



The Motherland monument is one of the most recognizable symbols of the Ukrainian capital. Not the most unambiguous one, however: though the meaning of the statue remains relevant, the Soviet past sparked discussion amidst the decommunization movement. In 2023 Ukraine reclaimed the monument by renaming it and changing the Soviet hammer and sickle on the shield to the Ukrainian coat of arms, the trident.

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Introduction.

# Decolonization of memory in the former Soviet spaces

**M**emory as a narrative about our own past is central to decolonial thinking. The mere right to tell one's own history – a history that is told not from the position of colonial power but rather from the position in which one can recognize oneself – is central to the resistance to epistemic violence inflicted by the coloniality of power. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes:

[I]mperialism and colonialism brought complete disorder to colonized peoples, *disconnecting them from their histories, their landscapes, their languages, their social relations and their own ways of thinking, feeling and interacting with the world!* (emphasis added).

Hence, the question of decolonialization

is linked to the desire for *connection to one's own history* in which the decolonizing subjects can recognize their past. If we follow Tlostanova and Mignolo's proposition of *delinking* as a method of decolonial practice,<sup>2</sup> then we can say that decolonization of memory is about *delinking from the memories imposed by the colonial matrix of power*.

The fundamental right to one's own history in the process of decolonization

## “INSTITUTIONALIZED PAST OFTEN BECOMES THE VERY VEHICLE OF (RE)CREATION OF UNJUST ORDER IN WHICH THE COMMUNITY CANNOT RECOGNIZE THEMSELVES.”

is indeed mentioned by many decolonial writers. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o writes in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* that decolonization means to

*see oneself clearly in relationship to ourselves and other selves in the universe*<sup>3</sup> (emphasis added).

“Seeing oneself clearly” involves having a clearer narrative of one’s own past. Jill Jarvis in her *Decolonizing memory: Algeria and the Politics of Testimony* Memory also writes about decolonization as a possibility to “see or hear what history has rendered ghostly”<sup>4</sup> (emphasis added). The work towards a more just history (with the imperative of historical justice directed at liberation of the tabooed and silenced histories) was part and parcel of anti-colonial movements worldwide, including anti-Soviet movements in the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup> Such examples are many and they prove one point: engaging with one’s past and memory is central for decolonial thought and practice.

**AT THE SAME TIME**, cultural memory is shaped and institutionalized by the unequal power relations. The institutionalized past often becomes the very vehicle of (re)creation of unjust order in which the community cannot recognize themselves in the story that is told to them and about them. In similar vein, Dovile Budryte writes that the postcolonial attempts to memorialize the traumatic histories of colonialism can become sources of state subjugation and oppression.<sup>6</sup> Thus, we should also recognize the challenges of

the “managed past” which is often shaped by unequal power relations and partisan politics. That is why one can even question the mere possibility of decolonization of memory.

**IN AUGUST 2023**, Yuliya Yurchuk and Fabio Belafatti convened a conference, “Decolonization of Memory in the former Soviet Spaces” generously funded by the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies. We sought to combine theoretical approaches and conceptual discussions from memory studies and decolonial theory to better understand the memory work of the societies in the countries that were part of the Soviet Union. We organized the event at a specific moment of history, while Ukraine continued its fight against the Russian war of aggression and when more and more scholars employed the concept of colonialism and decolonization to explain the Russo-Ukrainian war and the Ukrainian condition in general.<sup>7</sup>

The scholars who joined our discussion represented different disciplines and approached different countries in their research, ranging from the Baltic States to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. In the discussions it was obvious that we all shared the underlying idea of decolonial thinkers that colonial relations persist and continue to shape political, economic, social, and epistemic systems even after states gain formal sovereignty, and that the questions of memory and history are central to decolonial processes. All the societies that we approached, have lived in “the ‘shatterzones’ of successive and converging colonizations”, in which

they experienced interactions with and embeddedness in “a multilateral, multiscale field of political relations, facing off against not merely one empire but a horizon of maneuvering empires”.<sup>8</sup> We strove to see ways in which decolonial memory work has been done in the face of these “maneuvering empires” and which counter-maneuvers have been proposed. To put it in another way, we all wanted to understand what kind of “epistemological reconstitution”<sup>9</sup> is taking place through memory work that can be seen as part of a decolonial project. In the course of discussions, we also understood that although different countries had one common denominator in the Soviet oppression, they all have distinct and singular experiences of this past and have developed different ways of working through this past in the present. Without doubt, while approaching decolonization and decoloniality in different contexts one should consider not only imperial difference inherited from the interaction with different empires, but also colonial difference reflected in the internal patterns of domination inside and between (former) colonies.<sup>10</sup>

**THE SECTION ALSO** presents a text by Kateryna Botanova and one by Madina Tlostanova, who opened the conference with their keynote lectures. The authors engage in the discussion on memory and decolonization from different perspectives. Madina Tlostanova presents an intricate theoretical discussion on the limits of decolonization in the field of cultural memory because the mere understanding of memory reveals “the pitfalls of

the euromodern conception of time”.

Kateryna Botanova provides an engaging critique on knowledge production in the art exhibition spaces challenged by decolonial voices and demands for corrected art history. We also added the article by Anastasiia Bozhenko and Olesya Chagovets to this section to illustrate how decolonization of memory can be discussed in relation to the place of the Soviet heritage in Ukraine.

