

Ostap Kushnir

University of Portsmouth (United Kingdom)

ORCID: 0000-0003-4058-8059

e-mail: ostap.kushnir@port.ac.uk

Decolonising Knowledge Production about Ukraine: A Security Aspect

Abstract: The article aims to identify some of the misrepresentations of Ukraine that originated in Russia and led to distorted perceptions of Ukraine in the English-speaking academia. Apart from that, the article aims to expose the reasons behind the emergence of such misrepresentations, the way to counter them, and the pitfalls of using them in security analysis. The article hypothesizes that the traditional colonial perception of Ukraine prevents Western scholars and policy-makers, whom these scholars consult, from adequately interpreting and securitizing the acuteness of the contemporary Russian threat. To complete the research, the article draws from decolonial and securitization theories. The article argues that the centuries-long othering and denial of agency of Ukraine, combined with the lack of specific expertise on the country and the colonial tradition of knowledge production, led to a comparatively inconsistent response of Western academia to the post-2014 Russian aggression against a sovereign nation. To address the existing inadequacy, Western scholars should become more open to the opinions of their Ukrainian colleagues, accept the merit of unconventional perspectives, and revise Russo-centrism in research frameworks and teaching curricula.

Keywords: *decolonization, securitization, Ukrainian studies, knowledge production, Russo-Ukrainian war, Russian colonialism, Russian aggression*

Introduction

For centuries, the Russian perspective has dominated the expert approach toward Ukraine. It has been achieved through Russia's purposeful enforcement of its version of history and identity for Ukraine, as well as monopolizing the nation's representation abroad. In such a way, the traditional perception of Ukraine as a "Russia in miniature" – Little Russia or *Malorosia* – was born in the English-speaking academia. Because of their over-reliance on ingrained misconceptions, many Western scholars neither predicted nor could explain the character of the Russian full-scale invasion in 2022 (Dudko, 2023, p. 175).

Oxana Shevel, the President of the American Association for Ukrainian Studies, argues that Ukraine's trauma inflicted by Russian imperialism and colonialism remains "overlooked to a large extent"; instead, many in the English-speaking academia continue believing that Ukraine benefited from "modernization, education, and industrialization" under Russian rule (Prince, 2023). In other words, Ukrainians are not supposed to have any significant grudges against Russians who have never been colonizers in the first place. This belief emerges naturally if one considers the domination of Slavists, Rusologists, and Sovietologists in discussions over the region (Koval et al., 2022, p. 28).

According to Chernetsky, Western scholars specifically "misjudged and misunderstood" Ukraine when they expected it to fall quickly under the 2022 Russian assault because they believed that a "divided nation with a weak sense of national identity" could not fight back (Prince, 2023). In other words, the "Huntington's curse" from the 1990s of Ukraine being "a cleft country" (Huntington, 2011, pp. 165-166) did not disappear from academic discourse. Many Western scholars are also noticed as "speaking without sufficient expertise but from a position of authority, often making false projections and assumptions that are based on the Western experience but are not necessarily relevant to the region in question" (Kazharski, 2022). Lukas (2019) and Kazharski (2022) define this phenomenon as "Westspaining" (see also Hendl et al., 2024, pp. 176-177).

Åslund (2023) highlights that Russian studies have always been singled out in English-speaking academia, epitomized in the names of departments and research centers exploring the region. Many of them are overly focused on Russia at the expense of Ukraine or other sovereign entities (e.g., Moldova, Belarus, or the Caucasus republics), which leads to "epistemic inequality" and knowledge deficits (Kazharski, 2023; Dudko, 2023, p. 187). Already in 2003, Chernetsky (37) put it straightforwardly that the "position of Ukrainian studies vis-a-vis Russian studies in the West" was "subaltern and marginalized." A handful of non-mainstream scholars of Ukraine who were – and remain – employed in a few specialized institutions emphasizing Ukraine could not publish enough to challenge the embedded Russo-centrism. Moreover, almost all of these specialized institutions had been established by the Ukrainian *émigré* community in the 1970s–80s (and financially supported since then) to help it find roots and preserve identity in a distant land instead of sustainably developing Ukrainian studies (Sysyn, 2023, 1:08:01–1:08:19; Magosci, 2018, pp. 22–24; von Hagen, 1995, pp. 658–659).

One of the reasons English-speaking academia "misjudges and misunderstands" Ukraine resides in its unpreparedness or unwillingness to accept the nation as the one restoring its agency and departing from the perception of "Russia in miniature." Many experts question the sole fact that the knowledge production about Ukraine should be revised and decolonized, which, in turn, has much to do with dissonant understandings of coloniality and imperial legacies in Central and Eastern Europe (Polegkyi, 2015, p. 171; Yas, 2022, pp. 163–164).

The article argues that the decolonization of knowledge production about Ukraine is needed to diminish the academic bias in contemporary political studies and make Western countries more resilient in the face of new security threats. The way Russian foreign policy and aggression are analyzed should be reconsidered to discover better mechanisms for deterring the Kremlin's expansionism, defending the post-WW2 European order, and recognizing the right of Ukrainians for national self-determination.

