

DECOLONIZATION AND THE NEW 'CULTURAL REVOLUTION'

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IN 2020, THE AUTHORS OF THE PAPER OFFERED FOR OUR COMMENTARY published an edited volume that argued for 'transnationalizing Russian Studies' or, otherwise put, breaking out of the tacit methodological nationalism that took "'Russianness" for granted'.¹ They proposed to treat Russia as 'a multi-ethnic, multicultural and multi-lingual formation' and sought 'to place the mobility of language, culture, ideas and people within, across and beyond national boundaries'.² They now return to reassess the premises and conclusions of their volume in the context of ever more vocal calls for the decolonization of Russian Studies. Hence their central question: 'To what extent was our "transnational" approach still necessary – or even valid – at a time when the Russian army was literally transgressing national borders?'.³ After discussing the historical evolution of Russian Studies, the ambivalence of Western academics' positioning within it and the pros and cons of the current decolonizing approaches for our field, they reconfirm the relevance of their original conceptual lens but propose to combine transnationalism with decolonization as 'mutually corrective'.⁴

With respect to the central question, I am not convinced that we as scholars should use military invasions as our primary benchmark, rushing to reassess well-tested methodologies on account of a volatile geopolitical situation, no matter how tragic and emotional it may be for many concerned. This is especially the case since, as Byford, Doak and Hutchings acknowledge towards the end of their essay, the very epistemic foundations of our field today 'are not just symbolically mirroring the war's violence and brutality but are also shaped by them'.⁵ This is clearly an abnormal and deplorable situation for any sphere of human activity, particularly the intellectual one.

Moreover, I fail to see, at least at present, any direct benefit from combining the transnational paradigm with decolonization. Apart from the fact that 'decolonizing Russian Studies' has itself become a transnational trend, hastily adopted in university circles from North America to Europe to Japan, these phenomena remain fundamentally distinct.

While 'transnationalism' has gained wide currency in social, business and everyday parlance, having experienced a considerable semantic expansion, as a conceptual framework in literary and cultural studies it connotes something quite

specific. It arose in response to a rapidly shifting cultural reality informed by unprecedented migrations and global connectivity, which destroyed neatly circumscribed mono-national units (if they ever existed in practice). Transnational theory articulated a defining role in contemporary culture of cross-border mobility, fusion and interstitiality – processes that have decoupled conventional associations between nation, language and geographical territory. This approach reached Russian Studies later than other fields. It was not a common view even ten years ago when I was finishing a book on Russian Montparnasse as a transnational community.⁶ Since then, however, the transnational paradigm began to inform research on Russian culture both beyond and within national borders. In the years 2018 to 2020, when I was conducting an international collaborative project on Russian diasporic literature, we argued for diverse conceptions of ‘Russianness’, a multiplicity of literary canons and a plurality of historical and cultural narratives.⁷ Other publications, including *Transnational Russian Studies* by Byford, Doak and Hutchings, contributed to consolidating the transnational approach to Russian humanities. And as long as Russian culture (or, as some scholars insist, Russian cultures)⁸ remains global, multifocal and translingual, there seems no reason to doubt the relevance of this approach. Indeed, the two million-strong emigration from the Russian Federation over the last two years has only accelerated the further diversification and hybridization of Russian literary and political discourses and the establishment of new distinct geo-cultural formations in various corners of the planet.

By contrast, decolonization is, in the first instance, an ideology with a prescriptive character. Decolonization of Russian Studies has become a form of political activism, which is, in my view, incompatible with academic work (both research and teaching) because it tends to replace the transmission of knowledge with indoctrination. Political activism is the opposite of education, since it teaches students what to think and not how to think. Education is about introducing alternative narratives and discussing their respective values and flaws, rather than ‘cancelling’ views that appear ‘offensive’, ‘conservative’, ‘controversial’ or otherwise incompatible with the sensibilities of those who shape current mainstream opinion. Education also implies studying phenomena in their original historical and ideological contexts, rather than judging them only by the standards of today. Decolonization, as currently practised in Western academia, particularly in our field, does the opposite.

The authors of the essay point out very sensibly that this ideological framework was developed in other contexts and for other purposes, primarily in Latin American area studies. The indiscriminate application of this vocabulary to Russian culture for the primary purpose of illustrating the pervasiveness and persistence of Russian imperialism is unprofessional and reminiscent of selective and distorted Soviet interpretations of Western culture (and, generally, of anything that clashed with the Soviet ideological paradigm). It would be unproductive to read Pushkin and Tolstoy through Putin, Goethe through Hitler or Firdousi through the policies of current Iranian rulers. Our students will only become true experts on Russia if they acquire deep and thorough knowledge about the country and its complex and chequered history, rather than blindly assimilating a picture informed by fashionable

ideologies.⁹ The forceful implementation of the decolonizing paradigm in the *academic context* will breed Russophobia rather than training students to make reasonable predictions about the country's trajectory.

We have already seen how the academic community, including renowned Western experts in Russian politics and social studies, failed to anticipate the dramatic events of February 2022. Indeed, they were taken by complete surprise. And this happened despite Russia's alleged 'epistemic centrality', which, as Byford, Doak and Hutchings remark, 'has consistently generated a gravitational pull on limited institutional and epistemic resources at the expense of the many smaller, peripheral, non-Russian elements within this field's elastic remit'.¹⁰ Does this mean that these apparently disproportionate resources allocated for grants and research projects were wasted without producing any reliable results? Perhaps one of the reasons for the failure of Western academics to generate adequate expert knowledge is that Russia has been generally studied at a distance, with research driven by the application of trendy theoretical frames rather than old-fashioned 'field work'?