The section is an invitation to think further on the possibilities of implementing decolonial theory in the memory field of the countries that were dominated by the Soviet Union. ✖

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## theme section

### Decolonization of memory in the former Soviet spaces

Guest editor: Yuliya Yurchuk

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# Decolonization of the space.

## The uncomfortable heritage of Ukrainian socialist cities

Anastasiia Bozhenko  
and Olesya Chagovets

### abstract

The process of decolonization in Ukrainian cities is significant because of the remaining socialist heritage. This includes architecture, urban planning structures, toponyms, and symbolic spaces. While this heritage is deeply implemented in the contemporary cityscape, it has also become the subject of criticism, particularly after the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2014. Socialist cities such as Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia, and Kryvyi Rig played a prominent role in shaping the urban landscape and were conceptualized by Soviet urbanists in the 1920s and 1930s. These cities were designed to gain complete control over the social and professional aspects of residents' lives, reflecting the ideological ambitions of the communist party. This article explores the importance of socialist cities in the context of colonial heritage, examining the origins of the idea and its ideological significance.

**KEYWORDS:** Socialist cities, decolonization, architecture, urbanistic, Ukraine.

**T**he Russian invasion of Ukraine drove forward the cleaning up of Soviet heritage from the Ukrainian urban space. While the dismantling of Lenin monuments was the most obvious form of this process, the decolonization of Soviet architecture is not so explicit. So why should Ukrainian socialist cities be included in the discussion about decolonization processes in Ukraine? The point is that decolonization/decommunization of socialist cities is quite a challenge because it does not simply involve removing individual monuments or mosaics with propaganda connotations, but in this case the architectural and urban space itself is propaganda. Thus, one of the main problems, not purely of academic but also of practical meaning, is how to deal with this heritage.

Firstly, the concept of dissonant heritage could be useful in describing socialist cities. As Oksana Dovgopolova argues, heritage is not always what we want to be proud of, but what changed us as a society.<sup>1</sup> Although the socialist cities were created by a totalitarian regime, they are part of an important period in urban planning, industrial development, and architecture. At the same time, they were an attempt to rebuild society by implementing a specific urban structure, to implement ideology (and here we could refer to the concept of the producing of space by Henri Lefebvre,<sup>2</sup> although he considered the experiment of Soviet constructivists to have failed).

Another point is the use of memory studies. One of the main questions relates to where socialist cities' heritage is located in the hierarchy of remembering/forgetting. For example, in the

academic field, we could mention that there has been a certain research interest in the history and urban planning of the New Kharkiv or Kharkiv Tractor Plant district and Sixth Settlement, while other socialist cities (mostly in Donbas) are not so well researched. The same could be said about reflecting on their past in the public and artistic field, which we will return to later.

**APPLYING THE** decolonization issue could be tricky, however. While Ukraine was not a colony in the classical sense, the classical postcolonial paradigm should be reconsidered. We could argue about the correlation between colonial and totalitarian discourse. What if, while looking at socialist heritage only in the same way as on colonial heritage, we do not take into the consideration the important problem of our own participation in the creation of the Empire? New Kharkiv was planned and created, for example, by Kyiv architect Pavlo Alyoshyn, not by the Petersburg architects; thus, should it be considered as heritage imposed from above or is it our own heritage? Pierre Nora understands decolonization not only in a strictly ethnic way of the classical relationship between colony and metropolis, but in an ideological one as well:

[...] there is a third type of decolonization which followed on the collapse of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, whether communist, Nazi or just plain dictatorship: an ideological decolonization which has helped reunite these liberated peoples with traditional, long-term memories confiscated, destroyed or manipulated by those regimes.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps combining the classical definition of decolonization as a removal of the imperial symbols with the removal of the totalitarian ideology could be one perspective for the Ukrainian case.

However, speaking about the issue of decolonization, we need to admit that we should deal not only with the academic field, but with the public and (in the Ukrainian case, at least) legal fields as well. Speaking about the issue of decolonization, Volodymyr Vyatrovich, the former Head of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, highlights its nature as a part of forgetting:

[...] now the decolonization in Ukraine is the removal of imperial heritage, which is used for the renewing of imperial influence.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, decolonization is often understood as purely instrumental, whereby the urban space is simply cleansed from imperial and communist symbolism without exploring the mechanism of its influence on identity. Oksana Dovgoplova mentions this in her interview:

**How does the postcolonial syndrome in Ukraine find its expression? In the desire to wipe out everything imperial, and this is a normal postcolonial practice. But we can look at how this is done in other countries and decide – first of all for ourselves, not for Russian propaganda – what we should do with our heritage.<sup>5</sup>**

Speaking about the legal situation, the set of decommunization laws were adopted in 2015, but decommunization was understood then within the concept of the totalitarian past. Communist symbols were prohibited together with Nazi symbols. With the beginning of the full scale invasion, the situation changed.

