Postcolonial Russia

Since the seventeenth century, Russia has expanded contiguously over large parts of the Eurasian continent, yet her territorial and demographic possessions have not been designated as colonies by mainstream scholarship. The cumulative contribution of Russian and foreign scholars discursively ignoring Russia’s relentless acquisitions of non-Russian lands, and affixing in the authoritative historical narrative the image of Russian colonial innocence is one of the puzzles of modern history. It is partly explained by the difficulties of accommodating Russian colonialism within the postcolonial certitudes. First, Russia’s colonies are not separated from the metropolis by a body of salt water. Second, instead of race, religion and nationalism have played key roles in Russian colonial affairs. Third, Russia’s military conquests and subjugations of neighbouring countries have not been considered colonialist because in many cases both the exploiters and the exploited were white. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (1995) edited by Bill Ashcroft, Garth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin does not devote a single chapter to Russia. In the relationship of Russians to other peoples, skin colour has only sporadically played a defining role; however, racism has intensified in the post-communist period. On certain occasions Russia has accommodated the darker-skinned people of Turkic and Mongol background, when they adopted the Russian identity. In Andrei Belyi’s novel *St Petersburg* (1913), Apollon Apollonovich Ableukhov, a descendant of the ‘Kyrgyz hordes’ and a high-ranking Petersburg official, is a member of the Russian Orthodox Church and a devoted servant to the tsar. Similarly, Aleksandr Pushkin’s partly African background did not prevent him from becoming the masthead poet of Russian romanticism. However, for reasons having to do with Russia’s low prestige among the conquered peoples, few of them ever wished to assume the Russian identity in spite of a consistent policy of Russification. Finally, while the European colonial empires eventually accepted scholarship critical of their colonial misdeeds, Russian discourse remains impenetrable to postcolonial ideas. Russian intellectuals, scholars and the general public vigorously deny that tsarist Russia or its Leninist metamorphosis, the USSR, were colonial entities. In the early twenty-first century, the continuing war in Chechnya is viewed as a war against banditry and international terrorism rather than as a war of national liberation.

Russia usually overpowered a contiguous neighbour and first engaged in unsystematic looting, and then in reordering the economies of a new dependency to benefit the Russian economy, while promoting the use of the Russian language and imposing Russian political institutions on the conquered peoples. Unlike Britain and France, Russia had little to offer in terms of humanistic learning, technology or everyday culture: the Baltic rim, the partitioned Poland, and, after World War II, the remainder of Eastern and Central Europe were more advanced than the conqueror in these respects. The notorious transfer to Russia of entire factories from Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary after World War II symbolises the robbery syndrome that can be compared – *mutatis mutandis* – to the transfer of the Elgin Marbles to the British Museum.

Russia’s expansion into territories with well-established non-Russian identities began with Ivan the Terrible’s conquest of Kazan and Astrakhan (two Tatar strongholds
inhabited by the indigenous Turkic peoples) in the late sixteenth century. Not even this early acquisition successfully underwent the process of assimilation, described by Michael Hechter in *Internal Colonialism* (1975). In the seventeenth century, Siberia was conquered: here the adversaries ranged from native tribes to Chinese emperors. The first were nearly wiped out, and the area was thinly resettled with Russians and prisoners belonging to other nationalities. In the post-Soviet period, a cultural uneasiness has been in evidence even in Siberia, as witnessed by the contemporary Russian nationalist Valentin Rasputin's nervous invocations of Russia in his Siberian tales. The eighteenth century marked a spectacular southern expansion in the area of the Black Sea and, for the first time in history, a major expansion into Europe. In the partitions of Poland, Russia acquired not only a large part of that nation but also Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania. In the meantime, the Black Sea region became largely Russified and assimilated under Catherine I, owing to the extermination of Turkic Muslims and the flight of the remnants to the Ottoman Empire. This process enabled Nikolai Gogol's Chichikov to claim 'virgin territories' for his 'dead souls' in Gogol's famous novel of that title (1842). The nineteenth century was marked by the conquest of Central Asia and by numerous uprisings of the previously conquered and exploited peoples; each time the Russians managed to pacify them and hold onto their acquisitions. The Baltic fringe, the Caucasus and Eastern and Central Europe vigorously resisted Russian colonialism after they were conquered in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Except for the Caucasus, they are now free; some are members of the European Union.