This article addresses the issue of inadequate securitization of the Russian threat in the West, specifically in the English-speaking academia. It hypothesizes that the traditional colonial perception of Ukraine prevents the scholars and policy-makers whom these scholars consult from reacting to the ongoing war as existential for the Ukrainian nation and pivotal for the security of the whole continent.

Methodological remarks

On February 24, 2022, a wave of discussions started across the English-speaking academia on why the traditional analytic frameworks lacked explanatory capacity (e.g., could not predict the nature and character of the Russo-Ukrainian war) and how the Russian invasion of Ukraine should be interpreted *per se*. This article aims to contribute to these discussions; it is more a research agenda-setting piece that draws from the decolonial theory than the one rooted in empirical findings. The core of this article consists of an overview of the current state of scholarly understanding of Ukraine being a colony, colonial legacies in Ukrainian and Russian studies, the ways to decolonize knowledge production, and the necessity to do so (in light of the new security challenges).

Alongside the decolonial, securitization theory provides the central theoretical backbone for this article. It explores the preconditions, nature, and dynamics behind a shift in perception of a particular political issue from regular (familiar, comfortable, comprehensible) to irregular (unknown, menacing, dangerous). Whenever such a shift happens, whenever a new security narrative gains discursive credibility through a “speech act,” it “takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or as above politics” (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 23). Securitization occurs only if the political issue cannot be publicly explained and resolved with the mechanisms of “normal politics,” that is, through democratic deliberations, uniform processes, and traditional understandings (Hansen, 2012; Jaroszewich & Grzymiski, 2023, p. 4). Securitization requires an irregular issue to appear so threatening in the discourse (or to be portrayed such through the “speech act”) that the urge for its resolution legitimizes the violation of the “normal” political procedures. The key decision-makers must resort to emergency measures with no need for all political stakeholders' consent, at least immediately (Willimas, 2015).

In the case of Ukraine, the “normal politics” implied – at least before February 24, 2022 – that Russia had a hegemonic right to “supervise” Central and Eastern Europe, specifically the former Soviet non-EU countries; Russia had a right for its “near abroad”

(Gretskiy, 2020, pp. 4-5; Herbst et al., 2023). That kind of “normalcy” appeared as the result of the recognition by Western scholars and experts – and consequently, public opinion and decision-makers – of the legitimacy of the colonial legacies and dependencies in the region, specifically the deficiency of Ukraine’s agency if contrasted with Russia. In light of the established tradition of knowledge production, Russian interventionist foreign policy against Ukraine could not be securitized in the West as it did not look irregular or trigger any “above politics” response. That tradition is something that the given article considers harmful and challenging, and it advocates revision.

To a significant extent, securitization theory relies on othering. Jaroszewich and Grzymiski (2023, p. 6–7) suggest that othering is simultaneously a process and an outcome of a social imagining of a group of people – Ukrainians and Russians in the case of this article – based on generalizations of their collective features. The othering leads to the emergence of stereotypes and prejudice, as well as to the reinforcement of the opposition of the “self” against the “other” or the “normal” against the “irregular.”

The traditional colonial perception of Ukraine is deeply entrenched in the othering of the country and its people as non-Western, which also contributed to inadequate securitization of the Russian aggression in 2014. In the “friend-enemy” dichotomy, Ukraine has never been enough “friendly” and “normal,” while Russia has never been too “inimical” and “irregular” (Mälksoo, 2022, p. 473). The inability to alter the othering practices, revise the existing discursive narratives, and switch to alternative patterns of knowledge production—not least due to a fierce Russian opposition –significantly alleviates the understanding of the threat coming from the Kremlin. Since 1991, most former communist European states have invested significant intellectual resources to counter their othering in the West, while Ukraine is still falling behind (Kushnir, 2022, p. 116).

Ukraine as a former colony

In 1996, von Hagen hypothesized that Ukraine had no consistent image of a sovereign nation-state. Western academia debated the nature of its history; diaspora scholars produced incomplete or very narrowly focused research and the post-Soviet school looked provincial and had yet to undergo de-Russification. Von Hagen riddled the expert community with questions about to what extent the Russian legacies could be regarded as colonial and to what extent they could be incorporated into the brand-new Ukrainian statecraft.

Addressing these questions, Spivak (2006, p. 828) argued that Ukraine, as well as many other post-Soviet and post-communist republics, could be classified as a legitimate subject for colonial and postcolonial research: “When an alien nation-state [i.e., Russia] establishes itself as ruler, impressing its laws and systems of education and rearranging the mode of production for its economic benefit, ‘colonizer’ and ‘colonized’ can be used.”

One of the most elaborate overviews of the debate on the colonial status of Ukraine belongs to Yas. He looks into Ukrainian and Russian historiography of the 19th–20th centuries.

He concludes that Ukrainian intellectuals most often portrayed their country as a “[Russian] colony of the European type,” “industrial colony of imperial Russia,” or “leading colony of imperial Russia” (Yas, 2002, p. 159). In turn, official imperial scholars regarded Ukraine as a “dominated entity” but not a colony. Soviet scholars used the term “semi-colony” when they explained dependencies between Ukraine and Russia before 1922 and avoided discussing these dependencies in later times; such epistemic ignorance persists in Russian historical and postcolonial studies up to now. Yas (2022, p. 160) highlights an interesting fact: at the beginning of the 20th century, Drahomanov and Antonovych systemically compared Russo-Ukrainian relations to the ones existing between England and Ireland. Scholars believed that colonized nations’ histories and political developments followed similar trajectories.

