rossoliński-Liebe turns toward those who "invented" them, whom he labels "Ukrainian nationalists." He alleges that already in the nineteenth century the nationalism "became increasingly hostile to Poles, Jews, and Russians," thriving "in eastern Galicia rather than in eastern Ukraine" because the "political liberalism of the Habsburg empire . . . made Galician Ukrainians more nationalist, populist, and mystical than eastern Ukrainians" (Rossoliński-Liebe 54). This is another statement whose absurdity should be self-evident even to novices in the field of modern Ukrainian history, but apparently neither the reviewers of the manuscript nor its publishers were concerned by it.

Rossoliński-Liebe's claims are refuted by his own narrative. All the "Ukrainian nationalist" thinkers at the turn of the twentieth century that he discusses are "eastern Ukrainians." According to him, those thinkers contributed to the never-explained formation of Ukrainian "heroic modernity," which found its expression in the writings of "the nationalist extremist" Mykola Mikhnov's'kyi, "although it derives from the thoughts of such activists as Mykhailo Hrushevsky, Mykhailo Drahomanov, and Ivan Franko" (55). I am not sure how Mikhnov's'kyi's thought could derive from Hrushev's'kyi since they were contemporaries and usually political opponents. Both Drahomanov and Hrushev's'kyi were socialists and would not subscribe to Mikhnov's'kyi's ideology. The only thing we learn about Hrushev's'kyi and Drahomanov's ideas in this book is that Hrushev's'kyi used the term "race" in his writings, referring to anthropological types present in Ukrainian territory. Since Hrushev's'kyi was "claiming that the Ukrainian people had ancient origins," Rossoliński-Liebe condescendingly uses quotations marks around the word "academic" in his description of Hrushev's'kyi's oeuvre (55). Surely tracing the origins of peoples back in time using available evidence is a sound academic exercise, and Hrushev's'kyi is regarded as one of Ukraine's pre-eminent historians by both proponents and opponents of his interpretations. His idea that Slavic-speaking tribes documented between the Dnipro and the Dnister in the sixth and seventh centuries were most likely the ancestors of modern Ukrainians was no more questionable than Jules Michelet's ideas that Gauls were the ancestors of the modern French or Polish historians' ideas that various Lechitic tribes were the ancestors of modern Poles. Those historians—who, unlike Rossoliński-Liebe, have actually studied medieval Rus'—have never challenged Hrushev's'kyi's academic credentials.

When it comes to the "extreme" nationalist Mykola Mikhnov's'kyi, the author tells us that his "main aim was a biological and racial marking of the Ukrainian territories or the 'living space' of the Ukrainians" (Rossoliński-



Liebe 56). His was allegedly a “social Darwinist concept based on the assumption that there exists a Ukrainian race” (Rossoliński-Liebe 56). Mikhnovs'kyi's slogan “Ukraine for Ukrainians” is given as the ultimate proof of his xenophobic nationalism. Mikhnovs'kyi allegedly “went so far in his ethno-biological concepts” as to demand that Ukrainians not marry foreigners (Rossoliński-Liebe 56).

Mikhnovs'kyi and his Ukrainian People's Party had a minuscule following and belonged to the right-wing fringe of Ukrainian politics. Politicians who belonged to the Ukrainian mainstream at the turn of the twentieth century harshly criticized Mikhnovs'kyi for his nationalism. However, even in this case Rossoliński-Liebe's labels are nothing short of libel. Mikhnovs'kyi's nationalism was strikingly free of biological or racial, and therefore Social Darwinist, connotations, and there was no *Lebensraum* in his vocabulary, either. In Mikhnovs'kyi's thought, nationalism was a social phenomenon and a political movement that defined the twentieth century. The only classification of nationalisms and nations in Mikhnovs'kyi's oeuvre is very binary: there are oppressed nations and there are oppressor nations. Mikhnovs'kyi's nationalist ethics require one to support the nationalism of the oppressed and to keep in check the chauvinism of oppressors. In his own words, “nationalism is the angel of revenge for dominating and exploiting a nation, the angel of revenge for the downtrodden” (Mikhnovs'kyi, *Samostiina Ukraïna* 48).