The 1917 revolution and the ensuing violent removal of the tsarist government did initially promise change in the subaltern status of non-Russians in the former Russian Empire, renamed the USSR and significantly transformed in terms of its ruling class. The abolition of gubernias (governorships) as administrative units and introduction of 'union republics', 'autonomous republics', 'autonomous regions' and 'autonomous areas' according to their ethnicity paved the way for future decolonisation. However, several of the 'autonomous republics' including Chechnya, Tatarstan and the whole of Siberia were incorporated into the Russian Soviet Republic, a decision which after the disintegration of the USSR brought about two Chechen wars, instability in Dagestan and demands for autonomy in Tatarstan, Tuva and, to a lesser extent, in parts of Siberia. Inside the USSR, the rule of terror and mass arrests were common by the late 1920s, along with a reimposition of Moscow's policies and the Russian language. Contrary to the well-entrenched myth, ethnic Russian losses in World War II were modest in comparison with the losses suffered by the western rim of the empire. It is also generally overlooked that Soviet Russia entered World War II as a friend and ally of Nazi Germany, and remained so for the first two years of the war, from September 1939 to June 1941.

As a result of the 1945 Yalta agreements, the Soviet Russian Empire took another large leap westward. All of Eastern Europe and portions of Central Europe became de facto colonies of Moscow, and between 1945 and 1989 were subservient to Moscow's interests in foreign and internal policies. Resistance was suppressed in territories occupied by the Red Army. The trajectory of this suppression has not yet been fully reconstructed, as countries liberated in 1989 lack the financial resources and access to Russian archives. Perhaps the most notorious case of the Russians' refusal to disclose the details of Moscow's colonialist policies is the so-called Katyn Affair, the 1940 prison-style execution of some 26,000 Polish officers and officials at Katyn and elsewhere.

The year 1945 marks the greatest triumph of Russian colonialism. Never before had Moscow exercised military and economic control over so vast a territory. Instant annexation
of the newly acquired lands was impractical politically and linguistically, however, and only the Baltic countries and East Prussia were incorporated into the USSR. Like Britain’s colonies, the Central and Eastern European countries were given a measure of autonomy in the day-to-day running of their domestic affairs. While investment capital went to the ethnically Russian territories (from the Bolshoi Ballet and the ‘Soviet’ Academy of Sciences in Moscow to sports facilities and financial institutions dispersed in Russian cities), the most polluting industries were built in the colonies. The resulting destruction of Uzbekistan’s agricultural lands has been amply documented, and so has the pollution of Bashkortostan by nuclear waste, and consequences for the Kazakhs of the building of Baikonur.

In 1989, having exhausted themselves in enforcing unworkable economic policies and fending off numerous insurrections – Polish Solidarity being the most prominent – the Soviet Russian élites began to understand that change was inevitable. As the Soviet economic system neared collapse, the reformers tried to shore it up without relinquishing the empire. The last First Secretary of the Communist Party, Mikhail Gorbachev, tried the perestroika route, but it made the implosion of the communist system of governance even more obvious. Gorbachev’s successor, Boris Yeltsin, did the right thing. On 8 December 1991 Yeltsin summoned Ukraine’s Leonid Kravchuk and Belarus’ Stanislav Shushkevich to a meeting during which the three leaders declared that the USSR had been dissolved and the Commonwealth of Independent States established instead. In addition to exposing the absence of legitimacy and legality in the Soviet system, the declaration turned out to be a major step in crippling Russian colonialism. The fourteen non-Russian Soviet republics and Soviet possessions in Central and Eastern Europe acquired sovereignty.

In 1991 the Russian Empire shrank demographically to half its size, or 151 million inhabitants. While the wealth remained in Russian hands, the break-up of the political and economic ties and the accompanying loss of prestige created difficulties for the metropolis. In 2003 the Russian Federation’s GDP reached only 79.4 per cent of its 1990 level.

The year 1991 is celebrated as a victory in the non-Russian states of the former USSR, but Russian polls invariably show that the majority of Russians wish for the clock to be turned back. On 25 April 2005, in a nationally televised speech before the Russian Duma, Yeltsin’s successor Vladimir Putin stated that the fall of the Soviet Union was ‘the greatest geo-political catastrophe of the twentieth century’. This segment of Russia’s authorising discourse was created shortly before Moscow’s celebrations of the sixtieth anniversary of Soviet victory in World War II, and it reflects a continuing reliance on imperial vision in the politics of historical interpretation in Russia, as well as the incompleteness of Russia’s decolonisation. While the victory belonged to the Soviet peoples (half of them non-Russian), the fruits of success are still assumed to belong to the Russians. At the outset of his presidency, Putin reverted to the default mode of Russian discourse by stressing the importance of great power status for Russia (derzhavnost), which in Russian circumstances goes hand in hand with holding onto the remaining colonies and cherishing neo-colonial ambitions toward what the Russians refer to as ‘near abroad’.

