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Imperialism, supremacy, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

Few predicted the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine and especially its brutality. Similarly, Ukraine's capable and determined resistance came as a surprise to many. Ukraine, viewed through the Russian lenses, was erroneously characterized as "weak" and "fragmented." In turn, Russia was seen as a modern power seeking a "sphere of influence" through attraction and occasional meddling in neighbors' affairs. The Ukraine–Russia relations were misconstrued as "brotherly." I argue that Russia should be understood as a colonial power whose aggression aims to re-establish supremacy over the Ukrainian nation. This desire arose from Ukrainians' increased acceptance in Europe, which Russians perceived as a transgression of hierarchies. The brutality of the invasion was aggravated by the Russian forces' realization that Ukrainians not only rejected their "rescue mission" but did not need one in the first place. Misconceptions about the Russian invasion can be addressed through interdisciplinarity, engagement with postcolonial scholarship, and attention to facts.

KEYWORDS Ukraine; Russia; imperialism; supremacy; invasion; postcolonial

As of mid-2023, Russia continued its war against Ukraine. Our understanding of Russia's decision to escalate its aggression in February 2022, as well as of the way in which Russia's attack and Ukraine's resistance unfolded, was limited by several misconceptions that dominated mainstream International Relations (IR) debates concerning Ukraine, Russia, and the relationship between the two. Russia's perseverance in its attempt to subjugate Ukraine needs to be put in the context of the supremacist views that Russian elites and society have of Ukraine and its people, which have developed over centuries of Russian, and subsequently Soviet, domination.

However, Russia's behavior cannot be reduced to waning power's nostalgia for past imperial glory. In many ways, they are Ukraine-specific. In historical and contemporary Russian literature, media, and societal discourses,

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Ukrainians have consistently been portrayed as backwards, indolent, and selfish—and thus in need of imperial guidance. Such perceptions have also permeated international debates due to Russia-centric analyses of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and Russian networks of influence (Dudko, 2023; Koval et al., 2022). They have also been persistently challenged by scholars from, or specialists on, the region (see Mälksoo, 2022 for an overview). Still, Russia had to an extent succeeded in portraying Ukraine as a “failed” or “divided” state for audiences unfamiliar with the CEE, which led to the surprise in mainstream academic and policy discourses at Ukraine’s capable and determined resistance.

Similarly, few scholars and analysts, at least outside the region, predicted Russian forces’ brutality. In February 2022, Russian troops invaded *en masse* a well-functioning country with a strong civic identity hell-bent on resisting the occupation. The invaders expected that they would deploy to a “failed state” inhabited by oppressed Russophones who were led astray by the sinister West. As Sonevytsky (2022, p. 28) puts it, they imagined Ukrainians as “Russians suffering temporarily from false consciousness, or as hapless pawns of US and NATO imperialism” (see also Kudlenko, 2023; Shevtsova, 2022). The uncomfortable realization that Ukrainians needed or desired no “liberation” played a role in the commission of the war crimes. However, even before February 2022, there existed a considerable degree of hostility towards Ukrainians in Russia. It intensified after two key events: the 2013–2014 Revolution of Dignity, which Russia used to push the narrative of alleged “chaos” and “external control” in Ukraine, and the 2017 granting of visa-free travel to the Schengen countries for Ukrainians, which Russia perceived as a transgression of “legitimate” hierarchies.

The blind spots in dominant analyses prior to the full-scale invasion were in part the result of the limited integration of mainstream IR and areas studies (Kaczmarek & Ortmann, 2021), as well as other social sciences and humanities. There was also a dearth of applications of postcolonial scholarship to wars on the European continent. Finally, the emphasis on abstract models over empirical facts led to a situation when analysts held on to certain beliefs even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. In this article, I explore the views of Ukraine, as well as of Russia and its relations with Ukraine, that prevailed in mainstream debates prior to February 2022; the misconceptions that those views entrenched; and the disciplinary, theoretical, and empirical limitations of dominant analyses.

What did we think about Russia and Ukraine before February 2022?

In this section, I provide a brief overview of the mainstream discourses on Ukraine as well as on Russia and its relations with Ukraine before February

2022. Some of those discourses aligned with, or were used by, the Russian government to strengthen domestic support for the aggression and discourage international support for Ukraine's self-defense, although there was significant variations across countries and outlet types (Koval et al., 2022).

