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The decolonisation trap and the quest to reclaim a "kidnapped" Europe[1]

Pułapka dekolonizacji i misja odzyskania „porwanej" Europy

ABSTRACT:
This article looks at how Moscow's imperial mindset has long shaped the West's view of Ukraine and East-Central Europe. It traces the problem back to Enlightenment thinkers and Hegel, whose ideas helped excuse ignoring smaller nations as real players on the world stage. Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 forces scholars to rethink the old imperial narratives that have justified aggression and dulled the world's response to it. The author argues that "decolonising" how the West sees Russia and Ukraine should mean more than borrowing the usual tools from postcolonial studies or fitting Russian colonialism into the larger story of Western empires. A critical interrogation of the deeper intellectual habits that kept the region on the margins of Western thought is required, with specific focus on Cold War knowledge production. Ukraine's struggle matters far beyond its borders, because it shows the playbook empires use to impose their own cultural, political, and social rules on smaller nations – and the clever ways they defend those moves at home and abroad. That is why the debate – kicked into high gear in 2022 and still going strong three years later – over the foundations of Ukrainian and regional studies has mostly stalled and even met loud pushback from many quarters. This article sets out to uncover the deeper reasons behind that resistance to updating the way we create and share knowledge about the region.

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KEYWORDS:
decolonisation, East-Central Europe, Ukraine, Russia, Cold War mental maps

STRESZCZENIE:
Artykuł analizuje, w jaki sposób imperialne schematy myślenia, zakorzenione w rosyjskiej tradycji politycznej, od dawna wpływają na zachodnie postrzeganie Ukrainy i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej. Autor wskazuje źródła tego zjawiska w myśli oświeceniowej i w filozofii Hegla, które sprzyjały marginalizacji mniejszych narodów jako samodzielnych podmiotów w stosunkach międzynarodowych. Pełnoskalowa inwazja Rosji na Ukrainę w lutym 2022 r. uwidoczniła potrzebę ponownego namysłu nad utrwalonymi narracjami imperialnymi, które przez dekady legitymizowały działania Kremla i osłabiały reakcję Zachodu. Autor argumentuje, że „dekolonizacja" zachodniego spojrzenia na Rosję i Ukrainę wymaga czegoś więcej niż przeniesienia narzędzi studiów postkolonialnych czy wpisania rosyjskiego kolonializmu w ogólną historię imperiów zachodnich. Konieczne jest zbadanie głębszych wzorców myślenia, które utrzymywały region na marginesie refleksji akademickiej i politycznej. Przykład Ukrainy pokazuje, w jaki sposób imperia narzucają mniejszym narodom własne wzory kulturowe, polityczne i społeczne oraz jak potrafią je uzasadniać na arenie międzynarodowej. W tym kontekście trwająca debata o fundamentach badań nad Ukrainą i regionem często napotyka opór i kontrowersje, które spowalniają konieczną zmianę perspektywy. Celem artykułu jest wskazanie głębszych przyczyn oporu do transformacji sposobów tworzenia i upowszechniania wiedzy o regionie.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:
dekolonizacja, Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia, Ukraina, Rosja, mentalne mapy zimnowojenne

Wars are waged not only with weapons but at times with history: the past supplies the political legitimacy that leaders invoke. Russia's war against Ukraine is no exception. Well before the full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022, the Kremlin promoted a historical script for domestic and foreign audiences. In Vladimir Putin's speeches and essays, Ukraine was depicted as an inalienable part of a Russian imperial domain, lacking an autonomous historical trajectory and thus a legitimate claim to statehood. Assertions of Ukrainian sovereignty were labelled an "anti-Russia" project backed by external powers – first Poland, Austria-Hungary, and Germany; later the United States and the European Union. Framing the Ukrainian state as an "artificial" creation of Bolshevik nationality policy in the 1920s, Putin presented

his goals as "de-communisation" that would strip Ukrainians of recognition as a separate nation[2].

The great irony is that the Kremlin's rationale for re-establishing empire – relying on portraying Ukraine as a "failed" or "artificial" state project, accusing the Ukrainian authorities of nationalism and "minority" discrimination, and shifting the focus to Ukraine's "internal problems" – gained remarkable traction in Western policy debates[3]. When Putin released his essay on the "historical unity" of Russians and Ukrainians in 2021, specialists issued rapid rebuttals, yet the wider expert conversation still framed Russian expansion primarily as Ukraine's "civil war", conveniently recast as the "Ukrainian crisis". Such language shifted responsibility from Moscow to Kyiv and concealed the extent of Russia's assault on the post-Cold War international order. The result was widespread surprise when the 2022 invasion began and equal bewilderment at the Ukrainians' willingness to fight rather than welcome the invaders.

As Kremlin narratives permeated Western discourse, the most consequential tendency was to frame the conflict, triggered by the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas, as symmetrical. Leading journals hosted hundreds of articles leaning on abstractions such as "far-right nationalism", "separatism", and "regional conflict". Legitimate critiques of Kyiv's memory politics and real regional divides were stretched into arguments that normalised Russian expansion across the post-Soviet space[4]. This drift reflected the post-1991 dominance of identity, nationalism, and memory studies in Ukraine-focused scholarship. Tellingly, "war" was often avoided to describe an aggression costing tens of thousands of lives, even as talk of "memory wars" boomed. The master narrative reframed the violence as a struggle between rival Ukrainian identities, escalating during the Maidan into a civil war abetted by outside meddling – Russian and (sic!) Western – and only later "internationalised" in 2022. After the invasion, many who had adopted the civil-war lens revised their claims yet maintained that it still explained earlier

2 S. Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History*, New York 2024.

3 T. Kuzio (ed.), *Russian Disinformation and Western Scholarship: Bias and Prejudice in Journalistic, Expert, and Academic Analyses of East European and Eurasian Affairs*, Stuttgart–New York 2023.

4 Perhaps the most notable was the 2015 forum, *The Ukrainian Crisis, Past and Present* in "Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History", vol. 16, no. 1.

phases[5]. As Andrii Zayarniuk notes, such paradigms did not cause the Kremlin's actions but offered an intellectual alibi and fostered complacency about Russia's imperial ambitions, thereby easing the path to a full-scale invasion[6].

