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Russian Colonial Sickness and Decolonial Recovery: Revelations of Autotheoretical Practice

Nicola Kozicharow

This autotheoretical essay explores self-decolonization as a personal, embodied process through my experience of displacement and chronic illness. Russia's full-scale invasion of and ongoing genocide in Ukraine have drawn the world's attention to the brutal history of Russian colonialism. The fact I was largely unfamiliar with this history blew a hole in the foundation of my scholarly expertise and sense of self. Amid long months of sickness at my family home in the US, I sought to exorcize imperial myths from and find decolonial truths in my knowledge and family story. Learning from the lived experiences of Ukrainians and discussions with my father on Ukrainian identity was transformative, demonstrating the pedagogical power of listening to voices erased by colonialism.

Keywords: autotheory, decolonization, disability, displacement, Russian colonialism, Ukraine

In June 2014 I traveled with a group of academics from the UK to St. Petersburg to participate in the conference Russia—UK: Five Centuries of Cultural Relations.[1] The event organizers did their utmost to showcase Russian culture for foreign visitors: the Deputy Minister of Culture officially opened the event in the Hermitage theater, conference panels were held in the Peter and Paul Fortress, and the final evening featured an outdoor concert, which was dramatically staged at the bottom of the chessboard staircase at Peterhof and closed with turning on the gold Samson fountain—out of season—just for us. This conference occurred in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in Crimea and Donbas and likely became part of a broader effort to smooth over tensions in Russia—UK relations. I remember a few colleagues (British and some Russian) mentioned they had been furiously arguing with Russian academics who were not outraged that their country had just taken part of a sovereign nation and declared it theirs. I listened to these discussions, understood it was wrong, but didn't dwell on it: I loved Russian culture and was swept up in the fanfare, and, informed by my Russocentric academic knowledge and my own family background, I believed the insidious colonialist lie that Russia and Ukraine were closely intertwined. On the morning of my departure, I was violently sick from the worst food poisoning I had ever experienced and barely made my flight. As I look back now in revulsion and shame at my failure to question and willingness to be part of an event celebrating Russia amid its invasion of Ukraine, I wonder if my body was trying to tell me something: this pomp and propaganda were rotten and needed to be purged from my system.

After Russia began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, I was long overdue for 'a merciless purging of the grand imperial myths' (Tlostanova

2018: 128) through decolonization—a process urgently required more broadly in the academic and public discourse on Russia in the West.[2] The fact that Russia's long brutal history of empire and colonialism, of which the ongoing genocide in Ukraine is the latest phase, was largely unfamiliar to me revealed just how little I knew about the country I was supposedly an expert on and how catastrophically existing systems of knowledge about Russia in the West have failed. A recent study of course offerings in US universities (Gorodnichenko, Sologub, and Deryugina 2023), which are obscenely dominated by Russia, is indicative of a bigger problem: Western public and scholarly discussions of Russia and the Soviet Union have generally privileged Russian voices over those of its formerly and currently colonized nations. This narrow epistemological framework not only problematically reduces an enormous chunk of the world—areas as diverse as Siberia, the Caucasus, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia—to the perspective of a white, ethnic Russian, Russian Orthodox, and Russian-speaking population in the metropoles of Moscow and St. Petersburg but also gives credence to the imperial narrative that Russia is a 'great' power that is entitled to control those lands. This kind of thinking conceals the fact that Russia has silenced, hidden, and erased indigenous cultures and histories through colonial mechanisms of exploitation, appropriation, genocide, and ecocide for hundreds of years.

Since 2022 I have been among the scholars (Leigh 2022) who have had to confront our own role in perpetuating imperial myths and 'turning a blind eye to' Russian colonialism for so long (Radynski 2023). While decolonial scholars such as Madina Tlostanova (2020; 2018) and experts on countries such as Ukraine have advanced discussions of marginalized voices, misconceptions still pervade scholarship and media in the West, with even leading decolonial thinkers such as Walter Mignolo defending Russia's invasion and denying agency to Ukraine (Durdiyeva 2023).