Perceptions of Ukraine

Prior to February 2022, Ukraine was often described as a “divided” country (for a critique, see Kudlenko, 2023; Riabchuk, 2015) as well as a “weak” or even “failed” state. The notions of “division” and “weakness” should be analyzed separately. First, the notion of Ukraine as a “divided nation” functioned in two ways in international discourses. At times, it orientalized Ukraine as a peripheral conflict-affected country where “ancient ethnic hatreds” seemed to predestine it for disorder (for such portrayals of other countries, see Labonte, 2013). Ukraine was seen as “a big Yugoslavia in Eastern Europe” (Koval et al., 2022, p. 173). At other times, this notion normalized Ukraine as a non-post-colonial country that should have followed the Swiss model of a neutral multilingual federation—a view that ignored the fact that Germany, France, and Italy did not use language, history, and identity to undermine Swiss sovereignty as Russia did with Ukraine. Any measure that Ukraine took to limit Russia's influence after the war's start in 2014, such as the 35% quota for Ukrainian-language songs on radio, was seen with suspicion as something that risked upsetting “Russian-speaking Ukrainians,” assumed to be homogenous a group with a tenuous attachment to the Ukrainian state and nation. The problem of Russian infiltration was recast as an issue of cultural diversity, and the burden of addressing it was placed on Ukraine.

For Russia, both the orientalizing and the normalizing ways of portraying Ukraine as a “divided nation” played into its hands. The orientalizing frame reproduced Russia's “rhetoric about Ukraine not being a ‘real state’” (Flockhart & Korosteleva, 2022, p. 470), thus helping to drum up domestic support for the aggression. The normalizing frame, in turn, was used by Russia to delegitimize Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic aspirations and the international assistance to Ukraine: Neutrality and the weakening of the Ukrainian language's status would have helped Russia to control Ukraine's affairs through military intimidation and cultural domination.

Second, the notion of Ukrainian state's presumed “low capacity” led to the misperception that the 40-million country was “so weak and vulnerable that nobody [ould] help it against Russia, and the provision of lethal arms would only further worsen the situation” (Koval et al., 2022, p. 172). Only a few challenged the idea of Ukraine's “smallness” both as an empirical inaccuracy and a Russian imperial construction (Finnin, 2022). The notion of Ukraine's “weakness” led to the surprise at the Ukrainian government's choice of resistance over exile. In parallel, however, past portrayals of Ukraine

exclusively through the lens of corruption continued fueling doubts as to whether it would be able to use military aid effectively and as intended. For domestic audiences in Russia, alleged “chaos” in Ukraine was contrasted with Russia’s conservative authoritarianism serving as a bulwark against disorder. It also created an expectation among the invading troops that any resistance they would encounter could be easily crushed.

At the intersection of the notions of Ukraine as a “divided” and “weak” state, the Russian propaganda created a narrative that had the shakiest basis in reality but significant reach: that the Ukrainian state allegedly struggled to contain the influence of the far right. The full-scale invasion laid bare the cynicism of Russia’s “denazification” rhetoric, especially as Ukrainian units that had (or used to have) a number of far right members fought valiantly and loyally to protect Ukraine’s democracy, the Jewish president, and predominantly Russian-speaking Mariupol. The disproportionate attention to Ukraine’s far right in the academic literature might have resulted from Ukraine’s openness for fieldwork on this topic as compared to Russia, where this problem has been and remains more serious (Gomza 2022). Additionally, since many societies grappled with the rise of the far right, exaggerations about the influence of such forces in Ukraine attracted attention: After all, other Ukraine’s problems, such as covert and overt aggression by a neighbor, were less relatable. This was exacerbated by the tendency to view the CEE through the lenses of illiberalism and conservatism where far-right tendencies were to be “expected” (O’Sullivan & Krulišová, 2023)—a case of stereotypical thinking that ignored Ukrainians’ rejection of far right parties at the polls (Shevtsova, 2022).

