

The Kremlin's Imperial Dystopia Fuelling the War against Ukraine

by Leo Goretti

Another chapter in a centuries-long history of "colonialism, diktat and hegemony": it is thus that, in his 2023 Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, Vladimir Putin characterised once again the US' and European support for Kyiv.¹ As he repeatedly claimed in the past year, the West's unwillingness to accept the ongoing "collapse" of its global "hegemony" would allegedly underlie the "hybrid war" that, in his view, the Western "ruling elites" have unleashed to reduce Russia to their own "colony" populated by a "mass of soulless slaves".² According to this highly confrontational narrative, the roots of the Western predatory and racist attitude toward the rest of the world – and especially Russia – are to be traced back as far as the Middle

Ages, confirming Putin's inclination to rewrite history at his whim.³

An empire in camouflage

To be sure, the oppressive systems of power created by the European empires in the modern age left an indelible mark upon their colonies and the "metropolises" themselves, the economic, political and cultural legacy of which continues to be felt today.⁴ But this holds true for the territories that were once part of the Russian Empire as well: there, a "hierarchical, inequitable relationship [...] in which a metropole dominates a periphery"⁵ was also at

¹ Russian Presidency, *Presidential Address to Federal Assembly*, 21 February 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70565>.

² Russian Presidency, *Signing of Treaties on Accession of Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson Regions to Russia*, 30 September 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69465>.

³ Leo Goretti, "Putin's Use and Abuse of History: Back to the 19th Century?", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 22|10 (March 2022), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/14741>.

⁴ See for example Caroline Elkins, *Legacy of Violence. A History of the British Empire*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2022.

⁵ Ronald Grigor Suny, "The Empire Strikes Out: Imperial Russia, 'National' Identity, and Theories of Empire", in Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin (eds), *A State of Nations. Empire and Nation-making in the Age of Lenin and*

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work, albeit with its own peculiarities, most notably, the spatial proximity between centre and periphery.⁶ The construction of a “strong, centralised state” in tsarist Russia that Putin proudly talks about in his speeches⁷ went hand in hand with the forced inclusion of territories and peoples into the empire: local elites were co-opted, but any form of resistance was brutally repressed.

Even in the Soviet period, especially since the 1930s, despite the anti-colonial rhetoric of the communist leadership, an asymmetry in power relations continued to perpetuate between the Russian centre and the many peripheries:⁸ what has been described as “colonialism in camouflage”, both internal to the USSR, from the Baltic countries to Central Asia, and external, in the Soviet ‘sphere of influence’ in Eastern Europe.⁹ The post-Soviet Russian leadership proved unwilling to address this imperial and colonial past, which under Putin has been revisited into a mythological “great historical Russia”¹⁰ to be revived after the years of chaos and decline of

the 1990s.¹¹ It is precisely here that the roots of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine are to be found.

A Russian world

This is the paradox: while Putin describes the current war as yet another “anti-Russia project” orchestrated by the neo-colonial West, the defining feature of the war against Ukraine is exactly the Kremlin’s drive to re-impose a system of imperial power over the territories and peoples of the so-called “Russian world”.

This concept, which has become salient in the Kremlin’s discourse especially since 2007, extends beyond the borders of the Russian Federation to encompass the communities of the Russian diaspora – variously characterised in linguistic, ethnic, cultural, civilisational or ‘spiritual’ terms.¹² To be sure, within this imagined “Russian world”, there is some space for diversity (for example, religious); at the same time, however, identities are essentialised – as if they were immutable in time – and inserted into a precise hierarchy, where the Russian component (however defined) is overarching.

Toward the peoples of the “Russian world”, the Kremlin claims special rights, a “responsibility to protect” that supersedes the sovereignty of the

Stalin, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 25.

⁶ Alexander Morrison, “Metropole, Colony, and Imperial Citizenship in the Russian Empire”, in *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Spring 2012), p. 338, DOI 10.1353/kri.2012.0016.

⁷ Russian Presidency, *Signing of Treaties on Accession*, cit.

⁸ Botakoz Kassymbekova, “How Western Scholars Overlooked Russian Imperialism”, in *Al Jazeera*, 24 January 2023, <https://aje.io/5c6ysz>.

⁹ Epp Annus, *Soviet Postcolonial Studies. A View from the Western Borderlands*, London/New York, Routledge, 2018.

¹⁰ Russian Presidency, *Signing of Treaties on Accession*, cit.