The fact that the country that I had devoted my career to and lived in is and always was a genocidal colonial empire[3] raised urgent questions as a scholar and human that I could not explore within the boundaries of my field of art history or traditional academic writing. As an 'art of the present,' autotheory offers potential for historians to respond to contemporary crises and 'anchor scholarship [and pedagogy] in activism, community engagement, and everyday life as sites of meaning-making' (Brostoff and Fournier 2021: 495, 498). A productive tool for self-decolonization, autotheory 'unsettles Eurocentric [or Russocentric] ways of knowing' (Brostoff and Fournier 2021: 492) and gives space to scrutinize and take accountability for long-held assumptions and probe the ways in which personal and academic lives can inform and misinform each other.

A US citizen with British cultural ties and Ukrainian and Russian heritage, I had been living in Moscow for less than a year before leaving soon after the 2022 invasion. My dislocation from a recently established home to life in limbo without fixed abode has occurred amid chronic illness—a different type of dislocation. The state of free-fall I have felt in my loss of home and seemingly endless sickness, however, has led to sensations of openness and receptivity. This emotional and intellectual letting-go has powered my process

of self-decolonization, which involves a displacement from (self-)knowledge/history that seemed fixed and a disruption of ableist, imperialist power structures. Spending long months of convalescence at my family home in the US has also facilitated a cross-generational dialogue on suppressed Ukrainian identity with my father, who was born in Ukraine in 1941 and arrived as a refugee in New York in 1947. Listening to the lived experiences of Ukrainian journalists, artists, and activists has been transformative for my decolonial practice and enabled me to uncover colonial mythmaking and erasure within my own family. Decolonizing the self involves 'painful work asking for ruthless self-criticism' and wrestling with personal and collective memory and their 'restless ghosts' (Tlostanova 2018: 119–20). I have spent the past year doing just that.

Displacement

As an affective and bodily experience that un-fixes one's position from a previous state, displacement kickstarted my practice of self-decolonization. Looking back now, my departure from Russia felt like an exodus. From the Greek 'ex' for 'out' and 'odos' for path or road, exodus is 'the road out'—a departure that enables liberation, a going-out-of that does not necessarily involve landing anywhere. After a year of immersing myself in Russian life and language and work in a Russian institution, this country I thought I knew intimately began a campaign of annihilation in Ukraine. While every new report of violence was a shock, when Russian missiles made Kharkiv into the same grey landscape of destruction my father was born into in World War II, it was time to go. On 3 March, I took the first step out of and away from Russia, and my physical displacement served as a decolonial 'entry point,' delinking me from previous ways of knowing to move toward a new 'political, ethical, and epistemic positioning' (Tlostanova 2020: 165). The foundations upon which I had built my knowledge about Russian culture—and what I had understood that category to mean—were no longer reliable, throwing me into a period of epistemic doubt. The uncertainty and discomfort I felt from my displacement helped me accept, explore, and welcome this state of not-knowing and seek decolonial truths.

When I no longer called Russia home and could view it from the outside, I saw just how much my Russocentric perspective had blinded me. I saw Russia's coloniality—the 'dark side' of its grand historical narrative and what it excluded and silenced. My scholarship and pedagogy had been focused almost solely on artistic developments in Moscow and St. Petersburg or abroad in the diaspora. The only real insight I had into Russia's imperial history was through the artist Vasily Vereshchagin, who highlighted Russian colonial violence in Central Asia but nonetheless remained committed to its 'civilizing mission.'

After arriving in the UK in March 2022, I could not stop thinking about an exhibition I had seen at the State Historical Museum in Moscow a few months before I left Russia. *Russian Empire* [*Rossiiskaia imperiia*] celebrated the 300th anniversary of Peter I's establishment of the imperial Russian state (1721–1917). In a triumphalist linear narrative from Peter I to Nicholas II, the display showcased the empire's splendor through crowns and regalia and its vastness through maps