Chernetsky (2003, p. 37) also agrees that Russian rule in Ukraine resembles English domination over Ireland: “a lengthy, convoluted relationship of close neighbors that has produced a virtual minefield of cultural and political tensions.” Moore (2001, pp. 118–119) writes of the Russian colonization of Ukraine – as well as the English of Ireland – as one of a “standard” or a “dynastic” pattern in which a great European power conquers a weaker neighboring nation. Russian dynastic language about Ukraine was suffused with the rhetoric of sibling unity and accompanied by settler control. The same Yas, Moore (2001, p. 115) highlights that many “scholars specializing in the formerly Soviet-controlled lands [failed] to think of their regions in the useful if by no means perfect postcolonial terms developed by scholars of, say, Indonesia and Gabon.” This failure epitomizes the absence of communication between post-Soviet and Global South scholars and the lack of interest in establishing such communication due to the existing tradition in respective area studies.

That being said, not all experts on Ukraine agree to regard the country as a colony of imperial and later Soviet Russia. For instance, Rudnytsky (1963, p. 204), a significant figure in Ukrainian studies in North America, spoke against this: “Tsarist Russia possessed genuine colonies, such as Transcaucasia and Turkestan, but Ukraine could not be counted among them. The administration looked rather on Ukraine as belonging to the core of the ‘home provinces’ of European Russia. The economic progress of Ukraine (‘South Russia’) was faster than that of the Great Russian center.” According to Yas (2022, p. 167), there were similar views shared by dozens of other researchers from the relatively liberal 1960s.

Yekelchuk (2023, 1:37:07–1:38:04) does not deny that Ukraine was a colony but defines it as an “atypical” one. Ukraine did not suffer from European metropolitan rule as much as it did from Russia. Therefore, the country’s decolonization entails a departure from the Russian cultural space and approximation with Europe. At the same time, the majority of “typical” colonies in other parts of the world strive to forfeit Europe and its legacy. Krapfl (2023, p. 141) supports this logic of thought: “Discussions of decolonization in the Americas have usually not imagined Europe as a space subject to colonialism.” Therefore, the case of Ukraine introduces a change to paradigms of how colonialism and decolonization should be studied concerning Europe.

Decolonizing knowledge production about Ukraine

Speaking on the academic dimension of the coloniality, colonization, and decolonization of Ukraine, the observations by Koval and her team (2022) demonstrate that most of today's expert discussions are focused on the issues of history, culture, and literature. These discussions often take place within the long-established frameworks of "area studies," "Slavic studies," "Central and Eastern European studies," and/or "Eurasian studies." The latter frameworks are criticized for being imperfect, yet they continue to constitute the environment where the experts in the region are educated. It is no surprise that such experts failed to explain post-2014 developments in Ukraine or simply lacked the competencies to do so. As Peppard (2023, p. 229) highlights when commenting on curricula of Slavic studies in American universities, "In the literature courses, we do not get into any detail about Russia's war on Ukraine."

The discussions on the decolonization of Ukrainian literature, culture, and history are being led today by Moore (2001), Chernetsky (2003; 2006), Spivak (2006), Zhurzhenko (2021), Zayarnyuk (2022), Yurchuk (2022), Krapfl (2023), Donovan (2023), Peppard (2023), Dudko (2023), Kamusella (2023), Hosaka (2023), and others. Many scholars argue that Western institutions' existing curricula and research approaches are permeated with an appraisal of Russian imperialism and colonization. Already in 2006, Chernetsky (pp. 834-835) cited Etkind and noted that "in the Russian historiographical tradition ... Russian colonization is viewed as being of a settler type, 'an expansion of the Russian people' as it created 'its territory.'" This tradition not only made Russian settlers look like do-gooders but rendered the decolonization of Ukraine and other countries devoured by the empire logically impossible; Russian subjugation of Ukraine appeared to be "an internal affair" in this light (see also Yas, 2022, p. 162).

Little has changed in historiography since that time. Zayarnyuk (2022, p. 193) goes as far as to blame contemporary Western scholars, specifically historians, for uncritical popularizing Russia-originated misconceptions and "enabling of Russian crimes [which followed the 2022 invasion] because history is central to the ideology that underpins Russia's genocidal war in Ukraine." In turn, Yurchuk (2022, p. 44) highlights the omnipresence of the discourse of "subjugation to dialogue" in the Western expert communities, specifically Swedish, as if Ukrainians and Russians could easily reconcile while fighting: "Even the genocidal violence of the Russian army in Bucha and Irpin did not change their [academic] discourse. They still refuse to see the difference between the killer and the victim (...) people know almost nothing about Ukraine."