The law “About condemnation and prohibition of propaganda of Russian imperial policy in Ukraine and the decolonization of toponymy” put the Soviet Union in the context of previous imperial politics. The law defines Russian imperial politics as “a system of measures taken by governing bodies, armed groups, political parties, non-governmental organizations, institutions, enterprises, groups or individual citizens (subjects of the Russian/Moscow tsardom), the Russian Empire, the Russian republic, the Russian state, the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet

## **“THE SET OF DECOMMUNIZATION LAWS WERE ADOPTED IN 2015, BUT DECOMMUNIZATION WAS UNDERSTOOD THEN WITHIN THE CONCEPT OF THE TOTALITARIAN PAST.”**

Republic, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and the Russian Federation aimed at the subjugation, exploitation, assimilation of the Ukrainian nation.”<sup>6</sup> This suggests a succession of all regimes. At the same time, decolonization in the legal field directly affected heritage laws. Due to the law “On Changes to Certain Laws of Ukraine Concerning the Specifics of Forming the State List of Immovable Monuments of Ukraine,” if the tangible heritage object belongs to the communist or imperial heritage, that may be a reason for its exclusion from the register (or non-inclusion, if it is a newly discovered monument).<sup>7</sup>

Thus, in practice, heritage discourse sometimes conflicts with the decolonization discourse: while the first is about preservation and remembering, the second is about destruction and selective forgetting. While some imperial/communist monuments stand separately and could be transferred, for example into the museum space (for example, pieces of monumental art), some Soviet symbols are built into architectural monuments, and cannot be simply removed without damaging this heritage object; a lot of bureaucracy work also needs to be done in cases like this.<sup>8</sup>

## **General context about Ukrainian socialist cities**

The planning of socialist cities in Ukraine began with the establishment of the state commission for the building of socialist cities (June 12, 1929) (Figure 1). The general plans for Makiivka, Horlivka, Lysychans’k, Kramatorsk, Kharkiv and Zaporizhzhia were developed. They meant to be the “ideal model for equality”





Figure 1. Map of socialist cities in Ukraine. Source: the authors.

- 1 Grand Zaporizhzhia
- 2 New Kharkiv
- 3 Toretsk
- 4 Nikopol
- 5 Kryvyi Rih
- 6 New Kramatorsk
- 7 Makiivka
- 8 New Horlivka
- 9 Dniprodzerzhynsk (now Kamianske)
- 10 Lisichansk



Figure 2. Metallurgists Avenue. The socialist city of Kryvyi Rih. Photo from 1971.

and urban centers for the proletariat.<sup>9</sup> Socialist cities were influenced by both communism and Western urban planning ideas. Some researchers mention that it was “Americanism”.<sup>10</sup> According to Pavlo Kravchuk, socialist cities can be divided into two groups based on their ideology: Those built on social utopian ideas (Magnitogorsk, New Kharkiv) and those closer to Western examples.<sup>11</sup> Socialist cities were a concentration of Soviet ideology in the urban space; therefore they are important for studying the decolonization process. Firstly, the priority was not the city itself, but the object of heavy industry; secondly, the main task of the space organization was common everyday life, to eliminate individuality.<sup>12</sup> Mart Stam, a Dutch architect who was involved in creating the master plan for Makiivka, emphasized that the city scheme should reflect the living needs of the working class, rather than just being a calculated mechanism.<sup>13</sup>

**SOCIALIST CITIES** are viewed by Western historians as an extension of the Russian Empire’s imperial politics. For example, Dutch architect and historian Koos Bosma suggests that “industrialization, including the collateral social engineering, can be interpreted as inner colonization in the Caucasus, the Urals, the Ukraine and Siberia. The new socialist man or woman would live in a new socialist town that was the front of the battle against backward Czarist structures and extreme climatic conditions: mountains, rivers, deserts, and steppes. In the USSR, the organization and use of the labor force underwent a radical change”.<sup>14</sup> Heather Denaan, an American historian studying the experience of Nizhny Novgorod, comes to the same conclusion. She highlights that, especially during the classical period, Stalinist architecture is the most prominent example of such politics.<sup>15</sup>

To understand the place of the socialist cities in Ukrainian collective memory, we should look at how this idea was implemented on Ukrainian territory. In classical empires, changes were made without considering local conditions. But, as far as

Ukraine was not a classical colony, we can trace some variations of this transition. Studying the Soviet Union in the context of postcolonial studies, Estonian researcher Epp Annus argues that “the relationship between colonizer and colonized are characterized by notions of hybridity, mimicry and camouflage, of the splitting and doubling of identities.”<sup>16</sup> Svitlana Shlipchenko, Ukrainian architect and philosopher, emphasized the cultural origin of institutions in planning late modernist projects in Ukrainian cities. She highlights that although Ukrainian architects made the projects, all important decisions were made by the Moscow authorities. She suggests putting this kind of institutional relations into the frame of hybridity.<sup>17</sup>

**“ALTHOUGH UKRAINIAN ARCHITECTS MADE THE PROJECTS, ALL IMPORTANT DECISIONS WERE MADE BY THE MOSCOW AUTHORITIES.”**

The team that built Kharkiv Tractor Plant district or New Kharkiv, mostly Ukrainian, was led by Kyiv architect Pavlo Alyoshyn. The planners studied in Kyiv and Kharkiv institutions (Nina Manucharova, Petro Shpara, Ivan Taranov-Beloziorov et al.).<sup>18</sup> The degree of influence the ideas of Russian urbanist Nikolai Milutin

had on its planning is debatable. For example, in Vadim Alyoshyn’s dissertation he argues that the project of KhTZ deviated from the ideas of “Sotsgorod” so much that it could be considered as a different project. Another example is that the parallel settlement was accepted by Pavlo Alyoshyn’s team before the publication of Milutin’s book. Other features where KhTZ differs from Milutin’s concept were a certain restriction of space and absence of water space; the socialist city was wider than it was supposed to be according to the concept of the linear city.<sup>19</sup>