Mikhnovs'kyi's “Ukraine for Ukrainians” was not a call for the expulsion of ethnic minorities. He envisioned a Ukraine in which any foreigner could be naturalized by a community (a nineteenth-century Swiss model), and such naturalization would “give a foreigner all the rights of a Ukrainian” (Mikhnovs'kyi, *Suspil'no-politychni tvory* 178). “Ukraine for Ukrainians” can be seen as a precursor of Marcus Garvey's “Africa for Africanism” and a call for the liberation of Ukrainians from foreign oppression. Supporting the nationalism of “the downtrodden nations-slaves,” Mikhnovs'kyi draws attention to the sufferings of racialized groups in colonies and former colonies (*Suspil'no-politychni tvory* 178). He discusses the genocide of America's Indigenous peoples and the plight of African Americans, and he considers them as peoples not unlike Ukrainians. For Mikhnovs'kyi, African Americans “are a talented and powerful race, and they struggle with [self-]determination” (*Suspil'no-politychni tvory* 277). Even the tenth commandment from Mikhnovs'kyi's decalogue—“Do not marry a foreigner”—has nothing “biological” to it. The full phrase says, “Do not marry a foreigner [Ukr. “chuzynets’,” which could also mean a foe, a conqueror] because your children will become your enemies” (Mikhnovs'kyi, *Suspil'no-politychni tvory* 212). The danger is children's assimilation into the dominant culture of the non-Ukrainian spouse; this issue has been much discussed in nineteenth-century Ukrainian literature and journalism. The

“commandments” of the Ukrainian People’s Party were hardly unique for their time. The fifth commandment from the decalogue of the “Poles on the Eastern Borderlands of the Commonwealth” sounds far more biological: do not marry a foreigner, “or a person of a different rite,” because the children from such a marriage “would bring shame on your Polish name with their very existence” (“Papiery różne” 30).

In comparison with the nationalisms of Ukraine’s neighbours, Mikhnovskiy’s “extreme” nationalism was not only relatively insignificant but also remarkably free of racism. Roman Dmowski’s version of nationalism, which was starting to dominate in Polish politics at the turn of the twentieth century, was far more racist. In Dmowski’s works one finds plenty of references to “racial material” and “racial talent” (see *Myśli nowoczesnego Polaka*). In Dmowski’s work one would also find characterizations of Ukrainians that were quite similar to those provided by Rossoliński-Liebe. Dmowski also believed that several million Ukrainians “break down into very different territorial groups. With such differences we can talk about the existence of Ukrainian people only at a great stretch” (Dmowski, “Kwestia ukraińska”). While Rossoliński-Liebe does not quote Dmowski’s opinion about Ukrainians, he does introduce that of David Lloyd George: “I only saw a Ukrainian once. It was the last Ukrainian I have seen, and I am not sure that I want to see any more” (qtd. Rossoliński-Liebe 59). Since Rossoliński-Liebe leaves this sentence without either a preface or a follow up, one must assume that the author is endorsing it.

Demonization of nationalism has, as its corollary, either implicit or explicit exoneration of imperialism. This book, dealing with two world wars and repeated occupations of Ukrainian territory, discusses imperialism only in the context of Ukrainian nationalist rhetoric, not as a force directly responsible for the massive bloodshed and genocides perpetrated in the region throughout the twentieth century.

The fact that Rossoliński-Liebe’s opus was not only published by an academic press but also quoted and promoted by both the German state and German NGOs shows very well that imperialist colonial attitudes toward Ukraine are alive and well, and not limited to Russia. Apparently, when it comes to the condemnation of Ukrainian nationalism, the usual criteria of the academic world do not apply. In histories similar to Rossoliński-Liebe’s, moral indignation directed against nationalist hatred transforms into a feeling of sanctimonious self-righteousness and superiority to the people and cultural tradition in whom the nationalism is perceived. Paradoxically, these histories not only resonate well with Putin’s reasoning behind his “solution” to the Ukrainian problem, they also lend credibility to the radical Ukrainian nationalists in today’s Ukraine—who, despite the years of war and best efforts of the Russian intelligence and propaganda, still remain a miniscule faction of Ukraine’s political spectrum. The barely hidden anti-

Ukrainian tendentiousness of these histories allows the latter to claim that any critical scrutiny of the Ukrainian “integral nationalism” of the 1930s and 1940s is merely a pretext for attacking Ukrainians, their identity and right to self-determination.