The discussion about the decolonization of Ukrainian studies in contemporary English-speaking academia predominantly orbits the question of providing Ukraine with the agency it deserves. Donovan (2023, p. 163) argues that Ukraine has long been subject to "academic resourcification" in the West. The scholarly community used to treat the country as a cog-wheel in the metropole's larger social and economic systems. For instance, Ukraine has

commonly been portrayed as the breadbasket of Europe and the industrial heart of the Soviet Union, not a land of its people. In such a way, Western scholars tacitly adhered to “knowledge resulting from colonialism, a complex of inherited and internalized hierarchies of value that assert the primacy of certain forms of societal organization and practices of knowledge production over others” (Donovan, 2023, p. 165). Therefore, the decolonization of Ukrainian studies in English-speaking academia should go beyond simply de-centering Russia in research and education. Instead, it should reside in alienation from the existing paradigms of knowledge production that regard Ukraine and other post-Soviet republics as “developing” and “dysfunctional” if compared to their metropole or the West (see also Vorbrugg & Bluwstein, 2002, p. 2).

Dudko (2023, p. 175) adds to this point that “rethinking Ukraine and the region to which it belongs means embracing Ukrainian studies ... as a compelling analytical entry point for studying large-scale processes of modern politics, trans-imperial nation-making, and cross-border exchanges of ideas, ideologies, and knowledge.” The experts and researchers should reimagine narratives of Europe as a “pluriversal” with Ukraine being a proactive actor in that environment.

Yurchuk (2022, p. 46) opines that the decolonization of Ukraine in Western academia should commence with a few simple steps. Firstly, Western scholars should honestly spread factual knowledge: “Those of us who vote for the leftist parties must have the courage to speak about the crimes of communist regimes in their lectures.” Secondly, Ukrainian scholars should be provided with more space, resources, and time for expression so they can “speak on their terms, without [being forced] into suffocating embraces of a ‘dialogue’ with colleagues who see no difference between the positions of people in Ukraine and Russia.” Thirdly, Western academia should become open enough to listen to uncomfortable facts, acknowledge them, and learn resilience from Ukraine.

Kamusella (2023) believes that the decolonization of knowledge production about Ukraine should start with rearrangements of existing academic frameworks and paradigms. In particular, Central and Eastern European studies (including the Caucasus) should be subsumed under the clear-cut rubric of European studies. Ukrainian culture, history, literature, or politics should be separated from the amorphous “area studies” and legitimized as scholarly fields of their own. Finally, Slavic studies should no longer be used as a facade term to conceal the focus on Russian language and culture: “A department of Slavic studies to be what its name announces, it needs to offer full-fledged study tracks in other Slavic languages than Russian.”

Finally, Hosaka (2023), while highlighting the necessity to curtail Russo-centrism in Central and Eastern European studies and start perceiving Russians as noxious colonizers of the region, encourages us to take two additional steps. The first is to revise counterhegemonic epistemology in the English-speaking academia as there exists an “astonishing degree of empathy with Russian suffering while blaming the West for ‘Russophobia.’” (Hosaka, 2023, p. 1; see also Gretskiy, 2020, p. 4). The second is to firmly explore – instead of purposively

avoid – “politicized” topics that are uncomfortable for the Russian regime, challenge its legitimacy, and may trigger its hostile response (e.g., accusations of Western scholars in the “falsification of history” and limit their access to Russian research resources).

Ukraine in the Russian “grand narrative”

In the 19th century, the Russian court and individual benefactors supported scholarly societies that worked on codification and popularization of the history of the Russian empire in which the developments on Ukrainian soil were overlooked, distorted, or portrayed as non-important (Kaplan, 2017, p. 8). The imperial “grand narrative” or “traditional scheme” of Russian history that was formed “became an assertion of historical priority, a claim to privileged possession of territory and statehood, and a justification of a Great Russian ethnolinguistic definition of ‘Russianness’ and Russian identity” (Kohut, 2001, p. 75).

The “grand narrative” spread to the US in the early 20th century and shaped the curriculum of Russian studies at Harvard and other universities through the works of Klyuchevsky, an imperial-era scholar and one of the founders of modern Russian historiography. Klyuchevsky contested the existence of Ukraine and its people as belonging outside Greater Russia; Ukraine was “Russia in miniature,” or Little Russia. In light of his teachings, the colonizers’ version of the history of Ukraine remained largely unchallenged in the West up to the 1970s (Prince, 2023).

In the post-WW2 times, if one looks at the 1963 monograph on Russian history by Riasanovski, which became the indispensable handbook for many US and UK universities, at least three colonial claims – as earlier posited by Karamzin, Ustrialov, and Klyuchevski – immediately resurface.

Throughout the monograph, “Kievan Russia” primarily defines the proto-state in North-Central Europe from the 9th to 13th centuries. That term is misleading as one of its parts, the denominator “Russia,” started being widely used only around 1721 when the Russian empire came into being. Before that, the lands centered around Moscow had been commonly known as the Grand Duchy of Moscow and/or Tsardom of Muscovy, while lands centered around Kyiv were known as Rus. By using the term “Kievan Russia,” Riasanovsky equated meanings of “Russia” and “Rus,” intertwined different historical epochs, and spread confusion.