and statistics, boasting it was 'one of the largest states that ever existed in history.' While the empire was *rossiiskaia*—'Russian' in a broad geographical and civic sense—the centralized state and monarch acted as if it were just *russkaia* (Weeks 195), the signifier for ethnic Russians and their language, culture, and religion, and still the most common word for 'Russian' today.[4] In Russian [*russkii*] great-power chauvinism—a term first used by Vladimir Lenin to condemn the Russian imperial nationalism of Joseph Stalin—Russia's 'greatness' justifies its superiority and rule over less 'civilized,' non-Russian people. The exhibition claimed the empire 'united different peoples and territories' and contained 'two hundred nationalities,' yet none was represented or named. This historical vision of Russia corresponds directly with the Kremlin's imperial rhetoric today (Pynnöniemi 2019). The notion that the Russian Federation [*Rossiiskaia Federatsiia*], in the words of one of the main architects of Putinism, Vladislav Surkov, is a 'great and growing community of nations that gathers lands'—a phrase that harkens back to the violent conquests of the tsars—is used to legitimize its expansionist aggression in Ukraine, Georgia, and other neighboring countries.

While I was certainly disturbed by this exhibition at the time—its location right across from the Kremlin felt especially unnerving and ominous—I was horrified reflecting on it in spring of 2022. The genocide in Bucha and Irpin broadcast to the world how Russia enforced its ethnonationalist superiority and entitlement through colonial violence. As Russian soldiers were murdering, raping, and torturing their way through Ukraine, I felt sick remembering a video screen display at the exhibition. It was an animated map showing the geographical area of each tsar's conquests in splotches of red, which, amid a background of rousing classical music, spread out farther across the continent over time. This proud visualization of Russia's long historical tradition of invasion, exploitation, and genocide was subsumed under the banners of 'expansion,' 'unification,' and 'modernization.' While the existence of indigenous people was acknowledged as a number or spot on a map, their lived experience had been erased. Paintings of white peasants were the only representations of 'the people.' The process of cherry-picking what is 'heroic' or 'positive' out of Russia's colonial past and casting the rest into oblivion forges what Sergei Abashin (2020) calls 'un-colonial' [*nikolonial'nyi*] history. This denial of the past in the present—the coloniality of time (Vàzquez 2018: 250–51)—acts as a mechanism to ensure the Russian 'greatness' narrative's control over the representation of reality. In this space non-Russian people, languages, and cultures and their 'uncomfortable' histories are marginalized or whitewashed out of existence.

My specialism in 'Russian art' [*russkoe iskusstvo*] was now a bold-faced lie. I had used umbrella terms like 'Russian art,' 'Russian avant-garde,' and 'the national school of Russian painting,' which were not only completely inaccurate but also contributed to the myth of Russian 'greatness' that lays claim to and speaks for non-Russian cultures. The legacies of artists as important as Kazymyr Malevych (Figure 1), whose Ukrainianness was formative for and integral to his life and work, are thus

maligned and misrepresented. How could I work on my monograph on 'Russian art' when Russia was trying to wipe Ukrainian art from existence? Russia destroyed the house-museums of artists Arkhyp Kuindzhi and Polina Raiko, looted art, artefacts, and books, including over 10,000 artworks systematically pillaged from the Kherson Art Museum (Nemtsova 2023), damaged the Odesa Fine Arts Museum in a missile strike, and kidnapped and threatened museum workers to make them reveal where collections were hidden (Gettleman and Chubko 2022). This cultural genocide made the un-Russianness of artists previously labeled and appropriated as 'Russian' violently clear.

The Potential of Chronic Illness

In May 2022 I contracted COVID-19 for the second time, and the chronic fatigue I had struggled with for two years became worse than ever before. This shift coincided with my return to my family home in the US, and I spent months barely able to get out of bed. Everyday activities like taking a shower, walking up a staircase, or texting a friend were nearly impossible. As Russia continuously bombed and killed Ukrainians, as colleagues organized seminar series on Zoom and exchanged emails about decolonization and actions to take, as friends did extraordinary work on the ground to help Ukrainians, I felt useless. What could I do apart from raise my 'sick woman fist' (Hedva 2020a) in solidarity? I had to decolonize my knowledge and myself, but how could I begin the process of unlearning and relearning amid physical/cognitive impairment and incapacitation?

