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Polish Studies and the “Decolonization” Paradigm after Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine

Since Russia’s full-scale escalation of its war on Ukraine in February 2022, many Western countries have reassessed their approach to Central and Eastern Europe. The United States has offered massive military support to Ukraine, definitively reversing Barack Obama’s pre-2014 “reset” with Russia – though conflict in the Congress and Donald Trump’s prospective return now threaten this resolve. In Europe, German and French leaders have admitted serious mistakes in past energy dependency on Russia and naivety toward Vladimir Putin’s geopolitical intentions. German chancellor Olaf Scholz famously announced a historic “turning point,” or “*Zeitenwende*,” in Germany’s policy, which would pivot away from Russian fossil fuels to promises of greater investment in defense and unstinting support for Ukraine – with a mixed record of implementation at the time of writing.¹ French president Emmanuel Macron has said that France and other Western countries of the “old Europe” should have listened to warnings from the “new Europe” – that is, the Central and Eastern European (CEE) states with long historical experience of Russia’s regional ambitions.²

In fact, the CEE region has been far from monolithic in its response to Russia’s aggression, with Hungary seeking to block European aid to Ukraine. Yet Macron’s words were perhaps particularly pertinent to Poland, the largest of the EU’s “new” member states. From the first day of Russia’s invasion, Poland has been in

¹ “Policy statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag, 27 February 2022 in Berlin,” *Bundesregierung*, 27 February 2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/search/policy-statement-by-olaf-scholz-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-member-of-the-german-bundestag-27-february-2022-in-berlin-2008378>; Ch. Kessler, “The Limits of Germany’s *Zeitenwende*,” *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, 7 December 2023, <https://eu.boell.org/en/2023/12/07/limits-germany-zeitenwende>.

² M. Rose, “Macron Tells Eastern Europe – We Should Have Listened to You over Russia,” *Reuters*, 31 May 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/frances-macron-offers-mea-culpa-eastern-eu-nations-russia-2023-05-31>.

the frontline of support for Ukraine, offering both military resources and asylum for refugees, as well as lobbying Western allies to increase their backing. Despite recent disputes over Ukrainian agricultural imports, Poland has continued to rally support for its neighbor, while both countries' assessment of Russia's wider threat to international security has become the dominant position across Europe.

Reflecting these wider transformations, Western universities and scholars engaged in the study of Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia have faced a "*Zeitenwende*" of their own. As Russian forces have devastated Ukrainian cities and committed atrocities against civilians, scholars in the fields of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies have seen growing calls to "decolonize" their curricula, research agendas, and institutional composition from Russian domination.³ These calls have emphasized the need to foreground Ukrainian perspectives, previously marginalized or entirely absent, and to critically reassess the history of Russian culture as fundamentally implicated in the expansionistic imperialism of the Russian state.⁴ This critique has demanded the overcoming of a kind of "imperial blindness": a putative failure to perceive Russia as a colonial empire like Britain or France – with respect to both its Tsarist and Soviet histories, but also to the Russian Federation today.⁵ In the most polemical versions, some thinkers, together with the Ukrainian government, have called for a "boycott" of Russian culture; others have argued rather for a deep reinterpretation and acknowledgment of its imperial entanglements.⁶

Many of these calls for change have explicitly used a language of "decolonization," arguing that Western knowledge about Ukraine, Russia, and the wider region must be freed from its fundamental subjugation to the "great

³ A. Shalпов, Y. Shaipova, "It's High Time to Decolonize Western Russia Studies," *Foreign Policy*, 11 February 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/11/russia-studies-war-ukraine-decolonize-imperialism-western-academics-soviet-empire-eurasia-eastern-europe-university/>; Y. Stasiuk, "Decolonizing Eastern European and Eurasian Studies," *Yale Daily News*, 8 December 2022, <https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2022/12/08/stasiuk-decolonizing-eastern-european-and-urasian-studies/>.