We see a different situation in the case of Zaporizhzhia, where the team was supervised by Moscow architect Victor Vesnin, and the Ukrainian architects were excluded from decision-making.<sup>20</sup> In some cases, we can also see collaboration with foreign pro-communist architects; thus the idea of socialist cities was not implemented in a Soviet vacuum. For example, in 1930, Ernst May visited Kharkiv and gave a series of lectures about new

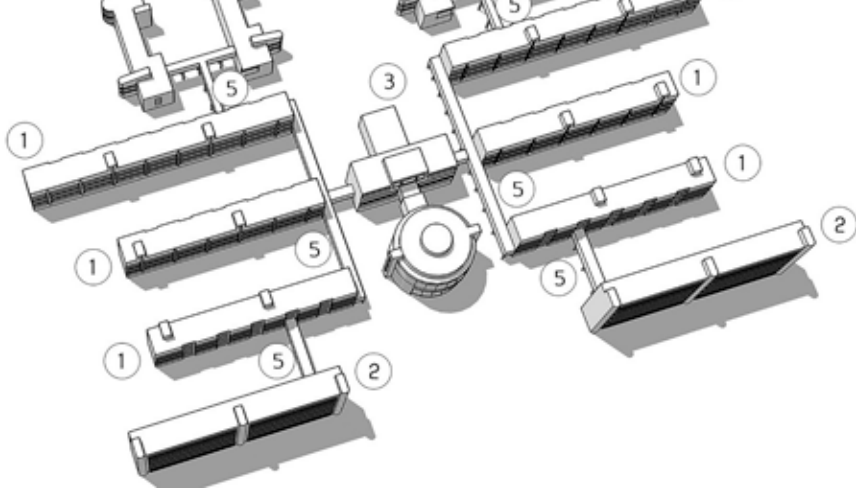


Figure 3. Schematic view of a residential kombinat. It was developed on the basis of the project of a residential kombinat in the socialist city of Traktorograd (New Kharkiv).

1. Apartments for singles.
2. Apartments for families.
3. Canteen.
4. Kindergarten and nursery.
5. Warm passages.

Ukrainian socialist cities.<sup>21</sup> Another aspect was the direct inclusion of foreign architects via International to the planning team. Dutch architect Lotta Stam-Beese worked with Pavlo Alyoshyn on the planning of Tractorobud, while Mart Stam participated in the project of Makiivka.<sup>22</sup> Writing about their ideological beliefs, Dutch architecture historian Koos Bosma mentioned that there was a whole spectrum: from convinced leftists to architects who were skeptical of communism and worked just for payment.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, we can conclude that the ways in which urban planning concepts were realized during the interwar period had some elements of colonial relationship (for example, the case of Zaporizhzhia), while other cases have the signs of hybridity.

## The implementation of communist ideology in space

Urban planning in the Soviet socialist context was a powerful tool for implementing ideological principles. In the late 1920s, the USSR developed models of the future society, where architects inspired by revolutionary visions aimed to rethink the idea of social relations, lifestyle, and family. The goal was to create a harmonious living environment for the working population, ensuring comprehensive development and contributing to the formation of a new personality. Therefore, socialist cities provided for extensive green areas, parks, and boulevards that met the needs of workers and contributed to their health (see Figure 2).

An important aspect was not only the creation of comfortable living conditions, but also the development of social institutions, including the family, education, the role of women in society, the organization of cultural and educational work, and other important areas. The first attempts were made to change the lives of working people and to eradicate the routine of household chores by introducing new approaches to planning and organizing cities. Every adult citizen was obliged to participate in productive work and public activities, which was fixed at the legislative level. Children under 16 were provided with full state services and lived in nurseries, kindergartens and boarding schools. An extensive social and amenity complex (catering facilities, retail chains, bath and laundry complexes, department stores, post



Figure 4. Socialist city of Kryvyi Rih. The Metallurgic Palace of Culture. First of May, 1960s. Source: Facebook group "Kryvyi Rih Antiquities".

offices, hospitals) and a system of centralized cultural services (palaces of labor and culture, parks and recreation, stadiums) met the daily needs of the population and created conditions for collective leisure.<sup>24</sup> Based on the concept of socialized life, the following spatial solution was developed for a residential kombinat.<sup>25</sup>

The concept of a residential kombinat was a complex of buildings that functioned in a specific cycle, where all the necessary aspects of life (sleeping areas, household services, childcare, leisure) were combined within one or two city blocks that interacted as an integrated unit (Figure 3). For example, in the socialist city of Novyi Kharkiv, a distinct planning arrangement of two residential estates remains evident.

The introduction of ideological symbols and concepts into the urban environment of socialist cities reflected the desire to reproduce socialist values through architectural and spatial elements. Sculptures, reliefs, murals, and other decorative elements on buildings contributed to visual propaganda, supported the ideology of the socialist regime, and carried certain messages and symbols that reinforced the ideological narrative. For example, monumental compositions depicted workers' and peasants' solidarity, the ideals of communism and the victory of the Soviet way of life.