Secondly, the term “Kyivan Russia” *per se* was developed and popularized by the Russian imperial academia of the 19th century (Sysyn 2023: 1:21:16-1:21:21). In opposition, the founders of Ukrainian historiography Arkas and Hrushevsky suggested defining the same lands as “Rus” or “Ukraine-Rus” (considering that the denominator “Ukraine” had already been listed in 1187 chronicle to indicate principalities around Kyiv) (Hyrych 2022). The Arkas and Hrushevski’s suggestion was in line with Toynbee’s (1915, p. 3) observation that Ukrainians self-identified as the “Rus people” while calling their northeastern neighbors “Muscovites,” not “Russians.”

Thirdly, Riasanovski (1963, p. 25) supported the claim that Russia evolved from and became the only heir to the Kyiv proto-state. The first scholar to formulate that claim comprehensively was Karamzin, who argued that the continuity between Kyiv and Moscow was not cultural, religious, or ethnic but political (Kohut, 2001, p. 73). In this light, the imperial concept of “brotherly nations” acquired its sense, legitimizing Moscow’s right to govern over Ukraine and other lands of medieval Rus. Moscow’s inheritance claim retains its validity up to now; according to Prince (2023), “one key narrative ... widely taught in the United States, is that Russia is the direct and sole successor to [Kyivan Rus] – a state that reached the peak of its power a century before Moscow was founded.”

Today, much of the Ukraine-related terminology used in English-speaking academia also reflects the colonial tradition. If spelled with the definite article, the sole name of the country, “Ukraine,” reinforces the exogenous version of its history and distorts its representation. According to Paul Grod, the vice-president of the Ukrainian World Congress, “‘Ukraine’ was used as a name for a region of the empires that subjugated Ukraine ... The continued use of the definite article in front of the name of an independent state – Ukraine – is therefore an indirect (although often unintentional) denial of statehood” (cited in Goncharova, 2018). Also, when using “Kiev” not “Kyiv,” the English-speaking scholars adhere to the vision of that city as one of many in the Russian metropolitan system, not the capital of an independent country with a unique language and culture (Dickinson, 2019).

The current government in Moscow encourages the use of imperial terminology in the West to latently justify its pretensions over Ukraine and deny the latter’s agency. Terminology in a given context equals manifestation of power over space and people; the ability to name has always been “the creative power to call something into being, to render the invisible visible, to impart a certain character to things” (Tuan, 1991, p. 688). In this light, because “Ukraine” means nothing but a dependent region, Russians have the right to intervene and prevent “NATO expansion” into their “sphere of influence”; because “Ukraine” has never been “a proper state” it should not fight back and win against the well-established Russian sovereignty; because “Kyiv” (not “Kiev”) is the capital of Ukraine, the country is governed by the Russophobic neo-Nazis who and reject the “grand narrative” of history (Kuzio, 2019, p. 499). These and many other colonial claims, if accepted uncritically in the English-speaking academia, lead to “misjudgment and misunderstanding” of Ukraine and its perception as “Russia in miniature.”

The Russo-Ukrainian war: Inadequate securitization

Hosaka (2023, p.1) argues that an excessive sympathy for Russian authoritarianism and exuberant respect for the regime’s colonial legacies (including literature) encourages Western scholars to approach Russia as a “normal” country. By doing so, the analysis of the Russo-Ukrainian war not only looks incomplete but is misleading; the strategies to deter the Kremlin’s aggression are ineffective (if not counterproductive), which leads to a further

increase of regional tensions and instabilities. It also motivates the Kremlin to expand its activities because Western scholars attempt to “understand Putin” at the expense of other countries. Zayarnyuk (2022, p. 193) warns that inadequate securitization will whitewash Russian war crimes and crimes against humanity in Ukraine, as well as allow perpetrators to avoid responsibility (see also Hendl et al., 2024, p. 180).

The scholars who downplay the legacies of colonialism continue perceiving Ukraine as “Russia in miniature” and explaining the Russian invasion as an “internal affair.” Putin (2021) has recently reinforced that perception in his essay “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” where he claimed that both nations are one people. Following the essay’s logic, Ukrainians are supposed to build their kind of authoritarianism and organize their political life around strong leadership and inflexible hierarchies. If this does not happen, Russians – on the right of the mentor and kindred nation – are entitled to take corrective action and “normalize” the political course of Ukraine. Therefore, for many in English-speaking academia, the 2022 invasion was nothing “above politics” or nothing “irregular” as Russians performed their natural hegemonic duty (Kordan, 2022, p. 166).

In the 2020s, Gretskiy (2020, p. 3) brought to light a neo-imperial “Lukyanov’s Doctrine,” which is a “foreign policy paradigm that inherited and fully embraced two fundamental elements of the preceding Brezhnev Doctrine – a vision based on the concept of limited sovereignty [of the neighboring states], and the right to intervene within its ‘sphere of influence.’ The latter includes direct and indirect support of its proxies to undermine governments of those countries that do not accept Russia’s leading role in the region.” In other words, “Lukyanov’s Doctrine” draws from the colonial representations of the Central and Eastern European states, above all Ukraine, and justifies the right of Russians to take unilateral actions in their neighborhood even if the latter contradicts the sovereign will of the immediate neighbors. Stent (2022) outlines similar features of contemporary Russian foreign policy but defines them as the “Putin Doctrine.” Both of these doctrines look legitimate, even “normal” for a part of Western academia, which poses an existential threat to all former Soviet and communist countries. If one day the Kremlin claims its European neighbors belong to its sovereignty, there will appear voices in the Western academia supporting that claim and discouraging “above politics” measures.