It turned out that that these were just the right conditions for self-decolonization. Decoloniality 'reaches out to those who have been disdained, made invisible, or dispensable' and causes one 'to understand suffering of the oppressed' (Vàzquez 2012: 243). Seen as weak and fragile, the sick body does not fit into universal notions of the 'normal,' making it, as Johanna Hedva (2020a) outlines in 'Sick Woman Theory,' 'sensitive, reactive to regimes of oppression' and to those who are 'culturally illegitimate and politically invisible.' While illness is typically associated with inaction and passivity (Hedva 2020b), artists and scholars (Sharma, Sainte-Marie, Fournier 2017) have long recognized its experiential potential and that of rest and self-care. Self-care, as Black queer feminist poet Audre Lorde (1988) first formulated, is 'an act of political warfare'—a tool of resistance to imperialist, patriarchal, and racial hegemonies (Steinvorth 2023). In being confined to one room unseen and unknown to the outside world, the sick body can also marshal silence as a form of resistance (Santos 2022; Dogadaeva and Zavadski 2023) and an amplification of marginalized voices.

In learning amid chronic pain and physical vulnerability, my self-pedagogy became an emotional, embodied experience. An insular life offered space to correct the vast sea of things I didn't know and cultivate, as Oksana Dudko (2023: 180) proposes to scholars in Russian Studies, 'genuine academic curiosity' about previously neglected regions and people. I have learned more

about Russia and my own family history in the past year than ever before through reading and listening to the voices of the currently and formerly colonized, especially their Instagram posts, podcasts, memes, and Twitter threads. No longer belonging to an academic institution, I was free to think and learn outside of academic disciplines and schools of thought—a situation that I acknowledge was only possible from an economically privileged position not afforded to others.

With an illness where it 'costs you to do anything' (Hedva 2020a), learning is slow but somehow feels more precious. I could pause and reflect on glittering facts like 'at the end of the nineteenth century the tsar ruled over more Muslim subjects than the Ottoman Sultan' (Leigh and Taroutina 2023: 1). No longer restricted to my research area of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I familiarized myself with the crimes of the Soviet period and was shook by the suppression of independence movements after the Revolution of 1917 and forced deportations of whole populations of non-Russian national groups to Siberia and Central Asia after the Second World War.[5] The Crimean People's Republic, which granted women the right to vote for the first time in the Muslim world, lasted only a month before the Bolsheviks seized control in 1918, and in 1941 between 187,000 and 191,000 Crimean Tatars were deported to 45-year exile (Williams 2016: 62, 101) and still face immense Russian persecution today (Musaeva 2023).

Weak and in pain, burning from inflammation, I could not look away. In this state, every new bit of information, every fact, staggers, floors, hits harder; you feel it reverberate and clang throughout the body so loudly that it leaves a permanent echo behind. I took off the rose-tinted glasses and saw Russia's 'great' landscape of human and cultural erasure: the abolishment of the Buryat language's Mongolian script and imposition of Cyrillic in the late 1930s; sickening massacres led by Grigory Zass in the Circassian genocide in the nineteenth century; and the execution of Ukrainian artist Mikhailo Boichuk and his circle in the purges in 1937. Typically dismissed in art historical discussions of his work, Malevych's late series of peasant paintings (Figure 1) was a powerful, subtle visualization of the horrors of the Holodomor genocide (Great Famine) in Ukraine and the artist's own arrest and imprisonment in 1930.[6]

This history hurts and it should. Decolonization is uncomfortable and 'hard, unsettling work' (Tuck and Yang 2012: 3). In long-term illness you learn to embrace the unresolved and show curiosity about discomfort because you live with it every day. As Pema Chödron argues (2013), chronic illness offers 'the death of old stuck patterns,' 'makes way for something new to be born,' and 'a hidden doorway to freedom when there is no way out.' Like a snake shedding its skin, I felt a decolonial push to leave the dominant narrative I'd been taught behind and recognize the alternatives and hope outside of it (Vàzquez 2012: 243). The joy of letting go of Russian culture in a moment when I hated it was exhilarating, and I felt slightly furious about how much I had been missing out on: having never liked Russian literature—much to the chagrin of its many enthusiasts—I tore

through novels by Ukrainian writers, and the new stunning exhibition catalogue *In the Eye of the Storm: Modernism in Ukraine, 1900–1930s* (Akinsha 2023) was a welcome companion in my sickbed. I echoed the sentiments of the futurist artists and poets in their 1912 manifesto *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste* (Burliuk et al. 1912/1988: 51): 'The Academy and Pushkin are less intelligible than hieroglyphics. Throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc. overboard from the Ship of Modernity.'