Perceptions of Russia and its relations with Ukraine

In turn, the mainstream IR literature expected Russia to behave like a modern power, that is, to seek an informal “sphere of influence” in its neighborhood and attract supporters by projecting a model of society that others would want to emulate (e.g., Malyarenko & Wolff, 2018). As for the reasons why Russia desired a “sphere of influence,” one strand of the literature argued that it was due to Russia’s fear of an external attack, which made a buffer zone of compliant neighbors desirable (e.g., Götz, 2017). Another strand argued that Russia was frustrated at not being perceived as an “equal” to Western great powers (e.g., Neumann, 2016). At the same time, neither school of thought expected that such influence-seeking would cross the threshold into a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which was certain to become costly due to sanctions and casualties (Driedger & Polianskii, 2023).

To understand why we got it wrong, it is necessary to examine Russia’s relations with Ukraine. These relations were often described, at Russia’s

instigation, as “brotherly.” Again, this worked both for international and Russian audiences. For international audiences, this led to an expectation that the Russian public would not support an all-out invasion of Ukraine, and that Russian forces would not commit war crimes. In other words, it led to a mistaken belief that Russia would seek to protect its standing among Ukrainians and therefore not invade so overtly and violently. For Russian audiences, it constructed Ukrainians as practically indistinguishable from Russians in order to downplay the existence of Ukraine as a separate political community (Riabchuk, 2013). It made many invaders believe that they would be greeted “with flowers.”

Once Russia launched the full-scale invasion, few expected it to be so brutal. Even in Russia, the initial expectation was that occupation of Ukrainian lands could be sustained through Ukrainians’ acquiescence and sold to domestic audiences as a “surgical operation.” Yet it quickly transpired that Russia did not hesitate to kill Ukrainians—often Russian-speaking ones—on the territories it occupied, and then kidnap or deport those who survived. The campaign of ethnic cleansing was followed by the influx of Russian settlers, either brought in by the Russian state or moving enthusiastically to razed cities.

What we got wrong

Contrary to the prevailing view of Russia as a modern power that seeks security or esteem, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine demonstrated that it should instead be conceptualized as a colonial power. Throughout history, empires fought colonial wars that were extremely costly. For example, by the time the Portuguese regime collapsed in 1974, it was spending up to 45% of its budget on colonial wars (Miller, 2012). In the past, however, colonial possessions were essential for great power status. Conversely, by now, imperial violence has been nearly universally delegitimized on the grounds of sovereignty, self-determination, and non-aggression. However, among some Russian domestic audiences, imperial violence found popularity.

The limitations inherent in viewing Russia not as a colonial but conventional security- or status-seeking actor became apparent in the mainstream analyses of Russia-NATO relations—for instance, the idea that Russia reacted to the “threat” of, or “disrespect” by, NATO. It was revealing how little the Russian leadership cared about Finland’s NATO accession. If the “NATO encirclement” argument were to be taken to its logical conclusion, any increase in NATO membership should be perceived as “threatening” by Russia. Finland is a country that maintains its forces in a high state of readiness, has a history of losing territory (permanently) and autonomy (temporarily) to the Soviet Union, and shares 1,340 km of

border with Russia. The Russian government's spokesperson Dmitry Peskov, while expressing vague dissatisfaction at Finland's NATO accession, offered the following explanation for the lack of a response: "Finland was never anti-Russia, and we have had no disputes with Finland" (Tass, 2023, para. 6). This bizarre claim is an illustrative example of Russian authorities' manipulation of history (e.g., Mälksoo, 2015). Yet what matters most is that Finland was clearly marked as being outside of the "Slavic brotherhood" that Russia tried to impose on its neighbors.

As for the idea of NATO's "disrespect" of Russia, it is important to remember that the aggression against Ukraine began when Russia was at the peak of its economic, cultural, and diplomatic power. In 2013, Russia's GDP reached its all-time high of \$2.29 trillion, only to fall to \$1.28 trillion in 2016, two years after the annexation of Crimea. The 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi were a triumph for Russian sport and cultural diplomacy. 59% of young Canadians, 51% of young Germans, and 49% of young Americans had favorable views of Russia back then.¹ Prior to the 2014 annexation of Crimea, NATO offered Russia bespoke forms and forums for cooperation, accommodating Russia's self-perception as a great power entitled to a special status (Oksamytna, 2022a). With its permanent Security Council seat, Russia was hardly a struggling and imperiled country.

