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CRITICAL FORUM: EMPIRE AND DECOLONIZATION

VIEWPOINT

On The Subjects and Objects of Decolonization

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Abstract

This response to Dace Dzenovska's article "Emptiness Against Decolonization" engages with her account of the social and political experience of the residents of "Lielciems" in eastern Latvia, describing it as a form of inter-imperiality, which has been defined by Laura Doyle as the "fraught condition" shaped by "multiple vectored relations among empires and among those who endure and maneuver among empires."[1] In the case of Lielciems, the contradictory implications of life on the "imperial fault line" bring to light pitfalls of discourse concerning decolonization in eastern Europe more broadly. Attention to the voices of Lielciems and other places like it—the voices of people who are the object of the decolonial aspirations of others—may allow us to make necessary corrections in our use of this term and of processes of decolonization in our disciplines. First and foremost, we must remain cognizant of the multiple uses to which the term has been put across the region, not all of which are beneficent, and of the failings of western empire in the past decades, even as we condemn the neoimperial violence of the Russian Federation.

Dace Dzenovska's article "Emptiness Against Decolonization" makes an important intervention into the processes of reflection and disciplinary rearticulation that have been initiated in the study of eastern Europe, Russia, and Eurasia since the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Scholarly inquiry into the imperial features of the USSR and the convergences and distinctions between post-socialist and post-colonial conditions have percolated in the profession for decades.[2] Yet who can deny, as Ukrainians defend their cities and villages from Russian soldiers, drones, and glide bombs, that the decolonization

[1] Laura Doyle, *Inter-imperiality: Vying Empires, Gendered Labor, and the Literary Arts of Alliance* (Durham, NC, 2020), 4.

[2] The literature on the imperial nature of the USSR and the post-colonial features of post-socialism is too large to cite in any complete way here. Important early contributions include: Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, 2001); David Chioni Moore, "Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique," *PMLA* 116, no. 1 (2001): 111–28. Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, 2005); Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery, "Thinking Between the Posts: Postcolonialism, Postsocialism and Ethnography After the Cold War," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51 (2009): 6–34. More recent works include: Serguei Alex Oushakine, "Postcolonial Estrangements: Claiming a Space between Stalin and Hitler," in *Rites of Place: Public Commemoration in Russia and Eastern Europe*, eds. Julie Buckler and Emily Johnson, (Evanston, IL, 2013): 285–313; Epp Annus, *Soviet Postcolonial Studies: A View from the Western Borderlands* (Abingdon, Oxon, Eng., 2018); Artemy Kalinovsky, *Laboratory of Socialist Development: Cold War Politics and Decolonization in Soviet Tajikistan* (Ithaca, 2018).

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of disciplines that continue to bear the imperial trace—from matters of literary canon, to those of fundamental theoretical frameworks, research topics, hiring patterns, and the very names of departments and journals—must now take center stage.

Nevertheless, Dzenovska argues that the view from the borderlands of Latvia reveals certain pitfalls of talk of "decolonization" and "anti-imperialism," which has become as prominent in the political rhetoric of eastern Europe as in the scholarly discourse of those who study it. As she proposes, the experience of those who live in the depopulating border zones of Latvia, many of them Soviet-era arrivals in Latvia or their descendants who have been stranded since the 1990s in the status of "non-citizen," renders plain the ironies of the vilification of the Russian Federation and the USSR before it as "empires," when this vilification is combined with a disavowal of the no less imperial nature of the United States, NATO, or the European Union.[3] Perhaps it is unsurprising that in societies at the "imperial fault-line" at a time of war, "empire" might come to operate more as a term of abuse than as one describing a political formation of any determinate sort. It is more troubling, however, that such is more and more commonly the case among scholars located far from the border zones. As scholars, we need to attend to other voices from those same societies, in order to learn how to do our own analytical business better.

Dzenovska's study introduces us to the inhabitants of a provincial town near Latvia's eastern border with Russia that was deprived of its economic *raison d'être* by post-socialist transition. For these people, who have experienced post-Soviet history as a process of disintegration of social and economic structures and infrastructures and fading hope that any local economic dynamism or external power might come to construct new ones, the inadequacy of the conception of "decolonization" to describe their own past experience or present needs is plain. Over the past decades, rather than agonize over the threat of a new invader, they have pined for economically productive or socially meaningful transnational and transregional connections. They are distrustful of all empires on offer, since they have been abandoned and misused by them all and fear that the current conflict will only lead to further degradation of their home territory. To make matters worse, these same people themselves have come to be seen by many Latvian elites as a symptom of past domination and a potential fifth column threatening to aid future neoimperial violence—a population that must somehow be "dealt with" in a continuing process of "decolonization." Deprived of agency in the past and present, they are now the objects of others' decolonizing aspirations.