Decolonial Power

Despite how much I wanted to learn, when my illness was at its worst, reading and even watching TV required too much cognitive focus. Due to light and noise sensitivity and crushing fatigue, I spent months lying down in a dark quiet room. The only way I could absorb knowledge was to listen. As Rolando Vàzquez (2012: 248) outlines, listening is a powerful tool of decolonial critique: the system of modernity 'holds the monopoly of speaking', and listening 'opens… humbles… builds understanding' that intends 'to bridge the colonial difference,' presenting 'a challenge to listen to those who have been disavowed and silenced.' Amid Russia's ongoing genocide and terrorist attacks, listening to Ukrainian voices has been crucial and urgent, especially given the tendency of academics in the West (including me before 2022) to view Ukraine through a Russian lens and ignore the voices of Ukrainian scholars (Kurylo 2023: 3) as part of a 'long-standing practice of casting Ukrainians as objects rather than subjects of their history' (Finnin 2013). This 'epistemic injustice' (Dudko 2023: 181), which is also prevalent in Western media, has led to the spread of dangerous disinformation about Ukraine, in which false Kremlin narratives such as the claim that Ukraine and Russia are brotherly nations and 'one people' (Putin 2021)[7] can gain traction.

An initiative launched in March 2022 by Ukrainian activist Valeriia Voshchevska and journalist Maksym Eristavi,[8] the *Ukrainian Spaces* podcast series has demonstrated the pedagogical power of listening to lived experiences of colonialism, bringing 'what has been relegated to oblivion' (Vàzquez 2018: 243) into the light and facilitating my own decolonial awakening. In over 60 episodes, all in English, they have featured different Ukrainian speakers, including Crimean Tatar, Jewish, and Romani Ukrainians and Ukrainians of color, on topics such as language, literature, cuisine, queer pride, feminism, pets, and diversity, and have built a global decolonial hive mind in solidarity with Kyrgyz, Qazaq, South Sudanese, and Taiwanese guests. Simply listening to their tone of voice and resonance in speaking about the violence of the invaders and fears for family, friends, and pets created a powerful, embodied sense of the impact of colonialism and revealed the knowledge that emotion, which is typically undervalued in academic research, can impart. With episodes entitled 'Decolonizing Stupid Things You Say About Ukraine' and 'Russian Colonialism in Ukraine, Explained,' the speakers aimed to educate listeners

as well as air their own frustrations with Westsplaining and gaslighting.[9] As someone with an invisible illness—a category of disability often subject to systemic disbelief—I felt keen empathy.

The podcast served as a safe space for Ukrainians to explore self-decolonization and reconnect with their Ukrainian identity as part of a community: speaking to each other enabled them to connect the dots and work out all the ways in which Russian colonialism and genocide affected multiple generations of Ukrainians. As Eristavi put it, rediscovering roots and history 'even within a family' is 'an everyday act of investigative journalism because a lot of truths and a lot of facts were concealed, hidden, erased throughout the decades and the centuries. And this does not make the job of discovering your identity easy' (Eristavi and Voshchevska 5 July 2022).

As I lay there in the dark, I listened to their stories and found that they were mine. Their grandparents, the names of family members, the things they did and did not know, the questions silenced and unanswered. I frantically scribbled down notes, often having to listen to the same few sentences over and over, rallying my sluggish sick body and mind to connect the dots and conduct my own 'investigative journalism.' My lack of understanding of Russian colonialism had prevented me from seeing its impact on my own family, and each episode prompted me to ask new questions and make connections. Over a long period of self-reflection, I developed a practice of listening that was subversive and dialogic; while unable to move physically I welcomed the movement of ways of thinking about Russia that had been deeply imbedded in me—seismic shifts that blow a huge hole in the foundation of my scholarly expertise and sense of self.