Figure 5. The dining club is a part of the residential kombinat of the Socialist city “New Kharkiv”. It was rebuilt into a residential building. Contemporary photo 2019.

Source: the authors

The evolution of socialist urban architecture underwent distinct phases across different historical periods. In its early phase, notably during the 1930s, the dominance of constructivism was evident, characterized by specific spatial attributes. Due to the architectural minimalism of that era, notable for its absence of ornamental elements, communist symbolism found its expression through diverse metal structures adorned with posters and signs. These symbols were integrated both as autonomous structural elements and as integral components of the architecture, such as parapets, railings, and handrails. The subsequent shift towards socialist realism introduced propaganda motifs like flags, stars, hammers, and sickles, seamlessly incorporated into the architectural elements, including capitals, pediments, and façade decorations. Symbols representative of the early 1930s Soviet regime did not withstand the test of time due to their mobile nature and were systematically removed during this era. In contrast, the symbols of the Stalinist era, the “Khrushchev Thaw,” and the “Brezhnev Stagnation” persist within the urban landscape, presenting an artistic dilemma. These art installations bear historical and artistic significance, necessitating preservation for the enlightenment of future generations and the exploration of the era’s artistic legacy. However, efforts to preserve the Soviet heritage face challenges from a part of society that wants to eliminate all remnants of the Soviet era.

### **Balancing between preservation and adaptation of urban architectural heritage**

Europeans appreciate modern architecture as they do ancient monuments. In Germany, the UNESCO World Heritage List includes various monuments of modernist architecture, both singular structures and ensembles, as well as industrial complexes.<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, the current state of the monuments of architecture and urban planning of Soviet early modernism in Ukraine is poor. Many urban ensembles and residential areas continue to lose the authenticity of their components, the com-

plexity of urban planning objects is disturbed, and their value is lost.<sup>27</sup> (Figure 5)

As an illustration, in Germany, six modernist housing districts have been granted protected heritage status.<sup>28</sup> This status affected all aspects of the environment, including buildings, open spaces and landscaping. The spatial configuration, surface materials, and vegetation types are meticulously preserved. Consequently, the original characteristics of the locale, along with the functional and aesthetic interplay between spaces and individual architectural structures, remain perceptible to this

## **“THE SYMBOLS OF THE STALINIST ERA, THE ‘KHRUSHCHEV THAW,’ AND THE ‘BREZHNEV STAGNATION’ PERSIST WITHIN THE URBAN LANDSCAPE, PRESENTING AN ARTISTIC DILEMMA.”**

day. Ukraine is in the early stages of recognizing the significance of its urban heritage from the 1920s and 1930s, with the subsequent focus on the aspiration to safeguard this legacy for future generations. Initial outcomes of Ukraine’s endeavors indicate the identification of a notable array of architectural and urban planning entities dating back to the 1920s and 1930s. Research and attribution efforts have been undertaken for these landmarks,

contributing to the enlargement of the purview of this heritage.<sup>29</sup>

The protective statute of Ukrainian legislation, “urban planning monument”, is not widely used today due to the lack of methodological materials that reveal the principles of its operation, although some scientific works address this issue.<sup>30</sup> The arsenal of principles for the identification and preservation of urban heritage makes it possible to choose an effective tool that can actually ensure the preservation of the urban heritage of early modernism for future generations. Thus, during the conservation of urban planning complexes and ensembles, the focus of preservation should encompass not only individual buildings or groups of structures but also the entire urban landscape, incorporating its essential features like spatial arrangement, three-dimensional composition, architectural facades, landscaping elements, urban furnishings, and more. The 1920s and 1930s marked an era of innovation in building materials and technologies. It can be argued that the authentic materials and structures from that period often exhibit significant operational limitations when compared to contemporary solutions. Replac-



ing them with modern materials leads to a loss of authenticity and changes the appearance of the building, depriving it of the character of its era.

**AS A RESULT**, the availability of carefully formulated technical (engineering) methodologies for conserving the architectural legacy of the 1920s and 1930s in Ukraine is of critical importance. These methodologies should be accessible not only for application in the case of the most significant landmarks, but also for everyday activities involving the entirety of the architectural heritage from that era. Presently, there exists a demand to formulate restoration methods for early modernist heritage that would facilitate the preservation of the buildings' functionality, preventing their conversion into mere museum artifacts.

Another, more general issue for the Soviet heritage is that it belongs to the so-called "modern heritage".<sup>34</sup> This concept refers to architectural objects that have emerged in relatively recent history, often in the last century or even later, and have great potential to become cultural heritage sites. These objects can be representatives of different architectural styles and trends that characterize a certain period of time. One of the key features of "modern heritage" is that these objects have not yet acquired the status of classical or historical monuments, but they may already be valuable from cultural, architectural, historical, or aesthetic perspectives. The concept of modern heritage is closely linked to the phenomenon of remembrance. The architectural heritage of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries was shaped in different contexts of memory. For instance, architectural histories of the Modern Movement (European modernism) and Soviet architectural history were grounded in collective memory. Conversely, regional architectural histories relied on individual, social, and national memory. The postmodern history of architecture is based on cultural memory.