⁴ O. Zabuzhko, "No Guilty People in the World?: Reading Russian Literature after the Bucha Massacre," *The Times Literary Supplement*, 22 April 2022, <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/russian-literature-bucha-massacre-essay-oksana-zabuzhko/>; V. Yermolenko, "From Pushkin to Putin: Russian Literature's Imperial Ideology," *Foreign Policy*, 25 June 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/25/russia-ukraine-war-literature-classics-imperialism-ideology-nationalism-putin-pushkin-tolstoy-dostoevsky-caucasus/>.

⁵ "Dr Olesya Khromeychuk (Ukrainian Institute London), BASEES 2022 Keynote Lecture, 8 April 2022," YouTube, updated 20 April 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJthJb1tK0Y&t=3s>; O. Zabuzhko, "No Guilty People in the World?...," op. cit.; J. Krapfl, "Decolonizing Minds in the 'Slavic Area,' 'Slavic Area Studies,' and Beyond," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 2023, vol. 65, no. 2, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/00085006.2023.2211460>.

⁶ C. Higgins, "Ukraine Calls on Western Allies to Boycott Russian Culture," *The Guardian*, 7 December 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/dec/07/ukraine-calls-on-western-allies-to-boycott-russian-culture>; "Yes, the Russian Literary Canon is Tainted by Imperialism," *The Economist*, 6 October 2022, <https://www.economist.com/culture/2022/10/06/yes-the-russian-literary-canon-is-tainted-by-imperialism>.

Russian” colonial frame. In a widely-discussed keynote speech at the 2022 annual conference of the British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies (BASEES), Ukrainian scholar Olesya Khromeychuk described a pressing need to overcome the entrenched dominance of Russian perspectives and the marginalization, distortion, or total absence of Ukrainian points of view.⁷ Vitaly Chernetsky – president of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) in North America – has employed a concept of “epistemic injustice” to capture a radical asymmetry in the capacities of different actors to shape frameworks of knowledge, directly resulting from asymmetrical relations of power.⁸ He argues for an “epistemic paradigm shift” that would address anti-Ukrainian prejudice; create resources for the development of Ukrainian Studies in the West; center Ukrainian interpretations of global issues; cease the mislabeling of Ukrainian artists as Russian; and listen to Ukrainian voices. These calls have partly been answered by a range of Western universities, professional bodies, and other institutions, which have organized special speaker series and other initiatives dedicated to “decolonizing” or “rethinking” Slavic and East European Studies and “provincializing” Russian Studies.⁹

The “decolonization” campaign reflects a newly prioritized impetus for concrete change to institutions, research, and teaching, with the aims of decentering hegemonic Russian knowledge frameworks and centering Ukrainian and other marginalized perspectives. However, beyond these specific calls for action, the broader use of concepts and approaches from postcolonial theory is by no means a novelty in Central and East European and Eurasian Studies. Indeed, scholarly discussions had been taking place from at least twenty years before Russia’s latest invasion on the “postcolonial” status of the “post-Soviet” sphere, including Ukraine.¹⁰ Together with Chernetsky and other Ukrainian thinkers, scholars in the field of Polish Studies were prominent among the pioneers, both in English-language

⁷ “Dr Olesya Khromeychuk (Ukrainian Institute London), BASEES 2022 Keynote Lecture, 8 April 2022,” op. cit.

⁸ “Russia’s War against Ukraine: Confronting Epistemic Injustice (Cambridge Stasiuk Lecture 2023),” YouTube, updated 8 September 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rwkEkaj-fEY>.

⁹ “Announcing the Decolonization in Focus Seminar Series,” Harvard University, updated 25 January 2023, <https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/insights/announcing-decolonization-focus-seminar-series>; “Rethinking Slavonic Studies,” Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages and Linguistics, University of Cambridge, accessed 29 January 2024, <https://www.mml.cam.ac.uk/news/slavonic-section-presents-rethinking-slavonic-lecture-series-2022-23>; “Provincializing Russian: International Conference,” Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen, accessed 29 January 2024, <https://www.uni-giessen.de/de/ueber-uns/veranstaltungen/tagungen/provincializing-russian>.