Alongside *Ukrainian Spaces*, I also listened to my father rediscover his own Ukrainian voice. For my father, the February 2022 invasion cleared the cobwebs away: he had spent 80 years of his life being told he was something that he wasn't. He was born in Kharkiv in 1941 and arrived as a displaced person to New York at age 6 along with my grandmother and his brother. He quickly learned English and became American. He never dwelled on nor was interested in his identity and spoke basic Russian at home, not learning how to read or write it. While he knew his father whom he had never met was Ukrainian, his mother told everyone they were Russian. The Ukrainianness in the family was downplayed, and Russian was an easier identity to explain in America; the fact that Westerners have generally tended to see Russians and Ukrainians as 'interchangeable' still creates a feeling of 'disconnect' for Ukrainians in the diaspora today (Stashsko 2022). I had grown up with the sense that we were both Russian and Ukrainian, but our Ukrainianness was not something to be proud of, perhaps a bit embarrassing, to be said in a stage whisper. As the *Ukrainian Spaces* episode 'How Russians made Ukrainians Hate Themselves' (5 July 2022) explores, this sense of shame was part of an inferiority complex conditioned by Russian colonialism. In the words of guest Sasha Boychenko, 'it's not only that [our] history and identity have been systematically erased, but they've also been altered... they've been messed with.'

Free of the shame surrounding Ukrainianness and the enforcement of Russian identity from my grandmother, who died years ago, my father began to explore what had been altered and what had survived in the face of genocide. Over many conversations during my long period at home, I shared what I had been learning, and we slowly unpacked and sorted through his memories, understanding and identifying the distinctly Ukrainian features of his life. He began speaking about his first few years in New York, during which time his Ukrainian paternal grandparents had also arrived and became part of the Ukrainian diaspora community. The visceral, sensory memories of a child began to surface: he remembered going with his grandfather to a Ukrainian Orthodox church and celebrating Easter, describing richly colored *pysanky* Easter eggs and a spread of desserts made by his grandmother Dusya. When I heard on *Ukrainian Spaces* that Russians mock Ukrainians for eating salo—slabs of fatback—he recalled it with ease. The family borshch recipe, too, came from Dusya, not from my grandmother who had appropriated it as 'Russian.'

Until 2022, I had heard virtually nothing about these grandparents whom he had only known for a brief span of time. My grandmother had remarried, and when her new husband (who was Polish) arrived in New York, she ceased contact with her in-laws, who had moved to a different state. I couldn't imagine how painful it would have been to miraculously find your grandchildren in America after the war and then be pushed out of their lives, and how heartbreaking for my father to be cut off from his grandparents as well as his cultural roots. His immediate family's Ukrainian identity, too, has become clearer, especially after some linguistic discoveries.

Years ago, when I began traveling to Russia, I had realized my grandmother spoke Russian with a strong Ukrainian accent. Amid decolonial discussions about generations of Ukrainians being conditioned to believe their language was uneducated and inferior to Russian, I began learning Ukrainian on Duolingo and saw just how different it was. I was livid at myself for believing the common assumption in the West that the two languages are nearly interchangeable when it is so easily corrected simply by listening to Ukrainians. Including my father: as I read out some basic Ukrainian words, we were both surprised that he recognized a few amid his limited Russian vernacular. A few days later he came rushing down the stairs, lit up with glee after a phone call with his cousin, with whom he had been sifting through family memories, myths, and lies, revealed they had used Russian and Ukrainian words concurrently while growing up. Like me, he had assumed they were similar, but that was because he knew them both; Ukrainian had been appropriated as 'Russian' his entire life. As I pictured two octogenarians saying the words 'onion' (*tsybulia* in Ukrainian/ *luk* in Russian), 'beets' (*buriak/svekla*), and 'flower' (*kvitka/tsvetok*) aloud and finding all this meaning in them, I thought, these are the things that slip through the cracks of coloniality: food names, pysanky, borshch—'the inadvertent insight[s] to make the puzzle pieces fall into place' (Zabuzhko

2021: 33) and deny assimilation and erasure.

While I felt fierce joy for my father that his stubborn kernel of Ukrainianness had persisted, my self-decolonization has felt more complicated. Extremely close with my grandmother, I was proud to be the only grandchild to have learnt Russian and share her love of Russian culture. I had built an entire career on it and a sense of belonging to Russia, which enabled me to forge close relationships with Russian relatives and informed my decision to move there. She always said Russia is 'the best' and being Russian makes you strong; but now being Russian makes me feel sick. To work through my complicity and guilt, I needed to deconstruct her zeal for a country she had only been to once when she was in her 80s, as both a grandchild and a historian with a new decolonial toolbox.

