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Citation: Oksamytna, K. (2023). Imperialism, Supremacy, and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 44(4), pp. 497-512. doi: 10.1080/13523260.2023.2259661

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Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2023.2259661>

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Imperialism, supremacy, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

Few predicted Russia's 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 Ukrainian's 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 Russia's invasion can be addressed through interdisciplinarity, engagement with postcolonial scholarship, and attention to facts.

Keywords

Ukraine; Russia; Imperialism; Supremacy; Invasion; Postcolonial

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Nicholas Barker, George Kyris, Bohdana Kurylo, and *Contemporary Security Policy* reviewers and editors for generous feedback on an earlier version of the article. Usual disclaimers apply.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest has been reported by the author(s).

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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. The misconceptions existed in 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 the 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, Ukrainians have consistently been portrayed as backwards, indolent, and selfish—and thus in need of imperial guidance. Such perceptions have permeated mainstream international debates as well 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 succeeded in portraying Ukraine as a “failed” or “divided” state, 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, the Russian troops invaded *en masse* a well-functioning country with a strong civic identity hell-bent on resisting the occupation. Russian troops imagined that they would deploy to a “failed state” inhabited by oppressed Russophones who were led astray by the sinister West. As Sonevitsky (2022, p. 28) puts it, they expected Ukrainians to be “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 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 the mainstream analysis prior to the full-scale invasion can be attributed to the limited integration of mainstream IR and areas studies (Kaczmarska & Ortmann, 2021), as well as other social sciences or humanities. There was also a dearth of applications of postcolonial scholarship on interventions to wars on the European continent. Finally, and the emphasis on abstract models over empirical facts led to a situation when analysts held on to certain beliefs even in the face of evidence to the contrary. In this article, I explore what views of Ukraine, as well as of Russia's and its relations with Ukraine, dominated mainstream debates prior to February 2022; how those views entrenched several misconceptions; and what disciplinary, theoretical, and empirical limitations dominant analyses had.

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

In this section, I provide a brief overview of the mainstream discourses in IR, policy, and media, about Ukraine as well as Russia and its relations with Ukraine before February 2022. Some discourses aligned with, or were used by, the Russian government to strengthen the domestic support for aggression and discourage Western support for Ukraine's self-defense. This is not to deny the presence of significant variations across countries and outlet types in terms of such analysis (Koval et al., 2022).

Perceptions of Ukraine

Prior to February 2022, Ukraine was described in mainstream discourses 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 society 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; see also Dudko, 2023). At other times, this notion normalized Ukraine as a non-post-colonial country that should have followed the Swiss model of a neutral multi-language 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 start of the war 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 "ancient hatreds" 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 "inevitability of neutrality" frame, in turn, was used by Russia to delegitimize Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic aspirations and Western assistance to Ukraine. Neutrality and the weakening of the Ukrainian language's status in favor of Russian would have helped Russia to control Ukraine's affairs through military intimidation and cultural domination.

Second, the notion of Ukrainian state's "low capacity" led to a misperception that the 40-million country was "so weak and vulnerable that nobody c[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 an imperial Russian construction (Finnin, 2022). Internationally, 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.

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 a 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," 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 the topic as compared to Russia, where this

problem, according to Gomza (2022), has been and remains more serious. Additionally, since many Western societies grappled with the rise of the far right, the alleged influence of such forces in Ukraine caught people's 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 CEE through the lenses of illiberalism and conservatism where far-right tendencies were to be "expected," (O'Sullivan and Krulišová 2023) ignoring 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 because Russia feared 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. For international audiences, this language 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 (Riabczuk, 2013). This created the expectation among the invading troops that they would be greeted "with flowers."

Once Russia launched the full-scale invasion, few expected it to be so brutal. Even in Russia, occupation was supposed to 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 demonstrates that it should instead be conceptualized as a colonial power. Empires used to fight 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. It is only Russian domestic audiences where imperial violence found popularity.

The limitations that come with viewing Russia as a security- or status-seeking actor become 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 is 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 1,340km of border with Russia. The Russian government's spokesperson Dmitry Peskov, while airing 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 a telling 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 some of 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.¹ Prior to Russia's 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 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, which attempted to legitimize itself through promises of "enlightenment" and "modernity"). For Ukrainians, rights are important: 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 are used to justify Putin's rule in the absence of democratic legitimacy,⁴ holds little appeal for most Ukrainians.

In 2022, the Ukrainian leadership had to take several steps in order to counter Russian infiltration of its domestic politics. 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 labelled 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 a 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's exchanged 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 thirty-two 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 the Ukraine-Russia relations, 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 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, 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. This paternalism in the past centuries facilitated the commission of atrocious colonial crimes in the name of “salvation” of “the natives.” This worldview also “empowers Russians to save Ukrainians by killing them without evoking any feeling of contradiction” (Dudko, 2022, p. 137).

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

Viewing the war from mainstream IR perspectives makes the behavior of Russian elites, soldiers, and civilians appear irrational: Russia incurred losses in terms of its economic and geopolitical standing, especially in the region and in 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 have been 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 to the high culture discourse, the 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 gave rise to the expectation that Ukraine would not be able to push back the Russian aggression.

Theoretical lenses

Another blind spot of mainstream IR is that it rarely draws on postcolonial scholarship in seeking to understand war (but see 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; overall, the coverage of the issue evoked “envy, anger, fury, dislike and hatred” towards Ukrainians (Chaban et al., 2023, p. 16). Russian media 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 violence by the Russian troops 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. For example, they were “astonished by the high quality of basic infrastructure in Ukraine” (The Times, 2023). They also did not expect that the Ukrainian society would be so organized and supportive of their elected authorities at the local, regional, and national level. This did not align with the stereotypes of Ukrainians as “indolent, inert, and passive” (Shkandrij, 2001, p. 108).

The 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 Canadian peacekeepers, several of them killed an unarmed Somali over petty theft and tortured another Somali teenager to death (Razack, 2004). Similarly, when the Russian soldiers invaded in February 2022, the Ukrainian “natives” were not only ungrateful—in fact, defiant—but also not backwards at all. The ensuing frustration among the Russian troops contributed to the environment where war crimes were committed, which the mainstream IR literature would view as “not strategic,” detracting from military effectiveness and ruining 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 Asia 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 region 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, it has taken a long time to construct them and might take a long time to dismantle them 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 had disseminated tropes and images that denigrated Ukrainians. For instance, a year before the annexation of Crimea, Ivan Urgant—a Russian late-night show host 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). 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." Such privileging of imperial culture above the lives of people it framed as inferior and therefore disposable paved the way for a situation when war crimes against

Ukrainians did not deny the support for the war: instead, social media users praised them (Garner, 2022).

In trying to understand why the reality of Russian imperialism had been ignored for so long, Zabuzhko (2023, para. 5) wondered whether it was “a case of latent imperialistic solidarity.” 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 the discourses of Russian supremacy and Ukrainian “inferiority.” Those discourses have been prevalent in Russia for centuries and 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 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 (for instance, through visa-free Schengen travel), 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 the invading forces.

As we continue 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 humanities and social sciences. To give another example, 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 one 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.

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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 with 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 it 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 present 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 colonised 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.