The conditions under which the USSR was dissolved allowed the non-Russian Soviet republics either to claim a proportion of the USSR’s wealth while at the same time assuming a proportion of the Soviet Union’s debt, or to renounce all claims and be released from responsibility for debt. Since the governments of the new states had no financial resources (the money supply was controlled by Moscow), they were obliged to choose the second option. The Russian Federation thus became, de facto and de jure, the sole successor state to the Soviet Union. However, the Russian élites continue to refuse to accept the symbolic
let alone economic, responsibilities implied in the succession. The Russian government has repeatedly refused to issue even perfunctory apologies for Soviet crimes against non-Russian nationalities, from the Ukrainian famine to the Katyn Affair. Putin dismissed any notion of symbolic reparations by stating that the Eastern and Central Europeans owe gratitude to the Red Army for liberation from the Nazis. Yet the march of the Red Army toward Berlin did not have as its goal the liberation of Eastern Europe, but rather its subjugation to Moscow. The fact that post-Soviet Russia refuses to face up to its imperial history bodes ill for its future policies.

While the absence of symbolic apologies can be taken in stride, the problems facing those national groups which remained part of the Russian Federation go beyond symbolism. Russia’s first foreign acquisition, Tatarstan on the Volga river, is typical of the fate of the non-Russian autonomous republics and regions within the federation. In 1992, under Boris Yeltsin’s originally tolerant régime, a new Tatarstan constitution was adopted. In 1994, a power-sharing treaty between Russia and Tatarstan was signed, whereby Tatarstan defined itself as a ‘sovereign state’ whose citizenship entitled one to hold the citizenship of the Russian Federation. In 1994 the Tatarstan legislature decided to change the Cyrillic script (imposed on the Tatars by Stalin during World War II) back into Latin.

The destruction of Tatarstan’s hopes and the hopes of other minority republics and regions came with the ascension to power of Vladimir Putin on 31 December 1999. He tightened Moscow’s control over the autonomous republics, pressured the Tatars to reintroduce the Russian alphabet and abandon Latin, and cancelled Tatarstan’s constitutional right to conduct independent economic policy. Tatarstan legislator Marat Galeev said that under Putin’s federal reforms, Tatarstan has experienced ‘an increase in unemployment, a reduction of its regional budget by almost half, and a decline in road construction by some 60 percent’ (Bigotry Monitor 2003).

Not all resistance to colonialism within the Russian Federation was peaceful. The autonomous republic of Chechnya tumbled into a military insurrection. Chechnya was originally subjugated in 1859 after decades of fierce resistance. In 1839, Russian poet Mikhail Lermontov wrote ‘A Lullaby’ in which ‘the evil Chechen’ figures prominently and which has been required reading in Russian schools. In 1991, Chechen general, Dzhokhar Dudaev, declared Chechen independence, and the country was renamed Ichkeria. In 1994 Russia invaded Chechnya under the pretext that ‘Chechen bandits’ had plundered the property of peaceful Russians across the border. A university textbook of Russian history presents the war as Russia’s answer to the provocations of the ‘Chechen criminals’ (Riabikin 1997). The war ended in 1996, and an agreement signed by General Aleksandr Lebed and the President of Ichkeria Aslan Mashkakov stipulated that Chechnya’s final status be decided ten years later. Russia did not keep the truce and invaded again in 1999. The pretext for the invasion was provided by the explosions in the Moscow and Volgodonsk apartment blocks that killed 200 people. On 30 December 2003, the UPI reported that copies of a book linking Russia’s FSB security service to apartment blasts in 1999 were seized by the Russian police.

The 1999 war never formally ended but was replaced by a partisan war. The last legally elected Chechen President, Aslan Mashkakov, was killed by Russians in 2005. In a report about the first Chechen war, Doctors Without Borders stated the following: ‘We are involved in all the major conflicts in the world but we believe Chechnya is the most cruel war. We are in the field witnessing the systematic massacre of civilian villages which are flattened by a [Russian] strategy of reconquest in south Chechnya’ (Reuters, 18 April 1996). The second war produced approximately 100,000 casualties, with torture and
The federation's demographic trends favour non-Russians over the Russians. The 2002 census showed that Russians made up 79.8 per cent of the population. In 1999, Sovietologist Paul Goble noted that the ethnic Russian population continued to shrink by half a million people a year, while the Islamic peoples' population was growing at a rate of 4 per cent a year; if the trends continued (and they have continued), by 2005 the federation's Islamic minority would reach 22 per cent. On 5 August 2005, The Times of London raised that figure to 23 million. It therefore appears that the federation is slated for instability. However, in spite of the actual and anticipated demographic changes, the grand narrative of Russian history is being passed on in the educational system and distributed abroad in an unchanged form. The politics of interpretation is still informed by the imperial vision. Russian history is yet to be recast in postcolonial terms.

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LITERARY WORKS

HISTORIES
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