Only after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 did scholars inside and outside the region issue an urgent call to rethink some Western assumptions – a collective attempt to diagnose how the analytical consensus had gone so far off-track. Those appeals soon converged on the language of decolonisation, understood primarily as an effort to confront epistemic violence and to redress entrenched, dismissive attitudes toward the countries of East-Central Europe within Western academia and expert communities. The debate thus focused on decolonising Western knowledge rather than on any project to dismantle multiethnic Russia. Fashionable though the term may be, it also describes Ukraine's own post-2014 initiatives to erase the remaining imperial and Soviet vestiges from its public space and cultural memory[7].

The shift reached a symbolic peak when the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) made "decolonisation" the theme of its 2023 annual convention, promising to "reassess and transform Russo-centric power hierarchies, both in the region and in the ways we study it". Yet the very call to decolonise immediately raised uncomfortable questions. How did the global scholarly community miss the gathering Russian threat? Why did mainstream Western narratives sideline Ukraine, and how deeply were those narratives shaped by perspectives emanating from Moscow? Many referred to Ewa Thompson's concept of "imperial knowledge" that denotes a discursive system across literature, criticism, and scholarship, produced in imperial centres, that legitimises and normalises empire at home and abroad[8]. To what extent did this system provide intellectual cover for Russian aggression and blunt the world's response to repeated hostilities against neighbouring states? And, most provocatively, can the war itself be

5 D. Arel, J. Driscoll (eds.), *Ukraine's Unnamed War: Before the Russian Invasion of 2022*, Cambridge 2023.

6 A. Zayarnyuk, *Historians as Enablers? Historiography, Imperialism, and the Legitimization of Russian Aggression*, "East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies" 2022, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 191–212.

7 *Decolonization: Selected articles published in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine*, https://ui.org.ua/en/sectors-en/decolonization-selected-articles-published-in-the-aftermath-of-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/ [31.07.2025].

8 E. Thompson, *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism*, London 2000.

traced – at least in part – to the distortions embedded in those inherited historical frameworks?

Three years on, the conversation about "decolonising" Slavic studies seems to have reached an impasse. The wave of manifestos that flooded Western venues in 2022–2023 – many of them offering serious blueprints for a long-awaited paradigm shift – met with sharp opposition. A counter-reaction came from critics on both the right and the left, in Russia and in the West, who bristled at efforts to decentralise the discipline's long-standing Russo-centrism. This article, therefore, undertakes an intellectual archaeology of the debate itself, using East-Central European studies as a case study in how Western scholarship has habitually approached and marginalised the region. It traces the deep roots of that marginalisation, discusses Cold-War struggles to secure an academic space for the region, and analyses earlier iterations of the same "decolonisation" debate, along with the alliances and the antagonisms they engendered. The theme of "decolonisation and its enemies" merits a separate study and cannot be fully addressed here. Likewise, the role of Soviet – and later Russian – intelligence services in shaping Western intellectual life deserves a separate, serious analysis. To bring order to the current tendency to conflate diverse currents and theories, I distinguish two senses of decolonisation: first, as the historical process of dismantling empire; and second, as an analytical paradigm – a program for deconstructing epistemic practices shaped by imperial knowledge. In what follows, I focus exclusively on the latter. The first part of this article concentrates on the intellectual roots of marginalisation and the early attempts by Central Europeans to challenge it. The second turns to the Cold War and the formation, within American (and more broadly Western) academia, of enduring structural biases that may help explain contemporary resistance to efforts to confront epistemic violence. The final section critically assesses the current decolonisation debate and cautions against the mechanical transplantation of postcolonial concepts developed for the Global South onto the very different imperial experience of the Tsarist and Soviet borderlands. In doing so, many authors fall into what I call the "decolonisation trap": an indiscriminate and uncritical use of a specific tradition and conceptual apparatus, stripped of its context. Contrary to the proponents' original aims, calls for decolonisation often arm critics of the very effort to rethink the paradigm and undercut frank, methodologically rigorous debate.

This article also seeks to explain *why* "imperial knowledge" lingers decades after the formal dissolution of empire, and *how* it circulates far beyond its original core. Milan Kundera famously likened Russia's post-1945 domination of its non-Russian periphery to the "kidnapping" of part of the West[9]. That "kidnapping" is not merely a familiar Russian imperial reflex. Territorial loss is experienced as an existential threat, prompting repeated quests for external validation of expansion – from Vienna (1815) and Yalta (1945) to the Minsk process (2015–2021) and the Istanbul talks (2022). Russian policy thus yokes the instrumentalisation of knowledge production to demands for international recognition of its sphere of influence. Refocusing the debate on this quest for recognition, rather than importing tropes from the Global South, would sharpen the methodological conversation. A frank reckoning with the discipline's own intellectual history may also help scholars avoid the "decolonisation trap" into which, regrettably, many have stumbled.

1. Intellectual roots of marginalisation

Western thinkers have long pushed the smaller nations of Europe's East to the margins, a habit traceable at least to the Enlightenment. As Larry Wolff shows, many philosophers depicted the region as backward and uncivilised, populated by peoples forever trailing the West's march of progress[10]. German idealist Georg Hegel hardened that outlook by sorting nations into "historical" and "non-historical" camps, linking genuine history to the possession of statehood. His schema not only rationalised Western colonial rule overseas but also gave intellectual cover to Russian, German, and Austro-Hungarian domination of East-Central Europe throughout the long 19th century[11].

The empires' collapse after World War I briefly created space for a "New Europe" to challenge such grand narratives. Politicians and scholars from the region invoked both history and the League of Nations' new ethos of cooperation to reclaim agency and craft their own interpretive framework. At the League's Committee on Intellectual Cooperation, and later at the

[9] M. Kundera, *The Tragedy of Central Europe*, "New York Review of Books", 26 April 1984, pp. 33–38.

[10] L. Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford 1994.

[11] A. Stone, *Hegel and Colonialism*, "Hegel Bulletin" 2020, vol. 41, no. 2, pp. 247–270.

International Congresses of Historical Sciences, Polish historian Oskar Halecki called for "Eastern Europe" to be reintegrated into universal histories – not only as an antidote to methodological nationalism but also as a means of achieving a fuller understanding of Europe's past. Although Halecki's appeal won regional support, it never prompted a thorough overhaul of mainstream Western research, teaching, or professional norms[12]. Between the wars, much of Europe's elite still saw the East as peripheral.