¹⁰ For example, see D.C. Moore, “Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique,” *PMLA* 2001, vol. 116, no. 1, Special Topic: “Globalizing Literary Studies,” <https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2001.116.1.111>; V. Chernetsky, “Postcolonialism, Russia and Ukraine,” *Ulbanded Review* 2003, vol. 7, Empire, Union, Center, Satellite: The Place of Post-Colonial Theory in Slavic/Central and Eastern European/(Post-)Soviet Studies; G.C. Spivak et al., “Are We Postcolonial? Post-Soviet Space,” *PMLA* 2006, vol. 121, no. 3.

scholarship and in evolving debates in Poland from the 2000s. Early work on the imperial ideology of Russian literature by Ewa Thompson seems almost to anticipate some of today's polemics, while scholars in Poland also developed a series of intricate theoretical perspectives and debates on the applicability – or non-applicability – of postcolonial or “post-dependence” theory to Poland's own history of domination by powerful neighbors.¹¹ Notions of Russia and the Soviet Union as colonial powers, and interpretations of Russian and Polish culture through the lens of postcolonial theory, have become commonplace – at least as interpretive possibilities open to contestation. Even in the popular political sphere, postcolonial theory has been directly mobilized by right-wing commentators and the Law and Justice (PiS) party, until recently Poland's ruling party, to explain – often tendentiously – the country's contemporary political condition and the foreign threats confronting it.¹²

In general, both Polish political culture – perhaps especially among conservatives – and Polish Studies as an academic discipline now appear to have been ahead of a wider curve of understanding, echoing perspectives also introduced by Ukrainian scholars and others from the CEE region. Just as Western capitals have come to share the Ukrainian and Polish assessments of Russia's threat to European security, Slavic and East European Studies more broadly have begun to take seriously theoretical positions that have long been discussed by scholars with expertise in Ukraine and Poland. Admittedly, this progress has so far been mostly rhetorical, with little substantial change in the structures of study of Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia at Western universities, due both to the embeddedness of established ways of understanding and to university structures that tend to shift only slowly and reluctantly.

¹¹ Among others, see E.M. Thompson, *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism*, Westport 2000; C. Cavanagh, “Postcolonial Poland,” *Common Knowledge* 2004, vol. 10, no. 1; D. Skórczewski, “Polska skolonizowana, polska zorientalizowana: Teoria postkolonialna wobec ‘Innej Europy,’” *Porównania* 2009, no. 6; H. Gosk, *Opowieści „skolonizowanego/kolonizatora”*. *W kręgu studiów postzależnościowych nad literaturą polską XX i XXI wieku*, Kraków 2010; T. Zarycki, *Ideologies of Eastness in Central and Eastern Europe*, London 2014; *Teksty Drugie* 2014, no. 1, Special Issue: “Postcolonial or Postdependence Studies?”; S. Bill, “Seeking the Authentic: Polish Culture and the Nature of Postcolonial Theory,” *nonsite.org* 12 (August 2014), <https://nonsite.org/seeking-the-authentic-polish-culture-and-the-nature-of-postcolonial-theory>.

¹² R. Ziemkiewicz, “W Polsce, jak w krajach postkolonialnych, funkcjonuje podział na ‘kreoli’ i ‘tubylców,’” *Polska The Times*, 10 July 2011, <https://i.pl/ziemkiewicz-w-polsce-jak-w-krajach-postkolonialnych-funkcjonuje-podzial-na-kreoli-i-tubylcow/ar/459043>; “System postkolonialny w Polsce? Kaczyński w Sejmie,” *Dziennik.pl*, 30 March 2012, <https://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/polityka/artykuly/385391.debata-w-sprawie-referendum-o-wieku-emerytalnym-jaroslaw-kaczynski-w-sejmie.html>; *Zdrowie, Praca, Rodzina: Program Prawa i Sprawiedliwości 2014* (Warsaw: Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, 2014), 17; C. Snochowska-Gonzalez, “Post-colonial Poland – On an Unavoidable Misuse,” *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 2012, vol. 26, no. 4, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325412448473>; S. Bill, “Seeking the Authentic...,” op. cit.

