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VIEWPOINT

The Empires within Us—Or Can We Really Talk about Postimperial Subjectivity?

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Abstract

It was about the dreams that I first thought of when reading Dace Dzenovska's thought-provoking article. What are the residents of Lielciems dreaming about? Do they dream of empires? I wonder, if we view the former USSR as an empire, can we further disentangle the recent past of people of Lielciems as imperial actors from their overwhelmingly ahistorical present, where they seem to have been forgotten by almost everyone—or, at least, anyone who could offer them a new visibility and dignity.

"Tu sueño imperios han sido," the Spanish title of a recent novel about the Aztec empire, is equally imaginative and perplexing. A literal translation of this line would run: "your dreams empires have been," but it sounds strange and confusing—and this is why the English version of the book carries a more straightforward title: "You dreamed of empires."[1]

The original title, drawn from a Baroque poem, conjures a historical imaginary which more and more scholars have begun to embrace; an awareness that, despite more than a century of nation-centered histories and analyses, many historical actors have not become post-imperial. As ghost-like presences felt in material remnants, from spices in food, to sartorial choices, to idioms, or much physically present and more recognizable military alliances or IT crashes that paralyzed economic sectors for days, empires of various kinds continue to inform lives, actions, choices, and dreams.

It was about the dreams that I first thought of when reading Dace Dzenovska's thought-provoking article. What are the residents of Lielciems dreaming about? Do they dream of empires? I wonder if we can further disentangle their recent past as imperial actors—if we view the former URSS as an empire—from their overwhelmingly ahistorical present, where they seem to have been forgotten by almost everyone—or, at least, anyone who could offer them a new visibility, rights, and dignity.

With nuance, empathy, and care for the people she met during her fieldwork, Dzenovska offers a poignant portrayal of this community rapidly unraveling despite its attempts to not be easily erased by global and regional agendas. Many of these people are ethnic Russians

[1] Rodrigo Figueroa, "Fiction is Always a Game": A Conversation with Álvaro Enrigue, Interviews, Issue 29, March 25, 2024. https://latinamericanliteraturetoday.org/2024/03/fiction-is-always-a-game-a-conversation-with-alvaro-enrigue/ (accessed January 13, 2025).

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who are permanent residents in Latvia, but not fully fledged Latvian citizens, and by extension, do not carry an EU passport. As such, they inhabit a blurry status of permanent in-between-ness: a position that has gradually undermined not only their sense of political and social selfhood (how do they define themselves politically), but also the value they carry for various polities (the Latvian state, Russian government, or international entrepreneurs who, like Godot, are desperately wanted and waited for, but never show up).

The people of Lielciems are seemingly forgotten by everyone with the exception of their children, who have migrated to western Europe in search of a better life and jobs, and the grandkids who visit in the summers. This is a place defined by a shrinking horizon of radical precarity and an economy of subsistence, where people pick mushrooms and berries in the absence of other available work, and try to forget about an unimaginable future by turning to entertainment shows on Russian television. The case of using EU funds for broadband internet set up in a place where it is apparently not used by anyone encapsulates a broader process of stagnation—actually, slow disappearance—that characterizes this settlement.

Despite the locals' comment that "empty space does not stay empty," Lielciems as a social place is un-becoming; turning into an absence. The community is unraveling from within, as the place becomes an abstract space, depopulated, transformed into a no man's land. The military commander's confession that it would have been better if there were no people living there reveals how these residents are viewed: as almost absent. The place is both disappearing and extending transnationally via labor migration, and the circulation of people, adult children finding work elsewhere, grandkids visiting grandparents in the summer.

Dzenovska asks: what do un-becoming places like Lieciems, where people stopped hoping, have to tell us about the limitations of theories about postimperial order and the political rhetoric of "decolonization"? This is a crucial question, because such theories and political agendas assume political subjects who are willing to hope: to envision a (better) future.

Dzenovska challenges us to think "beyond decolonization," given that such an approach assumes an implicit power difference, as political, cultural, and economic influence over a territory and people that continues to linger into the present, and which the "colonized" presumably wants to reject. Instead of assuming such a black and white political chronology, she aims to re-center her analysis of Lielciems and its people by placing them in "the relational imperial landscape within which a variety of subjects—empires, nation-states…nations without states, and people…—think and act."[2] Viewing places and people through this relational imperial landscape echoes other scholars' calls for acknowledging myriad influences, intersections, and interactions of people and places whose identities are in flux, and where borders may become more fluid from one political regime to the next. These are locations that historian Omer Bartov called "the shatterzones of empire," at the intersection of multiple regimes of power and histories of conquest, colonization, and conflict, where some political leaders may have dreamt of ethnically homogeneous polities, but many ordinary people may have been more nationally indifferent.[3] Moving out of the region, other scholars have called for an inter-imperial method—what Laura Doyle defined as a "longue duree study of empires … [that reveals] the ways interacting empires have undergirded nation formation and shaped national political discourses."[4] In other words,

[2] Dace Dzenovska, "Emptiness against Decolonization: Reflections from the Imperial Fault Line in Eastern Latvia," in this forum, page 689.