Incorporated into the new communist polity that succeeded the Romanov realm, the territories of the Soviet Ukraine and Belarus confronted even steeper obstacles to international recognition. Although Soviet Ukraine briefly made use of its nominal foreign-policy prerogatives in the 1920s, the wider world continued to treat the USSR as a unitary ethno-national entity – the latest incarnation of an ostensibly timeless "Russia"[13]. Stalinist centralisation soon eliminated any possibility that a distinct Ukrainian Soviet voice might contest that perception. Beyond Soviet borders, however, a small circle of scholars refused to concede Ukraine's invisibility. Supported by Poland, they established several independent institutions – most notably the Ukrainian Scientific Institute in Warsaw (1930) – that afforded figures such as Roman Smal-Stocki and Myron Korduba venues for research, publication, and discreet academic diplomacy. From these bases, they succeeded in placing Ukrainian topics into the programs of the international historical congresses in Oslo (1929) and Warsaw (1933), where a dozen Ukrainian delegates sought to challenge the prevailing paradigm of a monolithic "Russian" past before an international audience[14].

Yet even these efforts often met with icy indifference or outright hostility. Organisers of international congresses typically adhered to criteria based on the national representation of recognised sovereign states – an approach that reinforced the Hegelian logic of the "non-historicity" of stateless peoples. Within Russian White émigré circles, Ukrainian initiatives were routinely denounced as "provincial separatism" or as "Polish intrigues", while the scholars themselves were dismissed as politically motivated agitators.

[12] K. Zamorski, *Przez profesjonalizację do międzynarodowej ekumeny historyków: Historiografia polska na międzynarodowych kongresach nauk historycznych w latach 1898–1938*, Cracow 2020, pp. 73–206.

[13] O. Avramchuk, *A Phoney Autonomy? Soviet Ukraine's Foreign Relations in Historical Context, 1917–1991*, "Nowy Prometeusz" 2023, vol. 17, pp. 7–17.

[14] *Ukraina na istoriohrafichnii mapi mizhvoiennoi Yevropy*, Kyiv 2014.

The prominent chauvinist Vasilii Shulgin systematically sought to derail Ukrainian émigré attempts to place the "Ukrainian question" before the League of Nations, persuading officials and intermediaries that the issue was not one of a people's right to self-determination but merely an "internal debate" among "Little Russians": those purportedly wishing to remain part of the "Great Russian" nation versus "renegades" advocating independence[15]. Portraying the Ukrainian problem as part of a "civil war" within a singular "Russian nation" had a long genealogy and, already in the interwar years, was refined in émigré circles. A significant portion of today's Kremlin narratives and the rhetoric of their Western enablers can be traced directly to this discursive arsenal.

The interwar effort, shaped in large measure by Warsaw-based historians Oskar Halecki and Marceli Handelsman, transformed the ideal of Central-European scholarly cooperation into a strategic instrument of epistemic emancipation. By presenting Ukraine as an indispensable partner in a revived *respublica litteraria* spanning from Warsaw and Lviv to Prague and Budapest, the émigrés circumvented Moscow's historiographical monopoly and reinscribed Ukraine upon Europe's intellectual map. Their initiative was soon undermined by intensifying nationalist antagonisms and by Poland's own turn to authoritarianism. Even so, the conceptual frameworks and personal networks forged in the 1930s laid the tracks along which Ukrainian studies would travel once they reached the post-war Western academia[16].

With the outbreak of World War II, the states situated between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union were erased from the map; many scholars who had participated in interwar debates sought refuge in the United States to escape both totalitarian regimes. Among the thousands in exile were intellectuals such as Oskar Halecki, who secured a faculty post at an American university. Halecki and his fellow émigrés benefited from the support of influential US educators, including Waldo Leland, a founding figure of the American Council of Learned Societies, and Stephen Duggan, a co-founder of the Institute of International Education. Their impact, however, was hedged by the prevailing WASP establishment and its suspicion of newcomers. Once

[15] O. Budnitskii (ed.), *Spor o Rossii: V.A. Maklakov – V.V. Shulgin. Perepiska 1919–1939 gg.*, Moscow 2012, p. 298.

[16] O. Avramchuk, *Rzeczpospolita uczonych. Powstanie studiów ukraińskich i polsko-ukraiński dialog historyków w Stanach Zjednoczonych, 1939–1991*, Warsaw 2024, pp. 91–118.

in America, exiles also encountered the same Russo-centric lens that had long dominated European historiography – and now had to compete with a well-established cohort of Russian émigré scholars, refugees from Bolshevik Russia whose professional standing only rose during the war. Figures such as linguist Roman Jakobson at Harvard and historian Michael Florinsky at Columbia proved particularly wary of non-Russian interpretations[17]. Their stance revealed a familiar Russian tactic: portraying Central Europeans as incurable "Russophobes" who obstructed Moscow's rightful place in Europe[18].

2. The "Western Civilization" moment

The Enlightenment hierarchies and a Hegelian, state-centric lens predisposed analysts to treat "Russia" as the natural bearer of sovereignty in the East, making its "legitimate interests" seem immanent to European stability. The Bolshevik upheaval of 1917 did not break this habit. Even before Washington recognised the USSR in November 1933, much English-language expertise clustered around scholars willing to work with the Soviet regime. In Britain and the United States, Bernard Pares, a leading builder of Slavic studies at University College London, and Samuel N. Harper, a pioneer of Russian studies at Chicago, shifted in the late 1920s from supporting the "White" cause toward accommodating the USSR; contemporaries often viewed them as sympathetic, even "apologetic", toward Soviet policy[19]. Meanwhile, American universities absorbed prominent Russian émigrés – most notably Michael Karpovich, recruited to Harvard in 1927, and George Vernadsky, brought to Yale the same year. In practice, this reinforced a Russia-first vantage point across early Slavic studies, even though both advocated a more pluralistic field that included representatives of the Central European exile community[20].

The Yalta settlement at the end of World War II curtailed attempts to revise Europe's historical narrative. The Cold War entrenched a monolithic East/

[17] M. Filipowicz, *Emigranci i Jankesi. O amerykańskich historykach Rosji*, Lublin 2007.