So what does this mean for Polish Studies today? I would point to three interrelated areas for discussion and action as part of the broader movement for positive change: (1) participation and leadership in wider initiatives of institutional reform to address “epistemic justice” within various areas of study in Europe and North America; (2) direct strategic cooperation with and support of Ukrainian Studies and other fields of study focusing on regions, countries, and cultures historically or presently subject to Russian military, political, and cultural imperialism; (3) the continuation of ongoing processes of “decolonizing” Polish Studies itself. To be clear, by the term “Polish Studies,” I refer here not just to the traditional realm of “*Polonistyka*,” but rather in the broadest multidisciplinary sense to the study of subjects related to Poland and its diverse historical manifestations or precursors across various academic disciplines, including literary and cultural studies, history, art history, political science, sociology, and economics.

(1) The present “decolonizing” moment presents opportunities to reshape disciplines and their institutional frameworks at Western universities. Above all, this means lobbying and pressure to increase the coverage of “less-studied” countries and cultures – especially Ukraine, but also Poland. Of course, Russian Studies remains very much needed, perhaps more than ever, but it is also high time to give more space to perspectives that have been omitted or even silenced by the Russo-centric structure of most Slavonic and East European area studies departments at universities in Europe and North America. In practice, this process can involve constructive discussion with Russian Studies colleagues about “decolonizing” curricula through greater attention to the imperial context of Russian culture and to the perspectives of its “subalterns.” But these efforts should also be accompanied by a push to change hiring practices in institutions, expanding the number of academic staff employed to teach non-Russian subjects and thus building the pedagogical and research potential of smaller fields of study. In the context of the financial realities of many universities today, especially in the humanities, these aspirations will inevitably require fundraising activity. Scholars working in Polish Studies are potentially well positioned to support Ukrainian Studies colleagues in all these efforts.

(2) Strategic cooperation with colleagues and programs in Ukrainian Studies and other “less-studied” areas fundamentally involves pushing for reform of institutional architecture. However, it can also extend to greater collaboration in teaching, research, and public outreach. The broad fields of Polish Studies and Ukrainian Studies share many overlapping objects of analysis, from shared history in the early-modern Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to the contemporary influx of Ukrainian economic migrants and war refugees into Poland. In multiple fields, there is significant scope for joint initiatives of various kinds, including team-taught university courses, conferences, research projects, international grant applications, and public education activities. This cooperation can provide crucial support and opportunities for Ukrainian colleagues facing the most challenging practical and material circumstances, while expanding the reach and capacity

of Polish Studies. It can also serve the important purpose of advancing Polish-Ukrainian dialogue on difficult questions, from historical inter-group violence to contemporary economic disputes, through the exchange of research-driven academic perspectives. This type of cooperation may also seek to influence government policy and wider relations between the two countries.

(3) Finally, Polish Studies in various fields requires the continued development of its own ongoing processes of “decolonization” in reference to the regional hegemony of Poles and Polish culture in various historical periods, and to relations of inequality in the present. This project has particular urgency with respect to Ukraine and Ukrainians, but also applies to aspects of Polish relations with Lithuanians, Belarusians, Jews, and others. In fact, these processes of exposing and correcting “epistemic injustices” within the sphere of Polish culture and knowledge are already relatively far advanced, with a series of increasingly nuanced conversations taking place over the last few decades among Polish scholars and between Polish and Ukrainian scholars, among others.¹³

These discussions have included the detailed elaboration of critical perspectives presenting Poland as a kind of “colonizing” force, historically imposing both political power and a “cultural imperialism” of its own on the co-inhabitants of its region.¹⁴ At certain points in history, Poles can appear as both “colonizers” and “colonized,” subject to oppression above all by Russia and Germany, but also exerting their own dominant influence on other groups in the region.¹⁵ Just as new postcolonial readings of Russian literature are required to take greater account of Russia’s imperial history, the study of Polish culture can continue to benefit from the interrogation of its own “(quasi-)imperial knowledge,” as in ongoing work on representations of Ukraine and Ukrainians in Polish literature, following the earlier critical perspectives of Ukrainian scholars.¹⁶ Of course, this