The socialist cities of Ukraine encompass all the characteristics of the "modern heritage" category. Integrating socialist cities into the modern cultural landscape of Ukraine can provide new avenues for enriching the national culture, enhancing citizens' awareness, and forming a distinct cultural identity for the nation. In recent years, the heritage of socialist cities in Ukraine has been the subject of scholarly discussions and has undergone fresh rethinking. Simultaneously, the public perception of this heritage faces numerous challenges and discussions.<sup>32</sup>

**THESE DISCUSSIONS** reflect the diversity of viewpoints and approaches to the preservation (or lack thereof) and adaptation of the "modern heritage" of socialist cities. One pivotal topic of debate is the consideration of whether to retain the heritage of socialist cities as an important component of Ukraine's cultural legacy, taking into account all aspects of the ideological nature of these areas. While most scholars and public figures<sup>33</sup> believe that the architectural structures and urban planning of socialist cities hold significant historical and cultural value as evidence of the past, the national-patriotic community is concerned that retaining the authenticity of these cities (without reconstruction) may endorse Soviet ideology that contradicts modern



Figure 6. Participants of the workshop Dreaming Up the KhTZ. October 2019. Source: Kharkiv School of Architecture

values. Another substantial debate revolves around the appropriate approach to reconstructing and adapting these spaces. The first position advocates preserving the heritage at all levels: urban planning, spatial, and architectural elements, with careful adaptation to modern needs.<sup>34</sup> The second position advocates maximal modernization of both urban planning and architectural details without preserving authenticity. The discussions also encompass the utilization of the heritage of socialist cities for educational purposes. An important aspect of these discussions is the issue of dignity and remembrance, especially in the context of overcoming a traumatic past. Thus, preserving this heritage can serve as a means of honoring the memory of those who lived through this period. On the other hand, it may also be seen as a lack of respect for the victims of the regime. Finally, the discussions address the contemporary use of socialist cities. They examine their potential roles in tourism, art projects,<sup>35</sup> entertainment, and other aspects of modern life.<sup>36</sup> All of these discussions point to the complex and multifaceted nature of the legacy of socialist cities within contemporary society. They help society understand different perspectives and approaches to these sites and determine the most suitable and acceptable methods of preservation and utilization (Figure 6).

## Rethinking the totalitarian and colonial heritage

The planning of socialist cities from scratch also allowed the creation of communist toponymic space. For example, writing about New Kharkiv, Mariia Tahtaulova highlights that:

[...] in the toponymic of this district Bolshevik and proletarian components prevailed, which formed a toponymical ensemble. The main street was the Avenue named after Sergo Ordzhonikidze, where the main infrastructure and administrative objects were concentrated. Among other urbanonyms, there are avenues named after Kosior and Frunze, the Second Five-Year Plan Street, Third International, Seventeenth Party Congress, Inessa Armand, etc.<sup>37</sup>

Among the changes made to this ensemble in 2015 due to the law of decommunization, three of the nine streets were named

after artists and architects of the interwar period; thus, these new names are connected with the period when this district was planned: one is named after Biblik, former Soviet director of the Tractor plant.<sup>38</sup> However, the renaming of the Seventeenth Party Congress Street as the Sevryn Potocki Street is questionable. Count Potocki was a Russian official of high ranking and loyal to the empire, despite his Polish roots. The Oleksandrivs'ki Avenue has another touch of the empire – although named after Saint Oleksandr, this naming tradition is associated with the Russian Empire. This trend is typical not only for Kharkiv; in Kherson's case, Sergiy Vodotyka mentions the streets renamed after Count Potyomkin and Richelieu, the main actors of imperial policy in southern Ukraine. He argues that such a tendency is a marker for the "little-Russian" identity of the southern and eastern Ukrainian cities' municipalities.<sup>39</sup> Now, these urbanonyms should be changed again, due to the new set of the decolonization laws.

Returning to the decommunization of the KhTZ district, we should also mention the research of Roman Lubavskij, who considers that the "gentle" decommunization was connected with the mostly neutral narrative about this district in the late Soviet Union-early years of independent Ukraine:

**The narrative of the history of the 'socialist town' did not include stories about the 'revolutionary achievements of the working class', so the description of its space was always focused on the everyday life of its residents [...] It is worth noting that the image of the district formed during the 1970s and 1980s led to the removal of its planning beyond the context of the policy of the Bolshevik totalitarian regime in the 1930s. This ensured the 'gentleness' of the decommunization of this space in 2014 when the names of Soviet political figures (S. Ordzhonikidze, S. Kosior) disappeared from the toponymic landscape, but the names of the directors of the tractor plant (V. Biblik, P. Svystun) appeared.<sup>40</sup>**

The tendency to tolerate Soviet toponymy more in industrial cities, such as Kramators'k, Slovians'k, and Kamians'ke, was mentioned by Oleksii Gnatiuk and Viktoriia Glibivets in their research of Ukrainian toponymy. They connect it with the toponymical tradition of naming the streets after the founders of local industry.<sup>41</sup> The inertness of the Kryvyi Rih municipality was mentioned at the official level when in 2016 the city was the only one that ignored decommunization. That is why this process was transferred directly under the control of the provincial administration.<sup>42</sup>

While decommunization is provided by the municipalities, presenting the more official side of memory politics, non-governmental organizations present the other point of view towards the communist heritage. Speaking about their perception of the Soviet heritage, during our work with the inhabitants we observed some division connected with the chronological periods: while in recent years, the attitude to the constructivist heritage became more positive, Stalinist architecture (often referred to as "Stalinist vampire" – wordplay with Stalinist empire style) is still perceived as "bad" architecture both in the aesthetic and semantic meaning



Figure 7. KhTZ residents share their family stories. June 2020. Source: the authors.