In the period immediately following the fall of the Soviet Union, academics tended to expect eventual 'convergence' between Russia and the West, leading to the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of government, as Francis Fukuyama famously argued in his book *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992).¹¹ While there were certainly critics of Fukuyama's teleological argument, few cared to explore in earnest the viability of alternative scenarios or to examine more broadly why in some regions, nations and countries Western-style democracy appears unable to displace more authoritarian forms of government. For a political scientist conditioned by the Western academic culture, it could have been risky to start this conversation, posing uncomfortable questions about the universal applicability and stability of contemporary democracy and the inefficiency of national and international institutions created (and funded) to promote democratic values around the world. Rather than challenging the sacred cow of democracy as the ultimate end point of political evolution, many scholars prefer to explain the endurance of non-democratic regimes by delusion, ignorance or oppression. So, the problem is not that Russianists have come so close to their object of study as to require 'decolonization' to liberate themselves from Kremlin influence. On the contrary, they need to examine their subject at a closer range. If they continue to observe Russia through a telescope, they will add very little to our understanding of it, just when we need that knowledge most.¹²

If any 'self-decolonization' is indeed necessary, it is precisely this kind of re-evaluation of preconceived notions that inform Russian Studies today, along with a return to bottom-up research. As for periodic reviewing of one's own beliefs, strategies and positioning: professional and responsible academics have always done this anyway, long before the buzzword 'decolonization' was adopted, and they will continue to do so. But subjecting everyone simultaneously to this mandatory exercise can only do harm, intimidating those who should be able to think independently and to teach their students to express their thoughts and doubts freely. We already see blatant violations of free speech and free thought and censoring of those who

hold dissenting opinions. While paying lip service to inclusiveness and diversity, this ideology thrives on the exclusion of specific groups, cultures and systems of thought.

In their essay, Byford, Doak and Hutchings point out the imminent dangers of blind application of the decolonization paradigm to Russian Studies. And they do it in a very polite and reserved way that contrasts favourably with the uncompromising rhetoric that marks the written and oral expression of those who promote decolonization today. However, rather than looking for a way to reconcile decolonization with more appropriate scholarly methods, the time seems ripe to resist the aggressive ideologization of our field before it is too late. Those of us who remember the Soviet past cannot help seeing the familiar outlines of intellectual repression under a different guise. A rather unpleasant *déjà vu*...

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NOTES

¹ *Transnational Russian Studies*, ed. by Andy Byford, Connor Doak and Stephen Hutchings (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020). The quotation is taken from the authors' summary of this volume in their contribution to this Talking Point: Andy Byford, Connor Doak and Stephen Hutchings, 'Decolonizing the Transnational, Transnationalizing the Decolonial: Russian Studies at the Crossroads', *Forum for Modern Languages Studies*, 60.3 (2024).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Maria Rubins, *Russian Montparnasse: Transnational Writing in Interwar Paris* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

⁷ *Redefining Russian Literary Diaspora, 1920–2020*, ed. by Maria Rubins (London: UCL Press, 2021).

⁸ *Global Russian Cultures*, ed. by Kevin Platt (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 2019).

⁹ We are already seeing the result of the proliferation of various disciplines that easily shift into ideological dogma, each offering its own reductive optic for the examination of sophisticated cultural production. Among others, the Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz has pointed out the impact of such disciplines as Postcolonial Studies, Gender Studies, Race Critical Theory and Queer Studies on the intellectual environment and the decline in university education. See 'Prof. Alan Dershowitz Describes the Ivy League Universities' Double Standard', <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CzTpGpGLecA>> [accessed 8 April 2024]. Conditioned to view the world only in pre-defined categories with set normative associations (oppressor/oppressed, colonizer/colonized, dominant/subaltern), students are not prepared to assimilate the complexities of historical context, critically to assess conflicting sources of information or to engage in a dialogue. Analysis and reflection give way to superficial pasting of the assigned categories onto each new situation. This phenomenon is illustrated by the current anti-Israel rallies on campuses. The cause of the present war in Gaza – the barbaric attack by Hamas terrorists on Israeli civilians on 7 October 2023 (the worst atrocities perpetrated against Jews since the Holocaust) – was quickly de-emphasized, with left-wing propaganda flipping the narrative to demonize Israel. Crowds on campuses reproduce the claims and statistics of Hamas leaders, chant their slogans and resort to occupation of public places and bullying Jewish students and professors. Meanwhile polls show that half of these activists know next to nothing about the prehistory of the conflict and have no idea that the call to 'free Palestine' 'from the river to the sea' necessarily implies the destruction of the State of Israel, which is located precisely between the River Jordan and

the Mediterranean Sea (see Ron E. Hassner, 'From Which River to Which Sea? College Students Don't Know, Yet They Agree With the Slogan', *Wall Street Journal*, 5 December, 2023). This astounding ignorance coupled with a self-righteous tone and verbal aggression is unsurprising, when even the presidents of top US universities, including Harvard, UPenn and MIT, are unable to answer the simple question of whether calls for genocide of the Jews violates the university code of conduct (as demonstrated by the Congressional hearing on antisemitism at college campuses on 5 December 2023). After 'instruction' from academics like these, the younger generation naturally finds itself in a state of moral chaos and intellectual confusion.

¹⁰ Byford, Doak and Hutchings, 'Decolonizing the Transnational'.

¹¹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

¹² The current efforts to isolate Russian researchers (usually irrespective of their political position), to suspend all exchange programmes, to terminate joint academic projects and alliances, to ban experts who still reside in the Russian Federation from publishing in Western journals and participating in conferences will inevitably lead to a major global setback because science and scholarship today are inconceivable without international cooperation.