One of the brightest examples of inadequate securitization by denying Ukraine’s agency is Mearsheimer’s (2022) explanations of the causes of the Russian invasion in 2022. He unequivocally claims that “the United States and its NATO allies played a crucial role in the events that led to the Ukraine war – and are now playing a central role in the conduct of that war.” He also adds that “Washington and its Western allies are committed to decisively defeating Russia” by burning through Ukraine’s resources; “In essence, the United States is helping lead Ukraine down the primrose path.” Finally, he states that Putin has never been “bent on conquering and absorbing Ukraine.” These three claims, at least these three, introduced into discourse by the Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, suggest that the only fighting sides in the Russo-Ukrainian war are

the US (with its NATO allies) and Russia, that the war emerged due to the Russian objection to Western expansionism in Ukraine; and that the war cannot be won by the defeat of Russia on the battlefield.

Mearsheimer's analysis relies on the colonial narratives that Ukraine is not fully sovereign. The "normalcy" that Mearsheimer and a handful of other scholars advocate neither leaves room for the national aspirations of Ukrainians nor explains their fierce resistance against the invaders (see also Hendl et al., 2024, p. 178-79). As Mälksoo (2022, p. 472) brilliantly notices, "Besides the generally strong and emotive Western support to Ukraine, the calls for Ukraine's neutrality and a hasty peace in fear of Putin's nuclear escalation have provided a fig leaf for the staple geopolitical 'buffer zone' – argumentation, effectively negating the political right to sovereign choices of the Ukrainian nation and state."

In light of the traditional knowledge production about Ukraine, Western scholars find it appropriate to draw heavily from Russian sources, especially from the speeches by Putin, when commenting on the Russo-Ukrainian war (Kuzio, 2018, pp. 530–531). In the pre-invasion times, Western leading think tanks were noticed to rely far more on Russian sources than on Ukrainian (Kulyk, 2020, pp. 5–6). This disproportion in data collection constitutes another layer of inadequate securitization of the Russian threat; it also manifests the defective perception of Ukraine's agency as the sources originating on its territory are systemically overlooked.

Conclusions

The "misjudgment and misunderstanding" of Ukraine in Western – and specifically English-speaking–academia is related mainly to Russia's centuries-long hegemonic supremacy in designing Ukraine's domestic policies and communicating them abroad. It was, among other things, accomplished through the consistent promotion of Russian colonial narratives inside and outside of Ukraine. In this light, according to Gretskiy, Ukraine continues appearing in the eyes of many Russian and Western observers as a state with "limited sovereignty": "Russians perceived [Ukraine and] other post-Soviet states not as fully-fledged sovereign and independent countries, but as temporary breakaway territories which would sooner or later be re-incorporated with Russia" (Gretskiy, 2020, pp. 18–19).

Bearing this in mind, to appropriately "judge and understand" today's Ukraine, Western scholars should not only approach it as a different entity from what Russia portrays it to be but acknowledge that the nature of that difference is yet to be profoundly explored. To do so, Western scholars should cut off the colonial legacies that distort the perception of a sovereign nation and reject the "grand narrative" of Russia's supremacy over it.

Decolonizing knowledge production about Ukraine should primarily reside in re-designing the traditional logic of research and education. Ukraine should be approached as a scholarly object in its own right, not "Russia in miniature." To make this happen, the English-speaking academia should become more susceptible to the voices of their Ukrainian

counterparts and more open to discovering new facts and creating new expertise, even if the latter collide with their long-established beliefs. The English-speaking academia should not be afraid to go beyond the traditional approaches to studying Russian authoritarianism as an “interesting case” of political order but look at it as a repressive and aggressive regime. It is also necessary to revise the curricula of the specialized courses and choose new handbooks. Finally, the thematic categories of “area studies,” “Central and Eastern European studies,” “Slavic and Eurasian studies,” and others should not only place Russia outside of their immediate focus but aim to discover unique peculiarities of the colonized nations and peoples that the Russian rule has long portrayed as peripheral.

In the long run, the academic “misjudgment and misunderstanding” of Ukraine, if not revised today, will pose a threat to European security as the scholars will not see the necessity to respond to the Russian discursive domination, which leads to a breach of international law and violation of the integrity of sovereign states; if happen, new cases of Russian aggression in Central and Eastern Europe will be interpreted as an “internal affair” that has little to do with the Western interests, and, therefore, should not be securitized.