When it comes to Ukraine, few observers outside the region truly grasped the scale of societal transformation that took place there after 2014. While the Revolution of Dignity is often framed as a *geopolitical* choice between Russia and the West, for Ukrainians, it was a *geopolitical* choice between yielding to Russian-style oppression and developing their democracy (see also Musliu & Burlyuk, 2019). Submitting to the Russian influence, which some speculated could have prevented the 2014 invasion and the 2022 escalation, would have meant a loss not only of autonomy but also of rights.² (In this sense, Russian imperialism differs from European imperialism of the past, as the latter attempted to legitimize itself through promises of "enlightenment" and "modernity"). For Ukrainians, rights are a fundamental concern: asked about the most important values, Ukrainians first mentioned freedom (83.9%), followed by justice (72.5%), naming order (48%) and material well-being (46.5%) last.³ The Russian socio-political model, where order and a degree of material well-being in urban centers were used to justify Putin's rule in the absence of democratic legitimacy,⁴ held little appeal for most Ukrainians.

In 2022, despite the emphasis that Ukrainians place on freedom and justice, the Ukrainian leadership had to take several measures in order to counter Russian infiltration of its domestic politics that would be hardly acceptable in different times. These steps included the banning of political parties supporting Russia, of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate, and of the import of music and books produced in Russia.

Predictably, Russia swiftly labeled the latter as “Russophobia” and “discrimination.” Yet it highlighted the role of language in relations between former imperial centers and lands they used to occupy. By erasing the Ukrainian language for centuries and then flooding the market with Russian cultural products, Russia made profits that it could subsequently convert into resources to wage the war, in addition to using such products to spread propaganda. As for political parties supporting Russia, the extent of their pre-February 2022 influence became apparent when the Russian regime took the domestically unpopular decision to exchange their collaborator in Ukraine, Viktor Medvedchuk (a head of such a political party), for the defenders of Mariupol. Similarly, a clergy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate was traded for 28 Ukrainian prisoners of war (Reuters, 2023), underscoring the value of such assets to the Russian regime. Despite 32 years of *uninterrupted* independence, Ukraine only recently started consistently counteracting this type of Russian influence, and for the first time it could do so with some understanding from its international partners.

As for misperceptions about the Ukraine-Russia relationship, the attempts to cast Ukrainians as “brothers” concealed (for Russians and uninformed observers) and revealed (for Ukrainians and their supporters) Russia’s ideas of appropriate hierarchical relations between Russia and the nations it used to occupy. The fact that Russians saw Ukrainians, at least until 2014, as the most culturally proximate neighbors harmed rather than helped. As Riabchuk (2016, p. 82) notes, “[t]he serious discrepancy between the fictitious stereotype of Ukraine, created by Russian imagination, and the real Ukraine that evolved as a bold denial of the ‘almost the same people’ stereotype, creates a cognitive dissonance in many Russians.” Ukrainians’ defiance, as well as the kind of society it had built, contributed to the brutality of the invading forces and the hardening of hostile attitudes among the Russia population.

Not only did the majority of Russians support the war (Chapkovski and Schaub 2022), but they also openly discussed the benefits it generated for them. The two benefits that were mentioned most frequently were “return and addition of territories” (29%) and “protection of the Russian people” (16%). The former betrayed the positive evaluation of the settler-colonial nature of the invasion, while the latter was based on the false perception that Ukrainians were “secretly Russian” and longed to be “protected” from their government. In the past, such paternalism facilitated the commission of atrocious colonial crimes in the name of “salvation” of “the natives.” Similarly, it “empowers Russians to save Ukrainians by killing them without evoking any feeling of contradiction” (Dudko, 2022, p. 137). Therefore, understanding Russia as a colonial rather than conventional power is the

first step towards an accurate understanding of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Why did we get it wrong?

The reasons behind the blind spots in the academic, policy, and media debate on Russia, Ukraine, and the relationship between them have to do with disciplinary, theoretical, and empirical lenses.

Disciplinary lenses

From a mainstream IR perspective, the behavior of Russian elites, soldiers, and civilians appears irrational: by starting and escalating the war, Russia incurred losses in terms of its economic and geopolitical standing, especially in the region and Ukraine itself. Yet other disciplines, for example, the humanities, could have provided important insights into Russians' attitudes to Ukrainians. The systematic "othering" of Ukrainians (e.g., Riabchuk, 2016) and their relegation to a lower tier in the hierarchy of nations was prevalent in Russian discourses for centuries. It simultaneously made imperial violence acceptable and created an expectation that there would be no capable resistance.