¹¹ Jane Burbank, “The Grand Theory Driving Putin to War”, in *The New York Times*, 22 March 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/22/opinion/russia-ukraine-putin-eurasianism.html>.

¹² Igor Zevelev, “The Russian World in Moscow’s Strategy”, in *CSIS Commentaries*, 22 August 2016, <https://www.csis.org/node/37839>.

other post-Soviet states when needed.¹³ While the specific arrangements of the asymmetrical relations between Russia and its neighbours vary, since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, full reincorporation of Russian communities abroad has become an option from the Kremlin's perspective. On the occasion of the unilateral annexation of the Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions to Russia, Putin tellingly claimed that "there is nothing stronger than the determination of millions of people who, by their *culture, religion, traditions, and language*, consider themselves part of Russia, whose ancestors lived in a single country for centuries".¹⁴

An imperial war

The invasion of Ukraine is a direct consequence of this imperial logic: in Putin's discourse, Ukraine is essentially denied the status and dignity of a truly independent nation in the name of an alleged "historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians". Russians and Ukrainians ultimately are described as "one people [...] parts of what is essentially the same historical and spiritual space". The relation between these "two parts" is, however, clearly asymmetrical and hierarchical: while Putin believes that "true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia", the opposite does not seem to be the

¹³ Vasile Rotaru, "Change or Continuity in Russia's Strategy towards Secessionist Regions in the 'Near Abroad'?", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (2022), p. 86-103, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2022.2066821>.

¹⁴ Russian Presidency, *Signing of Treaties on Accession*, cit. (emphasis mine)

case.¹⁵ Likewise, the annexation to Russia of Ukraine's eastern regions is presented not only as a return to their true "historical motherland", but as a *re-appropriation*: "the people living in Lugansk and Donetsk, in Kherson and Zaporozhye have become our citizens, forever".¹⁶

In the first year of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this imperial discourse has been followed by actions: from measures to Russify the education system in the occupied territories of Eastern Ukraine¹⁷ to the forcible transfer of Ukrainian civilians to Russia, including forms of abusive compulsory security screening disquietingly known as "filtration",¹⁸ to the forced resettlement of Ukrainian children to Russia where they are given to Russian families and stripped of their Ukrainian identity.¹⁹ While Putin's fantasies about the "great historical Russia" and "Russian world" have clashed with the reality

¹⁵ Russian Presidency, *Article by Vladimir Putin "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians"*, 12 July 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

¹⁶ Russian Presidency, *Signing of Treaties on Accession*, cit.

¹⁷ Lauren Said-Moorhouse and Oleksandra Ochman, "This Is What the 'Russification' of Ukraine's Education System Looks Like in Occupied Areas", in *CNN*, 16 May 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/05/16/europe/russia-ukraine-education-intl-cmd>.

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch, "We Had No Choice". "Filtration" and the Crime of Forcibly Transferring Ukrainian Civilians to Russia, September 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/node/382706>.

¹⁹ Jennifer Hansler, "Report Says Russian Government Is Operating Network of Camps Where It Has Held Thousands of Ukrainian Children Since Start of War", in *CNN*, 15 February 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/02/14/politics/russia-government-children-camps-ukraine-report>.

of the Ukrainian people's strenuous resistance, Russian occupation has come alarmingly close to that form of colonialism geared towards the suppression of local cultures.

In Putin's words, it was Russia that supposedly "created today's Ukraine" – and would then be entitled to claim back Kyiv's "statehood, sovereignty, and territorial integrity" at its will. This imperial outlook explicitly denies the very foundations of the post-Cold War international order, which in Putin's view would be based on "invented" rules that are "nothing more than rubbish". In its place, Putin calls for a "multipolar world order" based on "dialogue" between "coequal development centres".²⁰ As evident from Russia's aggression against Ukraine, however, these "development centres" would be free to forcefully define, limit or even dispose of sovereignty and statehood in what they regard as their periphery, reproducing vicious hierarchies between polities, territories and populations. It took centuries and an unthinkable amount of suffering to create a – however imperfect and incomplete – world of equally sovereign states structured around rules, rights and mutual obligations. Giving in to Putin's imperial nostalgia in Ukraine would mean turning back the clock to a dystopian world of empires based on exploitation, domination and coercion.

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²⁰ Russian Presidency, *Valdai International Discussion Club Meeting, 27 October 2022*, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69695>.

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