[18] Ł. Dryblak, *Szermierze wolności i zakładnicy imperium. Emigracyjny dialog polsko-rosyjski w latach 1939–1956: Konfrontacje idei, koncepcji oraz analiz politycznych*, Warsaw 2023.

[19] M. Filipowicz, op. cit., pp. 50, 61, 72.

[20] O. Avramchuk, *The Paradoxes of Eurasianism. George Vernadsky, Exile Networks, and the Origins of American Ukrainian Studies*, "Studia z Dziejów Rosji i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej" 2024, vol. 59, no. 3, pp. 87–111.

West divide, reinforced by the new geopolitical order. In this setting, émigrés from non-Russian nations mounted campaigns to influence US policy and academic agendas, but deep-seated intellectual habits had already privileged a Russia-centric frame. That vantage point quickly became institutionalised. The Cold War's knowledge infrastructure – area studies centres, think tanks, foundations, and journals – was designed to study the "enemy" in terms of Soviet communism rather than Russian imperial nationalism[21]. America's "Wise Men", from George Kennan to Dean Acheson, exemplified and reinforced this framing. Political warfare initiatives placed émigrés on Western propaganda platforms, yet the central policy debate – between "liberation" and "evolutionary" strategies toward the Yalta order – rarely addressed the internal imperial structure of the USSR[22]. By 1956, the US foreign-policy debate had settled on a defensive-coexistence paradigm, effectively ratifying the status quo. Even the most hawkish voices concentrated their attention on Central European satellites, leaving Moscow's domination of non-Russian republics largely unexamined and conceptually subsumed into the "Russian" core[23].

Post-Stalin policy developments consolidated rather than corrected this analytical blind spot. The earlier primacy of political warfare was replaced by an ostentatiously official dialogue with communist governments. "Peaceful coexistence", people-to-people diplomacy, and expanded cultural and academic ties proceeded on Soviet terms. Visitors and topics were screened, "great-power" dialogue was privileged, and Moscow-centred themes dominated all official dealings with the Eastern Bloc. In US cultural diplomacy, the satellite states were often treated less as interlocutors in their own right than as levers for influencing the imperial centre[24]. Since 1958, US–Soviet academic exchange agreements confined participants primarily to Moscow or Leningrad and often excluded research travel to Kyiv, Tbilisi, or Almaty; archival rules barred access to republican collections outside tightly controlled

[21] D. Engerman, *Know Your Enemy: The Rise and Fall of America's Soviet Experts*, New York 2011.

[22] B. Tromly, *Cold War Exiles and the CIA: Plotting to Free Russia*, New York 2019, pp. 95–127.

[23] A good example is Zbigniew Brzezinski, who urged the peaceful undoing of Yalta's legacy and advocated the liberation of East-Central Europe without calling for the dissolution of the USSR. Z. Brzezinski, *The Future of Yalta*, "Foreign Affairs" 1984, vol. 63, no. 2, pp. 279–302.

[24] O. Avramchuk, *Budując Republikę Ducha: Historia Programu Fulbrighta w Polsce w latach 1945–2020*, Warsaw 2024.

central depositories[25]. These structural constraints aligned with the rise of the New Left, which encouraged abandoning the early Cold War's totalitarian paradigm. In Western Sovietology, these "revisionists" (e.g., Sheila Fitzpatrick, Moshe Lewin, Jerry Hough, and Stephen Cohen) explicitly rebelled against the prevailing totalitarian school associated with Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzeziński, which depicted the USSR as a monolithic, ideology-driven dictatorship ruled primarily by terror. Against that model, they emphasised institutional bargaining, functional differentiation within the state, and social history "from below", arguing that post-Stalin society looked in many respects like a modern industrial regime rather than an unchanging totalitarian monolith[26]. Because this revisionism often intersected with New Left politics – in which the communist project appeared as a peaceful alternative to Western capitalism – it encouraged a reflex to balance criticism of Moscow with symmetrical indictments of the West, frequently to the point of moral equivalence. The shift also dovetailed with, and was encouraged by, the ongoing US–Soviet détente of the late 1960s and 1970s; some revisionists even styled themselves "détentists". In turn, dissident voices – precisely those capable of challenging the intellectual architecture of this false symmetry – were pushed to the margins[27].

An important element in the intellectual history of the early Cold War was the elevation of "civilization" to the status of the field's core heuristic. In US usage at the time, "Western civilization" signified a transhistorical lineage running from Greco-Roman antiquity through the Judeo-Christian tradition to Anglo-American constitutionalism and the market economy – an inheritance said to embody the rule of law, individual liberty, and a common cultural canon. The so-called "Western Civilization" moment – anchored in university courses and policy discourse – imagined a capacious West that nonetheless kept East-Central Europe at its margins. Usage of "Western civilization" peaked around 1949; as Michael Kimmage observes, the popularity of the framework, culminating in William McNeill's *The Rise of the West* (1963),

[25] S. Zhuk, *"Academic Détente": IREX files, academic reports, and "American" Adventures of Soviet Americanists during the Brezhnev era*, "Cahiers du Monde Russe" 2013, vol. 54, no. 1–2, pp. 297–328.

[26] M. Filipowicz, op. cit., pp. 11, 82, 116.

[27] Notable was Richard Pipes' position against the backdrop of the "pleiad" of American scholars writing about Russia, J. Daly, *The Pleiades: Five Scholars Who Founded Russian Historical Studies in the United States*, "Kritika" 2017, no. 18, pp. 785–826.

resonated with US policymakers and intellectuals who mobilised a transatlantic "idea of liberty" for Cold War purposes[28]. Émigré scholars entered this conversation while seeking to sharpen its conceptual tools. By emphasising the region's cultural diversity, they worked to widen the scope of "Western civilization" and secure East-Central Europe a place in the postwar academic discourse. In doing so, Oskar Halecki rejected a simple East-West binary and introduced "East-Central Europe" as a region culturally Western yet historically shaped by both German and Russian imperialisms. His early-1950s monographs, written squarely in the Cold War context, challenged prevailing periodisation of European history and pressed for curricular change in area studies still dominated by Russian specialists[29].