Oksana Zabuzhko's (2012: 17) remark that 'Ukrainian families changed faiths, languages, and national flags in practically every generation... like addicts going through needles' felt fitting for my grandmother, who was a survivalist with chameleon-like tendencies. She became what she had to in a world in which the language you spoke and what ethnicity or religion you claimed could get you killed, saved, or deported. Armed with a lexicon of Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, and German, she managed to survive a harrowing journey with her children from Kharkiv to a displacement camp in Germany and then to the US. Lying was so ingrained in her as a survival strategy that I grew up hearing a constantly shifting narrative of events that bordered on both comedy and tragedy. Some family members who were said to be dead were in fact alive, and I once overhead her proudly telling a stranger that she had been born in Moscow. I have no doubt if she were alive now, she would boast about being born in Odesa. Which she, indeed, was, in 1919, before moving to Kharkiv in her childhood.

During her teenage years to her early twenties, Ukraine became 'the most dangerous place in the world' (Snyder 2015: 699): my grandmother lived through the purges of the 1930s, which decimated the Ukrainian intelligentsia, the Holodomor (Great Famine) genocide, and World War II. In the 1920s she had learned Ukrainian at school as part of the Soviet policy celebrating non-Russian nationalities, but in the 1930s Stalin reversed this and implemented an aggressive policy of Russification of language and culture that, along with the intentional starvation of millions of Ukrainians through famine, sought to destroy the Ukrainian nation. Here I found the root of her insistence that Russia was 'the best': by the mid to late 1930s the rhetoric of great Russian chauvinism had entered official state discourse, which from then onwards emphasized the superiority of 'the great Russian [*russkii*] people', who were the 'first among equals' and leader of the Soviet 'family of nations' (Plokhy 2017: 255). While said to be 'equal,'[10] non-Russian nationalities such as Ukrainian were regarded as inferior and potentially treasonous.

Pathological fear creates pathological lies: Russianness was a shield my grandmother bore against the world, and any Ukrainianness was appropriated to it. In 'the colonization of the imaginary' (Quijano 2007: 168–69), the colonizer's culture and language are made 'seductive,'

rewarding the dominated for assimilation. As Voshchevka's grandmother Maria (Eristavi and Voshchevska 13 March 2023) wrote, 'We were taught to love someone else's made-up country and be ashamed of our own roots.' I then faced a moment in self-decolonization where, as Eristavi notes, 'you're not entirely even sure what is true, what is not, what was conditioned [by colonialism], what was real' (Eristavi and Voshchevska 23 December 2022). What words do I use now to tell a family story about her? My self-identifying-as-Russian but possibly repressed/suppressed Ukrainian grandmother? Her identity had been so important to me, but now I had to let go of the universalist idea that identities are singular or fixed things. The 'truth' I'd been searching for was that Russian colonialism and its cycles of genocide, along with the trauma of World War II, had annihilated any self she could have had. Reflecting upon this now, I cannot help but recall the eerie faceless figures that haunt Malevych's late work and appear spatially disconnected from the stark, flat background, alienating their empty bodies from the earth. But the intergenerational dialogue I continue to have with my Ukrainian father is part of a global 'awakening… about our roots… this awareness… is the sound of the [Russian] colonial empire cracking. And they're so scared this will spread' (Eristavi and Voshchevska 23 May 2022). And from my sickbed I will spread it with all the decolonial energy I can muster.