– as totalitarian and colonial, while interwar architecture is almost appropriated as our own; it does not have such strong totalitarian connotations (despite the fact that KhTZ and Dnipro GES were built at the same time as the Holodomor was unleashed).

As an example, we could mention the participative practices in which the main target groups are residents of the socialist cities, who often do not understand the importance and controversy of this heritage. In 2017, within the bigger Bauhaus-Zaporizhzhia project, members of the City Garden NGO provided a workshop, "You are living in the legend", during which the participants had an opportunity to share their memories, family photos or documents connected with the Sixth Settlement, as well as to draw mental maps. In their survey of inhabitants, the NGO members found out that 90% of respondents feel they belong to this heritage while 92% are aware of the necessity to protect the settlement's buildings at national level.<sup>43</sup> Another example is the "Art-oborona" workshop with the residents of the KhTZ, where the activists asked the inhabitants to share their family stories while also telling them about the significance of this heritage, which helped to explain the importance of the KhTZ as urban planning heritage. We could observe here both some examples of non-critical nostalgia – "My grandfather built this himself", "This was a better time" and just a sense of curiosity about "how it was" (see Figure 7).<sup>44</sup> Similar practices, rather chaotic, could also be observed in thematic groups devoted to the history of socialist cities, when people write their recollections related to the posted photos.<sup>45</sup> The social mapping of KhTZ, "Summer Marathon KhTZ", helped not only to actualize architectural objects as a heritage for residents but also deepened the understanding of the problems with former socialist cities.<sup>46</sup> Speaking about such practices, it is hard to find any discussion that show awareness about colonialism, but for us it is important to register this understanding of heritage as "one's own", the feeling of belonging and heritage.

**CONTEMPORARY ART** is another medium through which the discussion about this dissonance in relation to heritage could be promoted. Unlike participative practices, artists often come from outside; they are not deeply involved in the context and do not take into account the residents' opinions. One example is the activity of the residents of "Our school KhTZ". The work of

Aleksander Adamov depicted Joseph Stalin. His miniature bust was made from bread, which was a symbol of the transience of the totalitarian regime, but this work caused great dissonance among the artists.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusions

So how could we define a decolonization discourse within memory studies in the urban space of Ukrainian socialist cities? Should it be described as a practice of (selective) forgetting/erasing? We should highlight here that in Ukraine decolonization is not only academic, but a legal definition, which, in our opinion, has a slightly different connotation. As Ukraine deals with the decolonization of space in socialist cities, a careful balancing of historical preservation and modern adaptation is required. It means that we should not simply remove communist and imperial symbols; a discussion on architectural heritage and cultural values should also be provided. Another point in this discussion is about applying the totalitarian discourse – how should it be connected with decolonization? Could we perhaps use the definition of both colonial and totalitarian heritage at the same time in referring to Ukrainian heritage of the Soviet period? Maybe postcolonial discourse is the only right way to remember the Soviet and imperial past during the active phase of war, but after its end, we as a society should move on. The third set of questions is about the relationship between decolonization and heritage studies. We see some contradiction, because while decolonization is about trying to destroy what does not fit official narratives and what is not “good” about the past, heritage discourse calls for preservation and discussion about every heritage object, especially those that represent difficult periods of history. Embracing the concept of modern heritage, encompassing Ukrainian socialist cities, poses both challenges and opportunities. Discussions about their preservation and adaptation balance the recognition of historical value and the negotiation of difficult heritage, ultimately providing fertile ground for a sustainable future. Participatory and artistic practices offer insightful perspectives in reimagining the legacy of socialist cities. Contemporary art serves as a potent medium, provoking dissonance and contemplation on the totalitarian and colonial dimensions inherent within these urban landscapes. ✖

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# Decolonizing knowledge production

by **Kateryna Botanova**

## UKRAINE BETWEEN RUSSIAN, SOVIET, AND POST-SOVIET SPACES

### abstract

The essay analyzes the role of Western art institutions in supporting and promoting imperialist views on both the cultural and political history of what once was the Russian Empire, then the Soviet Union, and then the so-called “post-Soviet” space while they universalized and homogenized the multiple, complex, heterogenic, interconnected voices that temporally and spatially fell within the boundaries of the Russian Empire in its various forms. It looks into the case of the market-driven umbrella terms of “Russian art” and “Russian avant-garde,” as presented in several exhibitions in major Western museums between 2016 and 2019, dedicated to the centennial of the October Revolution, often called the Russian Revolution. The research focuses on the artists connected to Ukraine. It attempts to do them epistemic justice by restoring the complexity of the interconnections, contexts, and traditions they grew out of and were inspired by, as well as the ones they reworked, deconstructed, and revolutionized. By referring to decolonial thinkers, it combines and compares how imperial thinking, frames of reference, and coloniality work in symbolic and knowledge production.