Halecki and his allies not only contested the post-Yalta configuration; they also had to engage with Arnold Toynbee's influential civilisational schema. In *A Study of History* (1934–1961), Toynbee placed Russia not within the modern "West" but in the "Orthodox Christian" civilisation, grouping all East Slavs under that diffuse label. More significantly, he effectively justified Stalin's policies by portraying Russians as more often the victims of Western aggression than its perpetrators. In 1952, Toynbee repeated the familiar Russian narrative of historical grievance, listing a series of invasions by Western armies from the early 17th century through to World War II. He used this sequence to portray Russia as part of a non-Western world that had been repeatedly struck and deeply harmed by the West[30]. Halecki countered that Russian history could not legitimately subsume the histories of all Eastern Slavs. He also insisted that the non-Russian nations of the Soviet Union should not be treated as mere extensions of "historical Russia", nor their pasts reduced to footnotes in the imperial grand narrative[31]. Toynbee privately praised Halecki for restoring East-Central Europe "to the centre of the picture" for the Western "ordinary philistines"[32], yet institutional change

[28] M. Kimmage, *The Abandonment of the West: The History of an Idea in American Foreign Policy*, New York 2020, chapter 3.

[29] O. Halecki, *The Limits and Divisions of European History*, New York 1950; idem, *Borderlands of Western Civilization: A History of East Central Europe*, New York 1952.

[30] The lecture was published as A. Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial and The World and the West*, New York 1958, pp. 235–236.

[31] O. Halecki, *The Tradition of Medieval Slavdom: New Interpretations*, "Tradition" 1958, vol. 14, p. 420.

[32] The Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences of America Archives, Oskar Halecki Collection, folder 76, Toynbee to Halecki, 26 August 1952, p. 151.

in Western academia was slow. The historiographical marginalisation persisted, with a complex past still refracted primarily through a Russian lens.

The decolonisation of the Global South and the parallel rise of postcolonial studies did not translate into greater influence for those urging a reassessment of the Russo-centric lens in Western academia. Even prominent critics of both Western colonialism and Communist totalitarianism – such as writer George Orwell – received far less attention than voices focused exclusively on exposing Western imperial abuses[33]. One reason lay in the broader intellectual shift since the early 1960s, sometimes described as the "abandonment of the West", which further weakened the already marginal position of Central European studies. The civilisational framework of the West, to which many exiled intellectuals remained attached, came under criticism for its associations with racism, colonialism, and neglect of non-European regions – especially the Middle East and Southeast Asia, the "genuine East" subjected to "orientalism" and cultural imperialism[34]. Postcolonial scholarship concentrated overwhelmingly on Western misdeeds in these areas, giving scant attention to the plight of the "captive nations" in the Soviet sphere[35]. In this climate, the Atlanticist visions promoted by Central European exiles failed to resonate; their calls for integration into a reimagined West were overshadowed by the rising activism surrounding the decolonisation of the Global South.

In much of the period's scholarship and policy discourse, Soviet control over its neighbouring countries was rarely framed as colonial, and the USSR itself was seldom described as an empire[36]. In 1951, George Kennan notoriously claimed that Ukraine was "as much a part of Russia as Pennsylvania is a part of the United States"[37]. He later criticised non-Russian exiles who successfully lobbied President Dwight Eisenhower to sign the Congressional Captive Nations Week Resolution in 1959, which designated the third week of July to highlight the Soviet domination of East-Central Europe. The

[33] J. Rodden, *The Politics of Literary Reputation: The Making and Claiming of "St. George" Orwell*, New York 1989.

[34] M. Kimmage, op. cit., chapter 4.

[35] A. Khalid, *Russian History and the Debate over Orientalism*, "Kritika" 2000, vol. 1, no. 4, pp. 691–699.

[36] A. Motyl, *Totalitarian Collapse, Imperial Disintegration, and the Rise of the Soviet West: Implications for the West*, [in:] M. Mandelbaum (ed.), *The Rise of Nations in the Soviet Union*, New York 1991, pp. 44–63.

[37] G. Kennan, *America and the Russian Future*, "Foreign Affairs" 1952, vol. 29, no. 3, p. 360.

resolution sought to signal American solidarity with nations under totalitarian rule and to remind Western audiences that the Soviet state was not synonymous with Russia. Kennan opposed it on the grounds that its advocates risked pushing the United States toward an "unnecessary" confrontation with Moscow and offered no viable democratic alternative to replace the regime they sought to overthrow. He argued that the "liberationists" he distrusted would ultimately obstruct the gradual, evolutionary liberalisation of the USSR – a process he described as "the last and only chance of avoiding a world catastrophe"[38].

3. The limits of émigré response

Despite unfavourable conditions, Central European thinkers worked hard to reshape a rapidly expanding field, using every available opening to renegotiate its philosophical, terminological, and institutional foundations[39]. Tactically, the exile response was multi-pronged: lobbying on behalf of the "captive nations", cooperating (at times) with US covert and psychological-warfare programs, contributing to broadcasts behind the Iron Curtain[40], and – more cautiously at first – building durable academic footholds in the United States. Oskar Halecki's writings supplied the intellectual blueprint for institutions that cut across the conventional East-West binary. Institution-building followed. New centres (e.g., Columbia's Institute on East Central Europe; the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute), journals, and professional associations sought to empower smaller nations within a field long organised around Russia. Columbia's Institute, founded in 1954 with a modest Carnegie Corporation grant, focused on the countries behind the Iron Curtain while explicitly excluding the Soviet Union. Though originally intended as a short-lived program to train officials and diplomats, it nevertheless became for decades the only US institution to maintain a structural distinction between East-Central European and Russian/Soviet studies. By some estimates, roughly a quarter of all American PhD dissertations in Central

38 G. Kennan, *Memoirs 1950–1963*, London 1973, pp. 100–102.

39 On the role of federalist intellectuals, see S. Łukasiewicz, *Third Europe: Polish federalist thought in the United States 1940–1970s*, Reno 2016.

40 A. Mazurkiewicz, *Voice of the Silenced Peoples in the Global Cold War: The Assembly of Captive European Nations, 1954–1972*, Berlin 2021.

European studies during this period originated there. Columbia thus functioned as a crucial node for knowledge, networks, and resources in a marginalised subfield, and helped catalyse the creation of the AAASS in 1961[41].