Nearly ten years ago I heard about a war and decided it didn't affect me. Now that has been proved wrong on so many levels. Beyond the ruptures in my personal and professional lives, the realization that the country I had championed is a ruthless colonizer and the country where my roots lie is an unbreakable defender of freedom and the dignity of life has changed my view of the world and understanding of my own role in it dramatically. Rather than discarding and swapping identities like a chameleon, my mixed(-up) American, British, Russian, and Ukrainian self must chart a new path forward, starting with acknowledging my complicity in Russia's colonial lies. Living with and continuing to explore my unresolved self-knowledge means I 'won't let [myself] off the hook' (Tuck and Yang 2012: 4) in what Janet Mawhinney calls a 'move to innocence.'[11] I advocate Georgy Mamedov's (2022: 126) emphasis on the Russian word for complicity, *souchastie*. *Souchastie* can be translated into two English words in social justice discourse: 'complicity'—the more negative sense of acknowledging one's own part in systemic and historical injustices—and 'accompliceship'—the positive sense of actively working with the oppressed towards concrete actions. Working to end Russian colonial violence and oppression involves confronting and taking responsibility for the Russian chauvinist attitudes that live within us and amplifying and standing with indigenous and/or non-Russian voices. The 'internal activism' (Tlostanova 2018: 21) of individual decolonization, then, can lead to solidarity and collective resistance. To be a decolonial warrior and accomplice is to recognize one's own position of safety and wellness and care for others: care forges a 'radical kinship' (Hedva 2020b). It is a way of connecting with one another that insists 'if only some of us are well, none of us are.' If we take that attitude, then Russia's cracking empire will fall, be held accountable for its past and present crimes, and repatriate all stolen land. Global care for bodies

and minds in a perpetual state of terror from invasion and genocide or facing everyday oppression—whether they are Ukrainian, Syrian, Bashqort, Chechen, or South Sudanese—will lead to liberation.

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1. 2014 was officially designated the UK–Russia Year of Culture by the UK and Russian governments, and many cultural events and projects were organized in both countries, including the conference Russia–UK: Five Centuries of Cultural Relations. For more information on the program, see: https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/63700/pdf (23/10/2023).
2. I refer to 'the West' throughout to indicate Western Europe and North America.
3. In the nineteenth century see, for example, Russia's settler colonialism in the Northwest Caucasus and the Circassian genocide. From Nicholas I's policy of 'pacification' or 'annihilation' (Kivelson and Suny 2017: 172) in 1829 to strategies of 'extermination' under General Nikolai Evdokimov (Richmond 2013: 92–97) in the 1860s, the Russian military had purged the entire Circassian population through massacres, forced deportation and exile, starvation, and village raids by 1864. In the first half of the twentieth century, see the Holodomor (Great Famine) and purges of the intelligentsia in Ukraine, which Raphael Lemkin (2009: 126)—the lawyer who coined the term genocide in 1944—called 'the classic example of Soviet genocide' whose goal was 'the destruction of the Ukrainian nation.' As for the twenty-first century, see discussions of Russia's genocide of Ukraine by academics (Hinton 2023, Snyder 2022), specialists in international criminal law (Azarov, Koval, Nuridzhanian, and Venher 2023), and NGOs (New Lines Institute and Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights 2022).
4. As 'Nothing About Us Without Us' (2023)—an open letter from Russia's indigenous and decolonial activists—recently emphasized, the semantic gulf between russkie (ethnic Russians) and rossiiane (Russian nationals) continues to be a marker of racial, ethnic, and religious hierarchies in Russia.
5. For an overview of the deportations, see, for example, the scholarship of J. Otto Pohl (1999: 1–8) and Aurélie Campana's (2007) useful timeline. Pohl (1999: 3) crucially notes that despite their Georgian roots, Joseph Stalin and Lavrentii Beriia 'behaved like Russian chauvinists' in targeting non-Russian nationalities.
6. See Myroslav Shkandrij's (2002) essay on Malevych for more detail on his Kyivan period.
7. For a critical analysis of themes addressed in Putin's text, see Serghii Plokhy's (2021) interview with the Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard.

8. In early 2023, Marichka Buchelnikova and Stas Olenchenko joined as co-hosts of Ukrainian Spaces.
9. See, too, Bohdana Kurylo's (2023) recent scholarly account of Westsplaining from a Ukrainian point of view.
10. The colonial myth of 'equal' peoples is still used as a smokescreen to downplay Soviet atrocities and ignore the cruel nuances of ethnic hierarchies. Some scholars (Abashin 2017) continue to argue that the Soviet experience was 'complex' and 'not only [about] oppression' because all national groups had the 'same rights' and received basic state benefits—as if pensions could somehow blunt the pain of deportation and exile.
11. Botakoz Kassymbekova and Erica Marat (2022) have recently described this phenomenon in the Russian context as 'Russian imperial innocence.'

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