References:

- Aslund, Å. (2023, January 4). *Opinion: The End of Post-Soviet Studies?* The Kyiv Post. <https://www.kyivpost.com/opinion/6385>
- Buzan, B., Wæver, O., & de Wilde, J. (1998). *Security. A New Framework for Analysis*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Chernetsky, V. (2003). Postcolonialism, Russia and Ukraine. *Ulbandus Review*, 7, 32–62.
- Chernetsky, V. (2006). On Some Post-Soviet Postcolonialisms. *PMLA*, 121(3), 833–836.
- Dickinson, P. (2019, October 21). *Kyiv not Kiev: Why Spelling Matters in Ukraine’s Quest for an Independent Identity*. Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/kyiv-not-kiev-why-spelling-matters-in-ukraines-quest-for-an-independent-identity/>
- Donovan, V. (2023). Against Academic “Resourcification”: Collaboration as Delinking from Extractivist “Area Studies” Paradigms. *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 65(2), 163–173. DOI: 10.1080/00085006.2023.2200669
- Dudko, O. (2023). Gate-crashing “European” and “Slavic” Area Studies: Can Ukrainian Studies Transform the Fields? *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 65(2), 174–189. DOI: 10.1080/00085006.2023.2202565
- Goncharova, O. (2018, July 6). *Honest History Episode 11: Saying “the Ukraine” Is More than a Mistake*. The Kyiv Post. <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/8043>
- Gretskiy, I. (2020). Lukyanov Doctrine: Conceptual Origins of Russia’s Hybrid Foreign Policy – The Case of Ukraine. *Saint Louis University Law Journal*, 64(1), 1–22.
- Hansen, L. (2012). Reconstructing desecuritisation: the normative-political in the Copenhagen School and directions for how to apply it. *Review of International Studies*, 38(3), 525–546.
- Hendl, T., Burluyk, O., O’Sullivan, M., & Arystanbek, A. (2024). (En)Countering epistemic imperialism: A critique of “Westspaining” and coloniality in dominant debates on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 45(2), 171–209. DOI: 10.1080/13523260.2023.2288468

- Herbst, J., Kramer, D. J., & Taylor, W. (2023, February 24). *Give Ukraine What It Wants*. Foreign Affairs. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/give-ukraine-what-it-wants-military-aid>
- Hosaka, S. (2023). A Way to “Toxic” Russian Studies: Stocktaking of Decolonizing, De-centering, and Rethinking Russian Studies. *Working Paper for 7th Annual Tartu Conference on East European and Eurasian Studies 11-13 June 2023*.
- Huntington, S. P. (2011). *Clash Of Civilizations And The Remaking Of World Order*. Simon & Schuster.
- Hyrych, I. (2022, July 28). “Ukraina-Rus” chy “Kyivs’ka Rus”? Tsi Poniattia Maiut’ Riznyi Zmist – Istoryk [“Ukraine-Rus” or “Kyivan Rus”? These Concepts Have Different Meanings – Historian]. Radio Svoboda. <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/ukrayina-rus-terminolohiya/31530763.html>
- Jaroszewicz, M., & Grzymski, J. (2023). Securitization in the Shadow of Armed Conflict: The Internal Othering and Electoral Rights of IDPs in Ukraine. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 56(1), 1–22. DOI: 10.1525/cpcs.2022.1775572
- Kamusella, T. (2023, September 5). *Going Native: Russian Studies in the West*. UAmoderna. <https://uamoderna.com/war/going-native-russian-studies-in-the-west/>
- Kaplan, V. (2017). *Historians and Historical Societies in the Public Life of Imperial Russia*. Indiana University Press.
- Kazharski, A. (2022, July 19). *Explaining the “Westspainers”: Can a Western Scholar Be an Authority on Central and Eastern Europe?* Forum for Ukrainian Studies. <https://ukrainian-studies.ca/2022/07/19/explaining-the-westspainers-can-a-western-scholar-be-an-authority-on-central-and-eastern-europe/>
- Kazharski, A. (2023, March 17). *Reasons for Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Realist, Liberal, and Constructivist Perspectives*. *Guest lecture at the University of Alberta*.
- Kohut, Z. E. (2001). Origins of the Unity Paradigm: Ukraine and the Construction of Russian National History (1620-1860). *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 35(1), 70–76.
- Kordan, B. (2022). Russia’s War Against Ukraine: Historical Narratives, Geopolitics, and Peace. *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 64(2–3), 162–172. DOI: 10.1080/00085006.2022.2107835
- Koval, N., Gaidai, O., Melnyk, M., Protsiuk, M., Tereshchenko, D., & Irysova, M. (2022). *Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar Studies in the World: Problems, Needs, Perspectives*. Ukrainian Institute. https://ui.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/ukrainian-and-crimean-tatar-studies-in-the-world_eng.pdf
- Krapfl, J. (2023). Decolonizing Minds in the “Slavic Area,” “Slavic Area Studies,” and Beyond. *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 65(2), 141–145. DOI: 10.1080/00085006.2023.2211460
- Kulyk, V. (2020). Analizuiuchy Analityku: Pro Zasady Doslidzhennia Zahidnyh Naukovykh ta Ekspertno-Analitychnykh Publikatsii na Temu Rosiis’ko-Ukraiins’koho Konfliktu [Analyzing the Analysis: On the Principles of Research of Western Scientific and Expert-Analytical Publications on the Topic of the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict]. In V. Kulyk (Ed.), *Interpretatsii Rosiis’ko-Ukraiins’koho Konfliktu v Zahidnykh Naukovykh i Ekspertno-Analitychnykh Pratsiah* (pp. 5–10). IPIEND im. I. F. Kurasa NAN Ukrainy.
- Kushnir, O. (2022). Overcoming “Otherness”: Central and Eastern European Nations and the Idea of “Europe.” *The International Spectator*, 57(4), 104–120. DOI: 10.1080/03932729.2022.2093934
- Kuzio, T. (2018). Euromaidan Revolution, Crimea and Russia–Ukraine War: Why It Is Time for a Review of Ukrainian-Russian Studies. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 59(3–4), 529–53. DOI: 10.1080/15387216.2019.1571428
- Kuzio, T. (2019). Old Wine in a New Bottle: Russia’s Modernization of Traditional Soviet Information Warfare and Active Policies Against Ukraine and Ukrainians. *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 32(4), 485–506. DOI: 10.1080/13518046.2019.1684002