A parallel knowledge infrastructure coalesced in publishing. Buoyed by post-*Sputnik* funding, "Slavic Review" launched in October 1961 under Donald Treadgold, with émigré intellectuals such as Oskar Halecki and Wacław Lednicki on its editorial committee. Through the 1960s, the journal became a venue for contesting the field's persistent Russian lens. The first major Anglo-American debate on Ukrainian history appeared in 1963. Ukrainian exile scholars argued not for a narrow Ukraine-centrism but for recognising Ukraine as part of a wider East-Central European sphere – politically subordinated to Russia yet culturally entangled with the West. They pressed for Ukrainian studies to be institutionally distinct from Russian studies and intellectually integrated into research on East-Central Europe. This agenda helped secure Ukrainian chairs at Harvard in the late 1960s and spurred further efforts to institutionalise a non-Russian focus (including the Association for the Study of Nationalities established in the 1970s)[42]. Yet the dominant paradigm largely held; non-Russian nations remained peripheral as historians, sociologists, and Soviet experts continued to privilege Moscow. The persistence of this hierarchy reflected not only intellectual conservatism among Western pundits but also structural determinants – funding priorities, archival access, and the gravitational pull of Cold War geopolitics[43].

Characteristically, the Cold War saw the first serious efforts to mobilise decolonisation as a lever for rethinking knowledge production – early precursors of today's calls to "decolonise" the field. Exile intellectuals, working through advocacy networks and "front" organisations, pressed Western governments and international bodies to put the liberation of the USSR's "colonial" subjects on their agendas and sought allies across the Third World. By the mid-1960s, campaigns to expose "red colonialism" had gained limited support in parts of the US administration, especially in United Nations forums. Congress also adopted resolutions that equated "colonialism" with "Soviet imperialism". Yet the approach proved ineffective. Newly decolonised states

41 O. Avramchuk, *Rzeczpospolita uczonych…*, pp. 217–218.

42 V. Kravchenko, *Ukrainian Historical Writing in North America During the Cold War: The Struggle for Recognition*, Lanham 2023.

43 E. Fishel, *The Moscow Factor: U.S. Policy toward Sovereign Ukraine and the Kremlin*, Cambridge 2022.

in Africa and Asia declined to turn decolonisation into a Cold War instrument and did not condemn Soviet control of Central Asia and East-Central Europe[44]. The United States, acting as a status-quo power, likewise avoided instrumentalising the USSR's multiethnic structure in official diplomacy. Even so, this activism produced visible confrontations – especially in non-aligned forums – between anti-communist and pro-communist idioms of anti-colonial liberation. Ukrainian, Baltic, and other diasporas generated a bulk of literature on Soviet colonial practice: policies of Russification, economic extraction from non-Russian peripheries, and violent suppression of national uprisings. After the Sino-Soviet split, Chinese propaganda likewise denounced the USSR as "social-imperialist" and even attempted to cultivate within the left-wing part of Ukrainian diaspora an anti-Moscow left international[45]. Strikingly, a circle of Russian exiles around the liberal émigré dissident journal "Kontinent" – Andrei Amalrik, Vladimir Bukovsky, and Natalia Gorbanevskaya – conceded in their 1977 *Statement on the Ukrainian Question* that the USSR was "the world's last colonial empire"[46]. Collectively, these interventions articulated an alternative vocabulary that anticipated contemporary debates on the decolonisation of Slavic and Eurasian studies.

As today, explicit comparisons between the USSR and the European overseas empires met strong resistance. Reluctance came not only from the foreign-policy establishment but also from segments of anticolonial opinion that viewed the Soviet Union as a genuine defender of national self-determination. A revealing episode occurred at the International Conference of Experts for the Support of Victims of Colonialism in Oslo in April 1973, where representatives of Smoloskyp, a Ukrainian human-rights organisation, highlighted the irony of inviting the USSR to a forum of formerly colonised nations while it remained, in their words, "the world's greatest colonial power". Their statement argued that Soviet rule obscured colonial relations through censorship, thought control, and the misuse of terms such as "democracy", "sovereignty", and "autonomy". They urged that the Soviet

44 M.A. Heiss, *Exposing "Red Colonialism": U.S. Propaganda at the United Nations, 1953–1963*, "Journal of Cold War Studies" 2015, vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 82–115.

45 P. Potichnyj, *My journey*, Ancaster 2012, pp. 212–245.

46 *Deklaracja w sprawie ukraińskiej*, "Kultura" 1977, no. 5, pp. 66–67.

Union be investigated alongside the remaining colonial powers rather than included among the investigators[47].

The Soviet-studies mainstream systematically downplayed such arguments. To call the USSR an empire was treated as a category error, and those who advanced the claim were pushed to the periphery. Early critics noted colonial continuities from the Russian Empire to the Soviet state, with Walter Kolarz (1952) extending the term "colonies" beyond Central Asia and the Caucasus to Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic states – polities "reduced to colonial status through enforced dependence on the Moscow government"[48]. Yet the thesis that the Bolsheviks had inherited an unstable empire was largely set aside, and scholars who focused on the significance of non-Russian nationalities within the Soviet Union, such as Robert Conquest, Leopold Labedz, John Reshetar, and Richard Pipes, found their academic careers affected. During the 1960s, as modernisation frameworks and fashionable sociologies gained prestige[49], coercive projects – collectivisation, campaigns against "kulaks", mass repression – were recoded as necessary accelerants of development. Opposition in the non-Russian republics was pathologised as "nationalism", while the Russifying policies of the Soviet leadership rarely received the same label. Even prominent critics such as Hans Kohn praised the alleged success of Soviet nationality policy, and Menshevik émigré Solomon Schwartz could judge after 1945 that the USSR had nearly achieved "a successful solution of the national question". Well into the mid-1980s, many Sovietologists continued to downplay non-Russian nationalism as a systemic threat to the stability of the empire[50]. Small wonder, then, that few scholars considered decolonisation theory applicable to the Russian/Soviet case. Symptomatically, Edward Said himself dismissed the applicability of "Orientalism" to the Russian and Soviet imperial experience[51]. As Alexander Etkind later observed, serious debate over whether postcolonial

47 Hoover Institution Library, Leopold Labedz Papers, box 50, folder 7, Statement by Smoloskyp, April 1973.

48 W. Kolarz, *Russia and Her Colonies*, New York 1952, p. V.

49 L. Labedz, *The Use and Abuse of Sovietology*, New Brunswick 1989.

50 W. Laqueur, *The Dream that Failed*, New York 1995, p. 54.

51 D. Schimmelpenninck, *The Curious Fate of Edward Said in Russia*, "Études de Lettres" 2014, no. 2–3, pp. 81–94.

concepts could and should be applied to the post-Soviet space did not begin until the 1990s[52].