In the Tsarist-era literature, Ukrainians were consistently represented as a backwards nation. Prince Ivan Dolgoruky reflected in the following way on his 1817 visit to Kyiv, a few decades after a large part of Ukraine was annexed by the Russian empire and serfdom was introduced:

The khokhol [a slur term for a Ukrainian] appears to be created by nature to till the land, sweat, burn in the sun and spend his whole life with a bronzed face ... [H]owever, he does not grieve over such an enslaved condition: he knows nothing better ... He knows his plough, ox, stack, whisky, and that constitutes his entire lexicon ... [H]e willingly bears any fate and any labour. However, he needs constant prodding, because he is very lazy..[I]f this entire people did not owe a debt to well-mannered landowners for their benevolence and respect for their humanity, the khokhol would be difficult to separate from the Negro in any way: one sweats over sugar, the other over grain. (as cited in Shkandrij, 2001, pp. 79–80)

In parallel, folk Russian discourse, such as proverbs, also emphasised Ukrainians' "laziness and stupidity and, consequently, complete uselessness" (Riabchuk, 2016, p. 78). In contemporary entertainment programming, Russia was cast as a rich, advanced, and benevolent state that provided financial support to its former possessions, while Ukrainian political elites were stereotypes as provincial, simple, lazy, slow, duplicitous, self-interested, and dependent on Russia (Minchenia et al., 2018). Russian media projected "images of Ukrainian leadership as being weak, selfish, striving for PR and

having low credibility” and of Ukraine as “an unsophisticated state” (Chaban et al., 2023, p. 14). This all fed into “[t]he colonial myth of ‘brotherly nations’, where the Russian people always played the role of wise older brother while the others acted as their endlessly slow-witted and moronic relatives” (Rafeenko 2020, 187–188; as cited in Dubrova, 2022). These historical and media portrayals erroneously suggested that Ukraine would not be willing or able to push back against the Russian aggression.

Theoretical lenses

Another blind spot of mainstream IR is that it rarely draws on postcolonial scholarship in seeking to understand war (cf. Barkawi, 2016), especially war on the European continent. For this reason, many analyses missed the fact that the hierarchies that Russia sought to correct through its full-scale invasion were not only between states but also *between societies*. For example, the granting of visa-free travel to the Schengen area for Ukrainians was viewed in Russia as more than Ukraine-EU rapprochement. In the eyes of Russians, the West granted Ukrainians, a nation they viewed as “inferior,” a privilege that Russians did not enjoy. This “undeserved favour” (Chaban et al., 2023, p. 14), a transgression of hierarchies, deepened Russians’ hostility towards Ukrainians. Russians on Internet forums imagined that Ukrainians in Europe would do nothing but “[p]rostitution and cleaning toilets,” activities befitting their “inferior” status in Russian eyes (Oksamytna, 2022b). Russian media alleged that people would flee “dysfunctional” Ukraine to escape poverty and become illegal migrants or smugglers in the EU, and the coverage overall evoked “envy, anger, fury, dislike and hatred” towards Ukrainians (Chaban et al., 2023, p. 16). Russian media further insinuated that to be accepted in Europe, Ukrainians had submitted to “liberal” values allegedly alien to their culture. This further strengthened the narrative that Ukraine had to be “rescued” in an imperial expedition.

Imperialism is not just a land grab or subversion of another country’s independence: it is an exercise of supremacy. The Russian troops’ brutality in Ukraine was aimed at “correct[ing] the allegedly mistaken cultural code of Ukrainianness which does not recognize the superiority of Russianness, the Russian nation, culture, history and language” (Mälksoo, 2022, p. 6). The behavior of Russian forces bore all hallmarks of imperial violence, including sexual abuse, the looting of cultural artifacts, dispossession, ethnic cleansing, and forced recruitment of people on occupied territories into the imperial army. It ran counter to the expectations that Russia would behave like a responsible occupying power aiming to restore its standing internationally or even among Ukrainians, eventually. Yet Russian soldiers had been primed by the images of Ukrainians as backwards, apathetic, and self-interested and of Ukraine as underdeveloped, chaotic, and fragmented

—a “failed state” where Russian-speaking population was “oppressed,” the president was “a drug addict,” and everything was in the state of “chaos.”⁵ When they invaded *en masse* in February 2022, they found a well-functioning and cohesive society where the population enjoyed a decent standard of living and a free exercise of their rights. They were “astonished by the high quality of basic infrastructure in Ukraine” (The Times, 2023) and did not expect that the Ukrainian society would be so organized and supportive of their elected authorities at the local, regional, and national levels. This did not align with the stereotypes of Ukrainians as “indolent, inert, and passive” (Shkandrij, 2001, p. 108).

