

# Revealing Pan-Slavic Russian Imperialism

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*Ewa Thompson, in conversation with Manuel Férrez Gil*

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**Manuel Ferez:** *You specialize in Slavic studies, Russia and Poland. To start with could you explain the meaning of the term "Slavic", and why this ostensibly neutral term has caused so much controversy within Russian historical revisionist paradigm, led by Vladimir Putin and supported by state-sponsored historians in Russia, especially when we speak of Ukraine and its identity?*

**Ewa Thompson:** The word "Slavic" refers to linguistic and anthropologic similarities rather than to cultural proximity. Slavic languages include Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Czech, Slovak, Serbian, Croatian, Slovene. However, the people who speak these languages belong to very different and sometimes antagonistic cultures.

Within this linguistic family two different alphabets have been used: Latin, used by Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, Croats, and Slovene – and Cyrillic, used by Rus-

sians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Serbs. Unlike the linguistic family of Romance languages that includes Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Romanian and French, the Slavic group is so culturally diverse that it does not even share an alphabet. Some Slavs belong to Western European culture, while others stress their Byzantine connection. Russians in particular are also connected to the legacy of the Mongols, who ruled Moscow for two and a half centuries (something Russians do not like to remember). In contrast, the territories that are now Ukraine and Belarus were wrenched away from the Mongols by Lithuanians, and then because of dynastic arrangements (a Lithuanian prince married a Polish heiress to the throne, became the King of Poland and joined his lands to Polish territory, creating the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, a country that survived from 1386 to 1795) became associated with Western European culture. Therefore, Belarus and Ukraine, even though they share the alphabet and Orthodox Christianity with Russia, developed Western notion of state organization and individual freedom. They reject Moscow control and want to be ruled by their own leaders. Eastern Ukraine fell into Russian hands in the second part of the seventeenth century, while parts of western Ukraine did not know Russian rule until the Second World War.

Such is an abbreviated history of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. They differ from one another because their histories are different.

In the United States and in other English-speaking countries, the word “Slavic” is commonly used to designate departments where languages and literatures of non-Germanic Central and Eastern Europeans are taught. This includes also Baltic and Hungarian language and literature, neither of which is Slavic.

**M.F.:** *In general terms, Tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union and Putin's Russia can be defined as expansionist projects, as they underwent constant expansion, whereby they colonized and subdued various cultures and nations. What are the similarities and differences between these three projects – Tsarist, Soviet and modern Russia in this aspect?*

**E.T.:** Indeed, Tsarist Russia, Soviet Russia, and post-Soviet Russia have been expansionist. In my view, Muscovy (the name associated with the Russian lands until the eighteenth century) continued the drive to conquer characteristic of the Mongols who invaded Europe in the twelfth century and got as far west as the city of Legnica in today's Poland. Tsarist Russia cultivated this drive to conquer using military force and diplomatic deceit. Russia claimed that by conquering territories in Asia it was “civilizing” them, much as the

British “civilized” Asia and Africa through their colonial conquests. As I argued in my book *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism*, Russia was unable to civilize itself, let alone anyone else. A major reason Russia tried to conquer Siberia (and succeeded in doing so) was economic and military: gold mines in eastern Siberia and numerous other resources of Asian lands enriched Russia, just as Western colonialism enriched Western Europe. The money thus obtained allowed the tsars to build facsimiles of Western cities in European parts of Russia. Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz wrote that the eighteenth-century palaces of St. Petersburg were paid for by wealth stolen from Lithuania and Poland: Russia appropriated the wealth of its Western colonies as well. So far as I know, there have been no comprehensive studies detailing Russia’s expansion from the economic standpoint. Russian authors have considered it a matter of fact that the colonies were there to be exploited.

As to the Soviet period, an additional factor has to be taken into account: the communist ideology. Ostensibly, communism did not pay attention to nationality, and this weakened to some extent the pressure and national discrimination of non-Russian nations within the USSR, particularly in the early period of USSR’s existence. Members of non-Russian nationalities could advance in the political world just as Russians could. But that did not mean that exploitation of Siberia’s and Eastern Europe’s natural resources was any less oppressive. In the early days of communism, the slogans about the “nationless” communist world were taken seriously, but as time went on nationless communism transformed itself into Russian chauvinism. The wealth of colonized countries and territories was appropriated by Moscow and its native Russian inhabitants. It paid for the famous Russian ballet and opera, and it underwrote Russian scientific and research facilities.