Writers did what many historians, sociologists, and Sovietologists did not: they shifted the frame. In the early 1980s, a cohort of Central European authors and public intellectuals coalesced around the University of Michigan-published journal "Cross Currents", seeking to capitalise on a new conjuncture – the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the rise of Solidarity, and renewed attention to human rights. Their aim was explicitly political: to publicise Eastern Bloc dissidence, recast the status of the "satellites", and challenge the post-Yalta order. Yet they rejected a narrow, chauvinistic nation-state solution. Instead, they promoted a "transatlantic Central Europe" – a broader alliance reminiscent of Halecki's concepts – and sought to engage Western audiences directly while maintaining ties with their homeland cultures behind the Iron Curtain[53].

From this vantage, Milan Kundera's 1984 essay *The Tragedy of Central Europe* recast the region as a "kidnapped West", while Czesław Miłosz – newly a Nobel laureate – insisted on Central Europe's distinct historical experience of domination. In 1986, Miłosz argued that, at the very moment the British and French empires were dissolving, half of Europe's independent states had been converted into colonial satrapies[54]. Russian poet Joseph Brodsky countered that line of argument. He dismissed Central European "Russophobia", contending that Moscow's expansionism stemmed not from a specifically Russian imperial culture but from Soviet communism, while writers like Kundera became captives to an East-West binary they purported to critique[55]. The dispute did not end in 1989. Brodsky publicly lamented Ukraine's separation from Russia and, in *On Ukrainian Independence*, deployed a derogatory ethnonym "Khokhols" for Ukrainians, while elevating imperial poet Alexander Pushkin over national poet Taras Shevchenko[56].

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52 A. Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience*, Cambridge 2011, p. 249.

53 J. Labov, *Transatlantic Central Europe: Contesting Geography and Redefining Culture beyond the Nation*, Budapest 2019, pp. 2–113.

54 Cz. Miłosz, *About our Europe*, [in:] R. Kostrzewa (ed.), *Between East and West: Writings from Kultura*, New York 1990, p. 101.

55 J. Brodsky, *Why Milan Kundera Is Wrong about Dostoyevsky*, "New York Review of Books", 17 February 1985.

56 I. Grudzińska-Gross, *Czesław Miłosz and Joseph Brodsky: Fellowship of Poets*, New Haven 2009, pp. 159–160.

For the Western mainstream, the early-1980s debates registered as parochial "Slavs arguing among themselves". The appearance of Central European voices did little to dislodge the prevailing Moscow-first paradigm. After 1985, Perestroika reinforced the view: a wave of "Gorbymania" swept academic and policy circles, sending experts and enthusiasts alike to a newly liberalised USSR. Moscow became the default, and often the only, research destination, with little attention to the fact that ethnic Russians made up only about half of a polity nearing 300 million. Critics of Russification were dismissed as destabilisers, portrayed as reckless radicals inviting a Yugoslav scenario. In the name of stability and centralised nuclear control, the integrity of a democratising Soviet state was to be preserved, preferably under Mikhail Gorbachev's banner of a "Common European Home".

The moral asymmetry of this enthusiasm was striking. Gorbachev received the 1990 Nobel Peace Prize even as Soviet armour had moved through Tbilisi (1989) and Baku (1990) and would soon fire on civilians in Vilnius (1991). Within Western Sovietology, revisionist habits of mind proved durable. Stephen Cohen is exemplary: an early champion of Gorbachev and a critic of the USSR's dissolution, he later emerged as a prominent defender of Moscow's narratives on Ukraine after 2014[57]. The argument here is less about particular figures than about conceptual reflexes, a repertoire of Russo-centric heuristics (civilisational framing, scepticism toward non-Russian national projects, deference to "spheres of influence") that survived the Cold War's end and continued to shape analysis. Similar continuities surfaced in diplomacy: the last US ambassador to the USSR, Jack Matlock, famously dubbed Ukraine a "nowhere nation" in 2000, and has since blamed Kyiv and NATO for the "Ukraine crisis"[58].

The Soviet Union's ethnic-line breakup caught many off guard. Rather than encouraging engagement with the cultural diversity of the successor states, the 1990s were read through an "end of history" lens, even as the region plunged into economic and social crisis and fears of a Balkan-style conflict

[57] J. Chait, *The Pathetic Lives of Putin's American Dupes*, New York Magazine, 14 March 2014, https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2014/03/pathetic-lives-of-putins-american-dupes.html [10.08.2025].

[58] J. Matlock, *The Nowhere Nation*, "The New York Review of Books" 2000, vol. 47, no. 3, pp. 41–45; J. Matlock, *Ukraine Crisis Should Have Been Avoided*, 27 May 2022, https://transnational.live/2022/05/28/jack-matlock-ukraine-crisis-should-have-been-avoided [10.08.2025].

grew. Against Francis Fukuyama's teleology, older civilisational schemas returned to prominence, most notably Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations". Following Toynbee, Huntington mapped civilisational borders by religion and famously split Ukraine along the Dnipro: a "cleft" country, with a "European" west and a "Russian" east, and, therefore, fated for civil war[59]. This trope of ineradicable internal division migrated into policy arguments and offered a convenient rationale for withholding robust support against Russian aggressiveness.

The unipolar "Pax Americana" further simplified the mental cartography. With "the enemy" defeated, much of the Cold War knowledge infrastructure on the USSR and East-Central Europe was allowed to atrophy. As Poland, Hungary, and the Baltic states entered NATO and the EU, the "real West" was tacitly redrawn at the eastern edge of Euro-Atlantic institutions – a shift that, from the post-Soviet vantage, merely pushed the wall of indifference farther east[60]. Despite unmistakable warning signs – Russia's wars in Chechnya and Georgia, and a series of nonviolent "colour revolutions" culminating in Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity – established paradigms were not reconfigured to account for developments in the non-Russian republics. Instead, the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas were packaged as an amorphous "Ukraine crisis", reinforcing the civilisational and Russo-centric theses advanced by Toynbee, Brodsky, and Huntington.