[3] Tara Zahra, "Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis," *Slavic Review* 69, no. 1 (Spring 2010), 93–119.

[4] Laura Doyle, "Inter-Imperiality: Dialectics in a Postcolonial World History," *Interventions* 16, vol. 2 (March 2014): 161 (159–96).

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the nation is really a phantasm, a product of imperial hegemony; a dream of the empire only to quickly turn into a nightmare.

I could see why the people of Lielciems would not want to view themselves as "colonized subjects," and how the rhetoric of "decolonization" would sound empty and strange to them. To de-colonize from whom? The town became a vibrant community in the 1970s, with people coming from all over the Soviet Union to work in the new factory. The settlement, then, is very much tied to the making and unmaking of a certain type of empire, that is, the former Soviet Union. Even though it is now geographically in Latvia, the town was a byproduct of a former imperial order whose remnants are now linguistic and cultural. In a way, perhaps we could view some of the current residents of Lielciems as symbolic colonial subjects, if we think of the former Soviet Union as an empire of the mind; it continues to be part of these people's dreams, nostalgias, as well as their linguistic landscape, as most of them are ethnic Russians.

Dzenovska writes:

> Most of [the people in Lielciems] refuse to articulate positive identifications as pro-Latvian, pro-Ukrainian, pro-Russian or otherwise … The residents of Lielciems reject the sorting that the post-Soviet national state demands of them, that is, to differentiate between loyal national subjects and agents of the former empire.[5] [They] are difficult to decolonize; their lives are too entangled…They practice a particular kind of "postcolonial estrangement."[6]

I wonder if their refusal to define themselves with national labels signals that some of them embrace their condition of permanent in-betweenness, as it allows them to inhabit multiple worlds at the same time, while offering them pragmatic solutions. For instance, many of them are ethnic Russians, so they could, in principle, apply for Russian citizenship and relocate to Russia. However, they do not want to leave, because leaving, especially now, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, means that they would no longer be able see their kids working abroad, or welcome their grandkids in the summers. The retired woman who decided to apply for Russian citizenship just so she could access a meager pension did not want to leave, but she was forced to because she could not pass the Latvian language exam. It was not ethnic or cultural allegiance that made these people apply for Russian citizenship, but financial reasons. They found themselves again colonized, so to speak, because once they opted to receive a pension from the Russian state, their choice became political, even though they initially did not see it as such.

The residents of Lielciems seem to be in-between histories, or in-between historical frameworks. While they reject the narrow national labels that the Latvian state has tried to impose on them—by asking them to pass a Latvian language test as a sine qua non for citizenship—they also reject Russia as a potential place of relocation. They appear to try to make the most of all these possible worlds, while not fully inhabiting any of them. They used to be colonial subjects of an empire of the past, but who are they now? How do they define themselves? Their self-definition seems to keep changing rapidly, as they seek a renewed visibility and rights while confronting various attempts at erasure: the maternity ward is closing, the stable jobs are disappearing, the troops appear out of nowhere as if their home is a no-mans-land, and so forth.

This is why I am not sure I would see their condition as what the author describes as a "true postcolonial estrangement." To me, it reads more as a multilayered inter-imperial

[5] Dzenovska, in this forum, page 691.
[6] Dzenovska, in this forum, page 697.

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condition, in which they try to continuously negotiate among competing allegiances, networks, identities, and promises. They are frozen in place, so to speak. They could not leave, or rather do not want to leave, because they do not have the financial means to relocate somewhere else in Latvia (or abroad). They could also receive some extra money from the Russian state if they opted to become Russian citizens, but that could also mean for some of them a forced relocation to Russia.

Meanwhile, at least until February 2022, many well-to-do Russians were able to apply for Latvian citizenship, allowing them to travel freely within the European Union. People with money found a way to circumvent the limitations of their political identities. Those without access to capital (or potential sources of capital, like transferable skills or education) are stuck in place, feeling too old to start anew in a different town or a different country.

Who can afford to become postcolonial? It seems to me that the people of Lielciems are doubly colonized, as they are pushed to signal a political allegiance when they simply want to get their lost community back. But the factory, once the main source of capital, is now abandoned. Their children found jobs elsewhere. What they have left are their dreams. What do they dream of? Do they dream of empires?

Emanuela Grama is an associate professor of anthropology and European history at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, USA. She specializes in the history of 20th century Central and Eastern Europe, with a focus on urban politics, processes of state-making, property, memory and cultural change in 20th and 21st century Romania. Her first book, *Socialist Heritage: The Politics of Past and Place in Romania* (Indiana University Press, 2019), was the winner of the 2020 Ed Hewett book prize offered by the ASEEES.

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