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· **DECOLONISING THE STUDY OF RUSSIAN  
HISTORY**

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**Decolonising the Study of Russian History  
Russian decolonisation and Eurasia: an  
imperial legacy?**



In November 2022, the US-based Association for Slavonic, East European and Eurasian Studies, the leading academic association in the study of post-Soviet societies, announced that the topic of its next meeting would be “decolonization”. The Association’s statement [explained](#) that «Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has led to widespread calls for the reassessment and transformation of Russo-centric relationships of power and hierarchy both in the region and in how we study it»<sup>1</sup>. This declaration represents a new step in a decades-long process of studying Russian and Soviet history. The disintegration of the USSR inevitably had significant consequences on studies concerning the history of the many peoples who were part of it. Many of these consequences are undoubtedly positive: the dissolution of Marxist-Leninist ideological frame, the rapprochement between scholars of this huge area and foreign ones, the introduction of new research criteria, and so on.

Not all aspects of this profound change appear really useful, starting with **the use of the categories of colonialism and orientalism**, both of Western origin and which have spread impetuously in recent decades. Indeed, these categories do not appear fully adequate to explain the historical dynamics of the Russian Empire, the USSR and the Russian Federation. This applies in the first place to the affirmation of the “colonial” character of the Russian Empire, which had

already been advanced by some Soviet scholars in the 1920s and 1930s and was revived in the post-Soviet years by many Russian scholars, especially among those belonging to the Anglosphere. This approach assumes that «... the relations between eastern and southern regions and the state were those of colonial lands and empire... Their status **resembled that of the people in the overseas colonies** of the French and British empires. European rulers distanced themselves from these peoples by emphasising their exotic, oriental character. By analogy ruled its own Russian Orient»<sup>1</sup>.

### **Anti-Colonial Colonialism?**

However, this analogy between the Russian empire and European colonial ones is largely imperfect, oblivious to the historical, anthropological, and geographical peculiarities in which these empires were established. As Andreas Kappeler observed, «Since the colonialism model developed with reference to modern Europe cannot be easily transferred to the Russian context, terms such as colony and colonial dependence will not be used without a close examination of the situation to which they might be applied. The frequent and wholesale use of the terms colonialism and imperialism when referring to Russia and Soviet Union, especially by American scholars, conceals far more than it reveals»<sup>3</sup>.

Russia, in fact, was a continental and not a maritime empire, which – like its rivals, the Ottoman and the Habsburg ones – developed on the basis of traditional expansionism rather than of modern colonial interests. Addressing the USSR as a colonial power **is even more questionable since it was a federal state founded on an anti-colonial ideology** and recognized territorial and cultural autonomy to its many peoples. As Dominic Lieven noted, «The Soviet regime actually created new native elites and institutions, organized them into a uniform federal system [...]. Much of Soviet federalism was a sham for most of the Soviet era, but it was never a complete sham and at times, especially in the 1920 and under Gorbachev, it was a vastly important political reality»<sup>4</sup>. Or, [according](#) to Alexander Morrison, «[...] far from destroying nationalities, the Soviet Union had often done a great deal to create them through active policies of *korenizatsiya*, which in the 1920s reached quite radical, one is tempted to say even *decolonial* heights». Therefore, «‘colonialism’ is simply inadequate to describe what modern Russia has become and what it is doing in Ukraine, or indeed the nature of the Soviet past»<sup>5</sup>.

Indeed, one gets the impression that, as happens in the cultural sphere with orientalism (“a good word defamed”, according to Sergey Serebriany<sup>6</sup>), these terms are applied not so much for their scientific congruence as for the negative value they express, largely due to their political

and ideological origin. These terms, so related to the hegemonic interest of Western cultural discourse, are at the same time attractive for scholars belonging to post-Soviet countries who, by adhering to them, **can on the one hand feel a part of the most advanced and fashionable scholarly research**, and on the other obtain considerable career benefits in terms of grants and academic appointments. Therefore it is not surprising that the decolonial discourse, often in connection with gender studies with an accentuated feminist, LGBT, and anti-racist orientation, is becoming increasingly dominant in academic studies on the Russian-Soviet space. It is no coincidence that Sergey Abashin, a well-known Russian anthropologist, [maintains](#) the «[...] **need to decolonize the very concept of “decolonization”**», and pay attention to the new hierarchies and modes of subordination that it creates”<sup>7</sup>.

In conclusion, despite the growing favor of the decolonial discourse, or perhaps precisely because of this success, one really has to ask what type of decolonization is needed today in studies of the Russian, Soviet, and post-Soviet space. Caress Schenk is probably right, [proposing](#) a kind of double decolonization, «[...] both from the hegemonic frames imposed by Russian imperial and Soviet knowledge production and from the dominance of Western theories

and “international” conventions that continue to edge out local voices and epistemologies»8.

<sup>1</sup>ASEEES Convention theme  
<https://www.aseees.org/convention/2023-aseees-convention-theme?fbclid=IwAR2AVVW8pZhMoJwBSnjxVukxl-jflzHLW0Kk6tJCkklwQgynVC3oZ-QZmk>

<sup>2</sup> D. R. Brower, E. J. Lazzarini, (eds.) *Russia's Orient. Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700-1917*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 1997, p. XIX.

<sup>3</sup> A. Kappeler, [\*The Russian empire. A multiethnic history\*](#), Pearson Education, Oxon-New York, 2001, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> D. Lieven, *The Russian Empire and its Rivals*, Yale University Press, New Haven-London 2000, p. 303.

<sup>5</sup> A. Morrison, *After The War: Central Asia Without Russia*, <https://www.oeaw.ac.at/sice/sice-blog/after-the-war-central-asia-without-russia>

<sup>6</sup> S. Serebriany, “Orientalism”: a good word defamed, in E. Steiner (ed.), *Orientalizm/oksidentalizm: jazyki kultur' i jazyki ich opisanija. Sbornik statej = Orientalism/Occidentalism: Languages of Cultures vs.*

*Languages of Description. Collected papers*, Rossijskij institut kul'turologii, Moskva 2022, pp. 25-33.

<sup>7</sup> S. Abashin, *Decolonising Decolonisation*, <https://www.oeaw.ac.at/sice/sice-blog/decolonising-decolonisation>

<sup>8</sup> C. Schenk, *Doubly De-Colonizing the Syllabus*, [https://issuu.com/aseees/docs/2022\\_sep\\_newsnet\\_final/s/1695480](https://issuu.com/aseees/docs/2022_sep_newsnet_final/s/1695480)