Russian soldiers’ belief in the righteousness of their *mission civilisatrice* was challenged, leading to confusion and discomfort that sometimes morphed into extreme cruelty. Indeed, “the hostility and brutality ... have been shocking” (Dijkstra et al., 2022, p. 464), yet they are typical for imperial wars. This is especially the case when soldiers deploy to a foreign country to “rescue” its “backwards” inhabitants only to find out that the “natives” were managing fine on their own. For example, Canadian peacekeepers arriving in Somalia in 1992 to fix that “failed state” did not encounter famine and lawlessness, the purported reasons for the intervention, in their region of deployment. The local population did not welcome the peacekeepers with open arms but remained apprehensive and focused on their own survival. As frustration mounted among Canadians peacekeepers, several of them killed an unarmed Somali over petty theft and tortured another Somali teenager to death (Razack, 2004). Similarly, when Russian soldiers invaded in February 2022, Ukrainian “natives” were not only ungrateful—in fact, defiant—but also not backwards at all. The ensuing frustration among Russian troops contributed to the war crimes, which the mainstream IR literature would struggle to explain as they detracted from military effectiveness and ruined what was left of Russia’s image.

Empirical lenses

Since the number of scholars who studied Russia far exceeded those who studied Ukraine, it contributed to the lack of empirical knowledge, especially of the relations between Ukraine and Russia.⁶ Many people who came to Moscow or St. Petersburg from outside the region for journalistic or academic research spent time among Russian elites who seemed moderate and sensible. Moscow or St. Petersburg were exotic enough to justify extended stays but not genuinely dangerous. The jokes about Ukrainians seemed innocuous, even if in bad taste, and the mistreatment of Central Asian migrants did not appear that different from what minorities experienced in many Western democracies.

If the invasion did happen, many observers thought, Putin would struggle to hold on to power as elites and eventually the population would turn against the war. By contrast, many specialists on or from the CEE doubted that Putin's departure would mean an end of the subjugation and denigration of Ukrainians (Hendl, 2022). Thinking about the invasion as "Putin's war" offered a tantalizingly easy solution: a change of leadership in Russia would mean the end of aggressive policies (see also McGlynn, 2023). This narrative of potential redemption was much more alluring than the reality of a 140-million nation where a large proportion of the population held supremacists views of neighboring nations. This does not mean that those views are immutable. However, they took a long time to construct and might take a long time to dismantle through reparations, trials, changes to the curricula, and societal debates about centuries of Russian imperialism.

While some members of Russia's political, artistic, and academic elites expressed disapproval of the full-scale invasion, in the years preceding the war, they participated in discourses that denigrated Ukrainians. For instance, several months before the annexation of Crimea, Ivan Urgant—a Russian media personality whose humor is considered "intellectual" and "sophisticated" and who declared to be "against the war" in 2022—joked at a culinary show about chopping greens "like a Red [Army] Commissar chopped residents of a Ukrainian village" (as cited in Minchenia et al., 2018, p. 224). While this joke could be dismissed as simply provocative, it needs to be placed in the context of the absence of renunciation of, and accountability for, Soviet crimes against Ukraine, including Holodomor.

A foreign scholar who used to teach in Moscow noticed that before February 2022, Russian academic circles remained relatively free, but opinions about Ukraine "were myopic and lacking in empathy" (Đokić, 2023, para. 22), suggesting that at least then, censorship was not the reason for the perpetuation of the negative stereotypes about Ukraine and Ukrainians. As McGlynn's (2023, p. 12) friend confessed to her, for most Russians, it was natural to "care more about a Pushkin statue than a dead Ukrainian child." The privileging of imperial culture above the lives of people it framed as inferior and therefore disposable paved the way for a situation when the war crimes against Ukrainians did not dent the support for the war: instead, some Russian social media users praised them (Garner, 2022).