Both in the local scene of the border town she has ironically dubbed "Lielciems" (Latvian for "Bigville"), and in the larger space of Latvia as a whole, Dzenovska describes the political structures and processes of the east European contact zone in a manner that resonates with Laura Doyle's work on inter-imperiality, the "fraught condition" shaped by "multiple vectored relations among empires and among those who endure and maneuver among empires."[4] In such geopolitically contested territories, local states, communities, and individuals strategically tune alliances among overlapping or clashing imperial powers in order to gain advantage in local struggles. Such alignments often enough reproduce imperial social relations and exclusions or introduce new ones, reinforcing the subalternity of some groups while advancing the interests of others. Dzenovska's term for such maneuvering is "triangulation," neatly capturing the positionality of local actors who seek to capitalize on asymmetrical, perhaps contradictory engagements with rival imperial matrices of economic and political power, east and west.

[3] For discussion of the category "empire," the historical devolution of its uses and meanings, and its range of application, including to the US, see Mark Beissinger, "Rethinking Empire in the Wake of Soviet Collapse," in *Ethnic Politics after Communism*, eds. Zoltan Dennis Barany and Robert G. Moser (Ithaca, 2005), 14–45.

[4] Laura Doyle, *Inter-imperiality*, 4. For a recent application of the concept of inter-imperiality to an earlier east European case, see Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă, *Creolizing the Modern: Transylvania Across Empires* (Ithaca, 2022).

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Hence, Dzenowska explains how in the course of the past thirty years, the Latvian state has triangulated between, on the one hand, construction of Latvian national identity founded on emancipation from the Soviet regime, often involving the political and social marginalization of Russophone and Russian former "occupiers," and, on the other, schemes bolstering the Latvian construction industry that rewarded investors in real estate with permanent residency, primarily appealing to wealthy Russians, who are nostalgically fond of the Baltic seashore as a site for their vacation homes and in need of access to European mobility. Prior to 2022, such contradictory inter-imperial maneuvering was common. Take, for instance, the (quite successful) Russian language study program in Daugavpils, to which US military academies, long before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, were sending their students, who were barred from study in the Russian Federation. For all that, the program draws staff and resources from the Russian and Slavic Department of Daugavpils State University and its Center for Russian Language and Culture, which took funding in those years from the Russian World Foundation, an instrument of Russian soft-power. *Vot*: Triangulation!

Those who are located in the precarious spaces of the imperial border zones draw on the resources of rival empires as they might. Who can blame them? As Dzenovska reports, some residents of Lielciems balanced their sense of belonging in their Latvian homeland with the decision to take Russian citizenship in order to gain an early pension, bartering the one form of inter-imperial value they hold, their "political value as potential subjects of Russkii Mir (Russian world)" for additional income. Not all inter-imperial triangulation strategies are equal, however. In the present, the wartime transformation of the Latvian political scene has raised the threat of deportation for some of these erstwhile Russian citizens who are not willing or able (in the face of Latvian language requirements) to revert to Latvian citizenship.

The dynamics of inter-imperiality can involve not just strategic capitalization of the resources of rival empires, but also speculation on the negative potentials of a feared or vilified opponent. Mainstream Latvian political life is founded on memory of the iniquities of the Soviet occupation—more and more imagined as "Russian" occupation—and has found support for nationalization policies within Latvia in the scene across the border of rising Russian illiberalism and military belligerence. For their part, Russian state rhetoric has drawn on Latvian voices, especially those on the nationalist right, as material for stories of "Russophobia" and anti-Russian discrimination in the west—as a political resource to drum up anti-western sentiment as needed. Here, the negative capacity of cross-border relations becomes a form of political capital, leading to the amplification of mutually reinforcing, polarized positions, which redound in persistent national and ethnic rivalries within Latvian society and politics.[5] Here, too, conditions have changed rapidly since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As Dzenovska explains, the ratcheting up of cross-border antagonism has given new prominence and vigor to Latvian discussions of the negative legacies of the Soviet past and the need for decolonization, possibly in the form of more stringent Latvianization policies.