## CONCLUSIONS

What to do with a field of historical knowledge that to a significant degree has discredited itself? What could be a way out of the present conundrum? Since February 2022, many scholars have been pointing to the need to “decolonize” the fields of Russian, Ukrainian, Slavic, and Eurasian studies. Even official documents produced by the ASEES executive express support for “decolonization.” Some point to “post-colonial epistemology” as a way to dismantle the “colonial” field’s colonial pedigree. (Mogilner, “Ukrainian (and East European) Studies”).

I am skeptical of “decolonization” initiatives that originate in privileged imperial centres with a long history of colonial enterprises. Decolonization of the discourse about Ukraine was initiated in Ukraine in the nineteenth century. It has also made enormous progress since late 1980s, mostly in independent Ukraine. Just like any true decolonization, the Ukrainian effort was not without its pitfalls and excesses. Nevertheless, it was a genuine reaction of Ukrainian society to centuries of imperial oppression. Western academia needs to realize that the West is not the only place where histories of Ukraine are being written; neither is it the most important one. It should also learn to accept that its privileged geographical knowledge does not necessarily translate into superior knowledge. Moreover, I am skeptical of “decolonization” appeals in the region’s Western area studies as long as the field’s current “Eurasian” geographic configuration remains intact. Carved around Russia, the space will be dominated by Russia, just as Comecon or Putin’s “Eurasian Union” were.

I am also not convinced that some kind of special “post-colonial epistemology” offers a way out of the present conundrum. When Marko Pavlyshyn introduced “post-colonial” to the field of Ukrainian studies, he applied it to the Ukrainian literature of the 1990s, which reflected the post-colonial condition of Ukrainian society and a post-colonial moment in Ukrainian history. Ukrainian post-coloniality was an immensely productive experiment in hybridity, a carnivalesque and playful celebration of paradoxes and parallels present in the continuous production, co-existence, and cross-fertilization of differences. Just as any post-coloniality, the Ukrainian one was deeply skeptical not only of its imperial past, but also of the nation-state that replaced the empire. This post-colonial Ukrainian culture probably reached its crescendo in the cultural explosion that

accompanied the Maidan protests of 2013–14 (Gerasimov). Ukraine's post-colonial moment ended with the killing of Maidan protesters and Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine. While other formerly colonial nations moved from anti-colonial struggle through neo-colonialism to post-coloniality, independent Ukraine's trajectory seemed to be the opposite: from post-coloniality through Russian neo-colonialism to the anti-colonial struggle of national survival.

While the works analyzed here have problems with their conceptual framework, those problems are not of an epistemological nature. Their main problems seem to be intellectual arrogance, lack of knowledge, and irresponsibility. Historians tend to like being provocative, ironic, and readable, and often they cannot resist an occasional pun or overgeneralization. Academic rigour can help here, but also self-reflection and self-examination. Scholars should remember about the very real political implications of their texts. Full realization of academic responsibility will help to avoid superficiality and presumptuousness, leading to more serious engagement with sources and more sophisticated conceptual frameworks.

Responsibility also requires a certain humility, for indeed there are limits to our knowledge. When it comes to the geography of knowledge production, "decolonization" of its own history and culture should be left to Ukraine, but it also should be accompanied by the "de-imperialization" of Western academia's imperial optics. The first simple step could be to acknowledge the existence and legitimacy of Ukrainian studies, including Ukrainian history. Ukrainian culture was just as real and rich a century ago as it is now. To identify trends in that culture and make judgements about it, one has to master it first. It is a field that requires linguistic proficiency and specific background knowledge. A doctorate in Russian history should not be seen as a credential of expertise about Ukraine. The scholarly community must finally realize that the centre of Ukrainian studies is now in Ukraine. The voices of Ukraine's expert scholars should be heard and respected, instead of being ignored or ridiculed. And finally, those Ukrainian historians who themselves have been involved in demonizing Ukraine and Ukrainian identity need to recognize their moral responsibility for the war, death, and suffering of Ukrainians and to re-examine their priorities, agendas, empathies, and approaches within the discipline.

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