¹³ For example, see A. Portnov, *Poland and Ukraine: Entangled Histories, Asymmetric Memories*, Berlin 2020; A. Pasięka, “How Pluralism Becomes Hierarchical? Debating Pluralism in Contemporary Poland,” *Sprawy Narodowościowe* 2013, no. 43; P. Verbytska, “What History do Young Ukrainians Need Today? Reinterpretation of the Image of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in Contemporary Ukrainian Historiography and History Education,” *The Polish Review* 2020, vol. 65, no. 1; *From Sovietology to Postcoloniality: Poland and Ukraine from a Postcolonial Perspective*, ed. J. Korek, Huddinge 2007; *Polska wschodnia i orientalizm*, ed. T. Zarycki, Warsaw 2013; G. Kasianov, *Memory Crash: The Politics of History in and around Ukraine, 1980s–2010s*, Budapest 2022.

¹⁴ Among others, see J. Sowa, *Fantomowe ciało króla. Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą*, Kraków 2011; D. Beauvois, *Trójkat ukraiński. Szlachta, carat i lud na Wołyniu, Podolu i Kijowszczyźnie 1793–1914*, trans. K. Rutkowski, Lublin 2011; M. Janion, *Niesamowita słowiańszczyzna. Fantazmaty literatury*, Kraków 2006.

¹⁵ M. Janion, *Niesamowita słowiańszczyzna...*, op. cit.

¹⁶ Among others, see R. Koziółek, *Ciała Sienkiewicza: studia o płci i przemocy*, Katowice 2009; D. Skórczewski, *Teoria – literatura – dyskurs: Pejzaż postkolonialny*, Lublin 2013; S. Bill, “The Ukrainian Sublime: Nineteenth-Century Polish Visions of the East” [in:] *Multicultural Commonwealth: Poland-Lithuania and Its Afterlives*, ed. S. Bill, S. Lewis, Pittsburgh 2023.

work need not imply any assumption of symmetry between Polish and Russian projections of power in the region. In other fields, related research imperatives include the continuation of difficult work in Poland and beyond on the complex history of Polish-Jewish relations during the Second World War. Until recently, scholars working on collaboration in the Holocaust by some Poles under the German occupation were subject to public attacks by politicians from the PiS government and by party-controlled media.¹⁷ As in various other countries, historical research in Poland must contend in this way with state-sponsored narratives and the “politics of history.”

In the three general areas of action outlined above, scholars and institutions of Polish Studies – in the broadest sense – can respond to the current historical moment by contributing to wider processes of positive change in multiple disciplines, while also building their own capacity. In practice, this contribution must include strong support for Ukrainian Studies and Ukrainian colleagues in the face of the existential threats posed by Russian military aggression against the Ukrainian state and by the accompanying “epistemic violence” against its culture, history, language, and identity.¹⁸ Poland, too, has faced such threats in the past. The frameworks of knowledge forged by this shared history give scholars of Poland important perspectives to share on relations of power in the region in dialogue with colleagues and partners at institutions in Europe and North America.

In cooperation and discussion with Ukrainian colleagues, Polish Studies can play a leading role in shaping the “epistemic paradigm shifts” required to ameliorate existing inequities of knowledge and access to institutional structures in the fields of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies. Progress in this undertaking will not stop Russia’s war on Ukraine, but it may contribute to the promotion of better understandings of its origins and to further consolidation of support for Ukraine’s self-defense and self-determination.

¹⁷ For example, see *Dalej jest noc. Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski*, ed. B. Engelking, J. Grabowski, Warsaw 2018. For the controversy around this two-volume study on instances of Polish collaboration in the murder of Jews under the German occupation and PiS’s political responses, see S. Bill, “Poles and the Holocaust: New Research, Old Controversies,” *Notes from Poland*, 29 June 2018, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2018/06/29/poles-and-the-holocaust-new-research-old-controversies/>; K. Wójcik, “Wszyscy dostali podwyżki, oni nie. MEiN ukarał za słowa prof. Engelking?,” *Rzeczpospolita*, 15 May 2023, <https://www.rp.pl/prawo-dla-ciebie/art38471941-wszyscy-dostali-podwyzki-oni-nie-mein-ukaral-za-slowa-prof-engelking>.

¹⁸ “Russia’s War against Ukraine: Confronting Epistemic Injustice (Cambridge Stasiuk Lecture 2023),” op. cit.