From a vantage at the border, one sees things that are obscure to the gaze of the center. In the west, it seems obvious that the culprit of inimical imperialism in eastern Europe is Russia. If the west has some imperial flaws, they are obviously mitigated by the civilizational gifts of the liberal democratic political order. In the face of illiberal dictatorship and naked military violence, what does it matter that the terms we use to excoriate Vladimir Putin's dictatorship are somehow imprecise? In Lielciems, though, as in many other places in eastern Europe, we recognize more clearly the imperial failings of the post-Soviet dispensation:

[5] See Kevin M. F. Platt, *Border Conditions: Russian-Speaking Latvians Between World Orders* (Ithaca, 2024), 135–86.

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the arrival of western institutions has not been a moment of opportunity or political agency for all.[6] Even more to the point, for the residents of Lielciems and others like them, the politics of reaction to Soviet occupation, under the moniker of anti-imperialism and, more recently, decolonization, has contributed to impoverishment and disenfranchisement. For the residents of Lielciems, such rhetoric has been not simply imprecise, but pernicious, masking new forms of social injustice under a triumphal gloss of emancipation.

Dzenovska's article brilliantly elucidates the complexities of talk of anti-imperialism and decolonization in Latvia. She does not devote much attention to related discourse across the border in the Russian Federation, although it might well be familiar to her informants, some of whom undoubtedly access Russian media via satellite dish or other means. Just as, since 2022, discussion of anti-imperialism and decolonization has come to the fore in a new way in eastern Europe, it has done so in Russia as well. One does not have to look far for examples:

> The West will do anything to preserve the neocolonial system that lets it be a parasite on the world, essentially robbing the world in the name of the power of the dollar and technological dictatorship, collecting tribute from humanity, extracting the basic source of its unearned prosperity—the rent of the hegemon… . The West's politics of colonialism reaches back to the Middle Ages, and led to the global slave trade, genocide of American Indian tribes, plundering of India and Africa, and English and French wars on China, forcing the latter to open its ports to the opium trade… . For our part: we take pride that in the twentieth century, it was none other than our own country that led the anticolonial movement, granting so many nations of the world the possibility for development, a reduction of poverty and inequality, and success in the struggle against hunger and disease.[7]

This is only a small sample of the "anti-imperialism" that was on display in Putin's speech on the occasion of the illegal Russian annexation of occupied Ukrainian provinces in September 2022.

We may dismiss this as cant. Certainly, Putin and his robber-baron elites, the hegemonic rent collectors of Russia, can hardly be described as victims of western capitalist imperialism. Yet for all that, given their experience of post-Soviet social life, for some residents of Lielciems, these words may have something of the ring of truth. For others of their neighbors, those who "read everything for its double bottom," to quote Dzenovska, they may serve simply as evidence of the vacuity of all manner of anti-imperial rhetoric, west and east. Despite its potential for cynicism, that position holds important lessons.

In both east European politics and in the academic study of eastern Europe, "decolonization" is both a problematic slogan and an urgent challenge. Putin's war on Ukraine is undoubtedly imperial in nature. Yet we will do better, in condemning it, to begin with its murderous violence and its foundation in lies. The battle of imperial name-calling only serves to rob words of their meanings and sap the force from our legitimate condemnation. Instead, as we seek to decolonize our disciplines and societies, we must strive for analytical and political lucidity. Decolonizations, like empires, come in many forms: decolonizations of the left and of the right, decolonizations that seek emancipation from the Eurocentric

[6] Kristen Ghodsee and Mitchell Orenstein, *Taking Stock of Shock: Social Consequences of the 1989 Revolutions* (Oxford, Eng., 2021).

[7] Vladimir Putin, "Podpisanie dogovorov o priniatii DNR, LNR, Zaporozhskoi i Khersonskoi oblastei v sostav Rossii," *Prezident Rossii*, September 30, 2022. http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69465 (accessed January 13, 2025).

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west and those that seek a return to Europe. And then there is Putin's "decolonization," in a category all its own. Within Europe and the US, let us also reflect on the failures of the past thirty years of post-socialist transformation—not just of eastern Europe, but of the globe—that has propelled the enrichment of the few while leaving the many, especially the peripheral, the elderly, the minorities, and the nationally displaced behind. It is these failures of our western empire that have rendered many in both Lielciems and Riga, in other places in eastern Europe and the Russian Federation, as well as in Latin America and the rural US impoverished and embittered—easy targets for a politics of populist ressentiment that blames all woes on foreign enemies and domestic others.

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