4. How to avoid the decolonisation trap?

As Martin Müller has noted, "remaining outside British and French colonialism limited the chances of the East [Central Europe] to be heard"[61]. That silence endures. Much of today's debate still operates within a North-South binary that erases the "Global East", though the Russian aggression has laid bare the inadequacy of that frame. A decolonisation argument can indeed open new pathways. Alexander Etkind's influential account of "internal

[59] S. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York 1996, pp. 36, 41, 83.

[60] M. Riabchuk, *Shifting the wall further east*, Eurozine, 6 April 2021, https://www.eurozine.com/shifting-the-wall-further-east [27.02.2023].

[61] M. Müller, *In Search of the Global East: Thinking between North and South*, "Geopolitics" 2020, no. 3, p. 742.

colonization" shows how postcolonial studies can illuminate Russian imperialism's eastward and westward expansion. Read alongside *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* and *The Secret Agent*, remind us that Russian and Western empires belong to a single repertoire of domination; both strands should be treated as linked rather than as incommensurable. One can, and should, bring decolonisation tools to East-Central Europe: to theorise the region's colonial legacies in relation to (not as replicas of) the Global South; to interrogate Western perceptions of Russia's place in European history; and to foreground the region's distinct historical experience. Among influential currents here is the "new imperial history" promoted by the "Ab Imperio" journal – a trend that expanded markedly after 2022.

Yet familiar obstacles have returned. Since 2022, many Ukrainian voices have criticised "westplaining" and the revival of colonial patterns in knowledge production applied to regions long relegated to the periphery[62]. Although some voices warned against excessive simplifications[63], the discussion ultimately moved largely down an unproductive path: comparisons to postcolonial settings stripped of Ukraine's European and historical specificity have invited predictable pushback from defenders of the status quo. By 2024, several influential journals carried such critiques; fora such as "Forum for Modern Language Studies" featured, alongside serious arguments for and against "decolonization", a set of heated tirades. The charges largely recycled tropes known from the Cold War iteration of the same debate: claims that decolonial language is being instrumentalised as a "nationalist" tool and the familiar tactic of disqualifying alternative voices by branding decolonising initiatives "unprofessional" activism. A persistent pattern has been to recast Central European critiques of Russia as mere Russophobia – Maria Rubins, for example, likened the current push to "decolonise Russian Studies" to a new "cultural revolution", warning it may "breed Russophobia"[64]. Many critics likewise relied on another Cold War-era revisionist habit: portraying

[62] J. Buyskykh, *Old-new colonial tendencies in social anthropology: Empathy in wartime*, "Ethnologia Polona" 2023, vol. 44, pp. 55–85; O. Kushnir, *Decolonising Knowledge Production about Ukraine: A Security Aspect*, "Polish Political Science Yearbook" 2024, vol. 53, pp. 139–153.

[63] G. Korolov, *Playing with the past: Does the decolonisation of the history of Ukraine make sense?*, "New Eastern Europe" 2023, no. 2, pp. 177–183.

[64] M. Rubins, *Decolonization and the New "Cultural Revolution"*, "Forum for Modern Language Studies" 2024, vol. 60, no. 3, pp. 380–384.

Moscow as a reactive victim rather than an aggressor and insisting on a symmetry between Western and Russian "hegemonic projects". What usually follows is an obligatory balancing of criticism of Russia with criticism of Ukraine and the West[65].

None of this requires imputing a Kremlin hand. The very notion of singular "Russian narratives" can mislead: few in Western academia are on the Kremlin's payroll, and more often these positions reflect epistemic blind spots rather than orchestrated hybrid operations. Russia pursues expansion irrespective of what is said in Western salons or on campuses. The problem is that Western circulation of imperial knowledge – habits of centring Moscow and suspicion of "small-nation nationalism" – helps the Kremlin by dulling vigilance, narrowing policy imagination, and complicating legitimate, critical inquiry into the region's dark past and difficult present. What the field requires is less sloganized decolonisation and more deliberate de-imperialisation: an unlearning of Russo-centric mental maps and a clear recognition that Russian imperialism – rather than supposed pathologies of non-Russian nationalisms – has been primary in driving the war.

A credible program follows from this diagnosis. The first task is to name the matrix: to produce rigorous intellectual histories of the field that uncover the premises by which Russia is continually reinstalled at the centre, explain why the post-1945 émigré response to Western epistemic violence proved ineffective, and show how Cold War knowledge production continues to frame the predominant mental maps long after communism's collapse. Hundreds of "decolonisation" panels and dozens of language-competent hires will not suffice if the substrate remains intact. What binds that substrate is the presumption of Russia's immutable claim to a "special place" in world order and in the global marketplace of ideas; that presumption must be brought under scrutiny. Secondly, to analyse the mechanisms through which the Russian state instrumentalises history – deploying tropes of "antifascism", "Russophobia", and "far-right nationalism" – to justify aggression, to paralyse democratic responses, and, ultimately, to secure external validation for imperial expansion. This analysis cannot rest on the idiom of postcolonial studies alone; it requires a fine-grained reconstruction of how inherited tropes shape

[65] For recent examples, see D. Dzenovska, *Emptiness against Decolonization: Reflections from the Imperial Fault Line in Eastern Latvia*, "Slavic Review" 2024, vol. 83, no. 4, pp. 687–704; V. Ishchenko, *Towards the Abyss: Ukraine from Maidan to War*, London 2024.

not only scholarship but also concrete policy decisions. Thirdly, to articulate a positive program: not the avoidance of Russian topics, but a coherent Central European account of Russia and Russian imperialism, situated within comparative empire studies and explicit about pathways out of empire for the region. Fourthly, to reframe the region: Ukraine should not be excluded from East-Central Europe – analytically, institutionally, or pedagogically. The boundary that once separated the Soviet "satellites" from the Soviet republics did not disappear after 1991; it persisted as a mental and institutional line that left room for renewed Russian claims to its "near abroad".

Unless the Yalta mental geography is retired – both in the Kremlin and among segments of Western elites – the region's "tragedy" will endure. Reclaiming the "kidnapped" Europe, therefore, requires ending not only the political and economic subordination of Russia's neighbours, but also the epistemic subordination that has long consigned East-Central Europe to the margins of knowledge, particularly in the imagination of the Western "ordinary philistines".

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