- Lawton, L. (1935, May 29). The Ukrainian Question and Its Importance for Great Britain. *Speech to the House of Commons*. <http://willzuzak.ca/lp/lawton01.html>
- Lukas, E. (2019, March 25). *It's Time to Stop "Westspaining."* Center for European Policy Analysis. <https://cepa.org/article/its-time-to-stop-westspaining/>
- Mälksoo, M. (2022). The Postcolonial Moment in Russia's War Against Ukraine. *Journal of Genocide Research*, 25(3–4), 471–481. DOI: 10.1080/14623528.2022.2074947
- Mearsheimer, J. J. (2022, June 23). *The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine Crisis*. The National Interest. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/causes-and-consequences-ukraine-crisis-203182>
- Moore, D. C. (2001). Is the Post – in Postcolonial the Post – in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique. *PMLA*, 116(1), 111–128.
- Peppard, V. (2023). Teaching Russian Studies in the Wake of the War in Ukraine. *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 65(2), 220–231. DOI: 10.1080/00085006.2023.2200671
- Polegkyi, O. (2015). Identity-building in Post-communist Ukraine: Post-imperial vs Postcolonial Discourses. In B. Törnquist-Plewa, N. Bersand, & E. Narvselius (Eds.) *Beyond Transition? Memory and Identity Narratives in Eastern and Central Europe* (pp. 169–190). Centre for European Studies and Lund University.
- Prince, T. (2023, January 1). *Moscow's Invasion Of Ukraine Triggers "Soul-Searching" At Western Universities As Scholars Rethink Russian Studies*. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-war-ukraine-western-academia/32201630.html>
- Putin, V. (2021, July 12). *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*. President of Russia. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>
- Riasanovski, N. V. (1963). *A History of Russia*. Oxford University Press.
- Rudnytsky, I. L. (1963). The Role of the Ukraine in Modern History. *Slavic Review*, 22(2), 199–216.
- Spivak, G. C. (2006). Are You Postcolonial? To the Teachers of Slavic and Eastern European Literatures. *PMLA*, 121(3), 828–829.
- Stent, A. (2022, January 27). *The Putin Doctrine*. Foreign Affairs. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-01-27/putin-doctrine>
- Sysyn, F. E. (2023, May 11). *"The Unpredictable Past": A Round-table Discussion on Transformations in Ukrainian Studies* [Video]. Youtube – Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 1:05:10-1:26:00. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2XI8btnN3B8>
- Toynbee, A. J. (1916). *British view of the Ukrainian question, the Ukraine – a problem of nationality*. Ukrainian Federation of USA.
- Tuan, Y. (1991). Language and the Making of Place: A Narrative-Descriptive Approach. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 81(4), 684–696.
- Von Hagen, M. (1995). Does Ukraine Have a History? *Slavic Review*, 54(3), 658–673.
- Vorbrugg, A., & Bluwstein, J. (2022). Making sense of (the Russian war in) Ukraine: On the politics of knowledge and expertise. *Political Geography*, 98, 1–3. DOI: 10.1016/j.polgeo.2022.102700
- Williams, M. C. (2015) Securitization as political theory: The politics of the extraordinary. *International Relations*, 29(1), 114–120. DOI: 10.1177/0047117814526606c
- Yas, O. (2022). Representation of Ukraine as Colony in Ukrainian and Russian Historiography. In S. Velychenko, J. Ruane, & L. Hrynevych (Eds.) *Ireland and Ukraine: Studies in Comparative Imperial and National History* (pp. 159–176). Ibidem-Verlag.
- Yelchych, S. (2023, May 11). *"The Unpredictable Past": A Round-table Discussion on Transformations in Ukrainian Studies* [Video]. Youtube – Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 1:26:26-1:45:28. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2XI8btnN3B8>

- Yurchuk, Y. (2022). War, Solidarity, and Resilience. Some Reflections from Sweden. *TOPOS*, 2, 42–47. DOI: 10.24412/1815-0047-2022-2-42-47
- Zayarnyuk, A. (2022). Historians As Enablers? Historiography, Imperialism, and the Legitimization of Russian Aggression. *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies*, 9(2), 191–212. DOI: 10.21226/ewjus754
- Zhurzhenko, T. (2021). Fighting Empire, Weaponising Culture: The Conflict with Russia and the Restrictions on Russian Mass Culture in Post-Maidan Ukraine. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 73(8), 1441–1466. DOI: 10.1080/09668136.2021.1944990