**M.F.:** *Why have Russian colonialism and imperialism been ignored, generally speaking, by academia? One usually reads about U.S. imperialism but one does not usually think of Russia as a similar imperialist state.*

**E.T.:** This is because Soviet Russia helped foment anti-colonial sentiments in the countries of Asia and Africa, and many early students and promoters of anti-colonialism came from these territories. Soviet Russia supplied anti-colonial rebels with money, weapons, and other resources necessary to win condemnation of colonialism in the international arena. Soviet Russia offered generous scholarships to students from oppressed countries. After several years of study in Moscow or Leningrad, these students returned to their respective

countries with a deep conviction that communism is the wave of the future and Russia leads the world in introducing it. Under such circumstances, it would have been awkward to raise questions about the Chechens, for instance, whose risings against Russian domination were frequent and bloody. One can also ask why Soviet Russia was a close friend of Nazi Germany during the first two years of the Second World War (1 September 1939 till 22 June 1941, when Nazi Germany broke off the friendship agreement and invaded the USSR without declaring war).

Only after the Soviet Union disintegrated and some of its colonial doings were exposed, the researchers who wanted to deal not only with British or French but also with Russian colonialism gained certain minimal acceptance in the scholarly world. This acceptance is still minimal: by and large, the English-speaking academia is still sympathetic to Russia because the old narrative about Russia helping to liberate the West's colonies lingers on. There are many scholars who ignore Russian colonialism and write books and articles as if it had never existed.

**M.F.:** *Is it possible that Russia's imperialist, aggressive and expansionist vision will change in the future? I am referring to imagining a future in which Russia manages to establish bilateral and regional relations (Central Asia, Caucasus, Baltic, non-Germanic Central Europe) on a horizontal level.*

**E.T.:** Everything is possible in history; whether it is likely is another matter. I think it is very unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future. Please remember that Germany changed from Nazi to democratic only because foreign armies defeated German armies and occupied Berlin. Germans were compelled to reject Nazism; had they won the war, they would have continued to worship Hitler who brought them victory. Similarly, if foreign armies occupied Moscow and forced the Russians to reject their expansionist policies, a radical change in the Russian political system would have become possible. But this is very unlikely to happen. As things stand now, there are not enough Russians to fight against the empire. To put it differently, Russians prefer empire to freedom. A candidate whom Putin defeated in an election, one Mr. Navalny, is on record as saying that the Crimea should be Russian. In other words, he supports Putin's attack on sovereign Ukrainian territory. I think that it would be useful to replace Putin as leader, because a change of leadership in Russia usually involves a few years of internal turmoil, hence a few years of peace

for Russia's neighbours. But when the new leader establishes himself, he will become another Putin.

**M.F.:** *In your publications on what you call “non-Germanic Central Europe” you distinguish between “imperialist nationalisms” and “defensive nationalisms”. Following this approach, how do you understand Ukrainian nationalism, and how will it develop in the future taking into account Russian aggression, actions undertaken by Ukrainian academic diaspora and media, academic and political attention that Ukraine currently enjoys?*

**E.T.:** Indeed, I make a distinction between aggressive and defensive nationalism. Throughout history, humanity has divided itself into nations that function as administrative, cultural, and psychological units offering models of productive life to their members. Unfortunately, some of these units “derailed” and adopted the attitude of “the more the better,” stealing land and resources from their neighbours. This is what I call aggressive nationalism. In response to this aggression, there developed defensive nationalisms that have been trying to preserve, support, and defend the communities who speak the same language and share the same history. By and large, such are the nations of non-Germanic Central Europe.

The Ukrainian nation is going through a period of great hardship, but it also is gathering the fruits of its remarkable determination and resilience. It has managed to get genuinely reconciled to the neighbouring Poland, and this is a development of great future importance: the two nations had fought each other in centuries past. Their reconciliation creates a new political situation in non-Germanic Central Europe. It makes it easier to respond together to potential Russian attacks in the future. It confirms the agreement concerning borders – neither Poland nor Ukraine have any territorial claims on each other. This is a major European development, and it bodes well for the future of Central Europe.

**M.F.:** *Finally, I would like to ask you about your medium- and long-term vision of Europe, not only of the European Union but of the European project that includes countries such as Ukraine, Georgia and a post-BREXIT United Kingdom.*

**E.T.:** The lessons we are learning from the present conflict should have been learned earlier; yet it is not too late to start now. I think that the Russian-Ukrainian war has exposed the mistakes of German policy over the last several

decades. As a European leader, Germany has failed its neighbours. Over the last several decades, Germany promoted Russia in every way imaginable. It encouraged Europe to become dependent on Russian gas and oil, and it assured its neighbours that Russia has abandoned its aggressive posture and has become a normal post-World War Two European country. It turned out that this is not the case, that Russia has not abandoned its goal of changing European borders by force. It has been advantageous for Germany to develop its close relationship with Russia, but the results are disastrous for other European countries. The leadership question in the EU has to be rethought and renegotiated. Perhaps the time has come for the peripheries of Europe to assume leadership.

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## Works Cited

Thompson, Ewa. *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2000).