In trying to understand why the reality of Russian imperialism was ignored for so long, Ukrainian writer Zabuzhko (2023, para. 5) wondered whether it was "a case of latent imperialistic solidarity" among great powers. Indeed, Russia's behavior in Ukraine holds an uncomfortable mirror to Western Europe's relatively recent colonial past, yet the fact that it is Western Europe's past should not dilute the attention to Russia's violent present.

Conclusion

The Russian aggression against Ukraine was enabled by discourses of Russian supremacy and Ukrainian “inferiority.” Those discourses prevailed in Russia for centuries and were accentuated by Russian media recently. Such narratives not only alleged that Ukrainians lacked resourcefulness, public spirit, and mettle, but also painted the country as “divided” and “chaotic.” This contributed to the misplaced expectation that Ukraine would not be willing or able to offer capable resistance to the invasion. In turn, the expectation that Russia would behave like a modern, cost-conscious power obscured the domestic popularity of its imperial aggression. The fact that the aggression was directed at Ukrainians, perceived as culturally close to Russians but “inferior” yet unjustly “favored” by the West, provided an impetus for the violent attempt to re-establish the hierarchy. The lack of empathy concealed by the “brotherhood” rhetoric, Ukrainians’ resistance against Russian “saviorism,” and decent living standards in Ukraine all contributed to the brutality of invading forces.

For those researching the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this article offers two suggestions. The first one is the importance of interdisciplinarity. While the IR scholarship often uses such concepts as “hostility” or “resolve” to assess the will to fight wars of aggression and resistance, understanding them is impossible without drawing on the humanities and social sciences. A historically informed view of the evolution of certain international institutions, like neutrality, could help understand why they are unattractive and dangerous for Ukraine.⁷ The second suggestion relates to the use of language. For instance, the oft-used term “NATO expansion,” especially in contrast with the positively connoted term “EU enlargement,” does not reflect the reality of new members wanting to join NATO and undergoing significant reform to do so. When we call the events that started in February 2022 “the Ukraine war” or “the war in Ukraine” instead of “Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine,” it shifts the focus away from the aggressor. Accurate and responsible use of language can encourage more nuanced analysis. Scholars of peace and conflict have a special responsibility in this regard.

Notes

1. Data from 2013: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2013/09/03/global-opinion-of-russia-mixed>.
2. Before February 2022, Ukraine was making gains compared to Russia on civil, political, and economic rights. On political and civil liberties, Ukraine scored 61 and Russia 19 according to the Freedom House in 2021 (both ratings declined in 2022). On LGBTI rights, Ukraine scored 20% in 2022 (Poland scored 15% and Latvia 22%), while Russia scored 8% according to the

ILGA-Europe. According to the World Bank's Gini index, Ukraine was the world's 4th most economically equal country in 2020, while Russia took the 81st place. In 2021, life expectancy in Ukraine exceeded Russia's by 2.2 years according to the UNDP Human Development Report.

3. Data from 2020: https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/ua/UNDP_UA_humanrights2020_infographics_UKR.pdf.
4. Despite Russia's narrative of rejecting Western materialism, allegedly in favour of spiritualism and traditionalism, material well-being is central to the project of Russian supremacy over its neighbours: McGlynn (2023, p. 37) notes that young Russian liberals in exile were upset about the economic costs of the war because its detracted from their "ability to feel superior to the Armenians and Kyrgyz now hosting them."
5. See Hurak and D'Anieri (2022) on Russia's strategy of promoting "chaos" in Ukraine as one of the forms of interference.
6. Several of those analysts, however, have become perceptive and dedicated critics of Russian imperialism.
7. While neutrality acquired a positive connotation and worked for some states during the Cold War, historical examples from the colonial era tell a different story. For instance, the Congo Free State was formally neutral – rendered so by great powers of the day on the assumption that the country lacked agency (Yao, 2022) – yet it was not only colonized but also drawn into WWI. A deal between great powers over Ukraine's head on its neutrality would similarly leave it vulnerable to Russian colonialism without guaranteeing non-use of its territory in future wars.

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Notes on contributor

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