**KEY WORDS:** Decolonization, knowledge production, Russian avant-garde.

**O**n the big crimson-painted wall, there are large white letters: “Red Star Over Russia.” And then in smaller ones, “A Revolution in Visual Culture 1905–55.” This is the title of an exhibition held in late 2017 at Tate Modern in London, one of the world’s most important and influential art institutions.

The odd and seemingly arbitrary years in the title can be explained, however. The exhibition was built on the collection of the late British artist and designer David King, who throughout his life relentlessly collected famous and anonymous photographs, posters, paintings, books, and ephemera from the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. He did it through a network of personal contacts in Moscow and Leningrad. His collection of over a quarter million artifacts covers the timespan from the Khodynka tragedy of 1905 to the first years after Stalin’s death.

But even with this information, the periodization is still odd.



Advert for the exhibition “Red Star Over Russia” at Tate Modern in London 2017.

PHOTO: PAUL FARMER CC

Did the revolution in visual culture start in 1905? Did it somehow end in 1955? I can think of several different and often contradictory movements and periods in visual culture as well as multiple centers of revolutionary artistic activities on the territory of the Russian Empire, the Ukrainian People’s Republic, and then the Soviet Union during these years.

But then there is “Russia”... Even though in their statement, the curators mention that “from 1905 to 1955 *Russian* and *Soviet* citizens struggled against the odds to build a new society,” the title covers it all. It stretches over fifty years of the history of the two empires and their different peoples and histories, painting everything and everyone in them red and “Russian.”

It is also worth mentioning that out of the three curators of this show, two are of Russian background, and their positions at the Tate are funded by V-A-C Foundation, which belongs to Leonid Mikhelson, one of the Russian gas tycoons (sanctioned by the

UK and US in April 2022). The V-A-C Foundation also supported an educational program around the exhibition that included exclusively Russian artists and was meant to be a liaison between this exhibition and another that opened at the Tate Modern at the same time. “Not Everyone Will Be Taken into the Future” by now late Ilya Kabakov (and his wife Emilia), who, although probably the most famous contemporary Soviet Russian artist, was born in Dnipropetrovsk, in Soviet Ukraine. Kabakov’s exhibition was supported by Novatek, the gas company that belongs to Mikhelson, and by Roman Abramovich, yet another Russian oligarch known for his passion for art, sanctioned in March 2022.

**ARE THESE QUESTIONS** even worth asking? After all, museums have to sell tickets, so some good marketing and catchy words and colors to increase sales shouldn’t hurt. But on the other hand, museums and cultural institutions, in general, are knowledge-producing centers. The latest definition of the museum, given by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), states that a museum, among other things, is an institution in the service of society that operates ethically, provides research, and offers varied experiences for education, reflection, and knowledge sharing.<sup>1</sup> This definition was altered in August 2022 after long debates and the substantial efforts and determination of the Ukrainian museum community, which, by that time, had seen all possible challenges and dangers that war could bring to these seemingly quiet institutions. The Ukrainian ICOM insisted that the new role of the museum should be not *only* to collect, preserve, research, and exhibit artifacts, but also to serve the community, and be inclusive and responsible to society.

This responsibility includes ethical and inclusive ways of knowledge production that aim at scrutinizing existing norms, approaches, and narratives, and bringing epistemic justice to what was and is unseen, overlooked, neglected, abandoned, or homogenized. Ukrainian historian Oksana Dudko made a similar point in connection to the role of archives in her recent research on “European” and “Slavic” studies.<sup>2</sup> This responsibility also takes more seriously into account the influence that cultural institutions have on public perception and public opinion, which later contribute to political agendas. And definitely to the ethics of funding.

**BETWEEN 2016 AND 2019**, around the time when the exhibition at the Tate Modern opened, there was a big wave of exhibitions in various major museums as well as smaller art centers and galleries all over Europe and North America dedicated to the centennial of the October Revolution. Most of them were focused on “Russian avant-garde,” “Russian art,” and the “Russian revolution,” some on the revolutionary legacy of contemporary “post-

Soviet art” or “the art from the New East.” A significant number of them were co-funded with money from Russian oligarchs – Abramovich, Blavatnik, Potanin, Mikhelson, Fridman – people on the sanctions list after the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022.

At that time, in the mid and late 2010s, the big blowout with the Sackler family had not yet happened – when major museums in the US and Europe, including the Tate and later the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, started to refuse donations and took the family name off their walls. (The Sacklers are an American family that owned a pharmaceutical business directly connected to the opioid epidemic in the US. They donated substantial money to art institutions around the world.) This came in 2019. But the public discussion about what was later called “tainted donors”<sup>3</sup> – donors engaged in unethical, immoral, or criminal activities and using their money for reputation laundering – was already actively underway.

**MOREOVER, IN 2017**, when the art world celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Revolution, Crimea was already illegally annexed by Russia, and the long war in eastern Ukraine was already going on, taking thousands of lives and internally displacing nearly two million people. The money that funded these exhibitions about the Revolution in major European and American art institutions was coming from the same source that was waging and funding this war. However, the reputation being laundered was not

that of the immediate donors, but rather that of the country where they had made their fortune, the country with the authoritarian regime at home and active military actions abroad. At the time of all these exhibitions, Russia was heavily involved in the war in Syria and, among many other atrocities, was complicit in the bombing of Aleppo and the destruction of Palmyra. Regardless of this, the name of Russia was spread over facades in capitals across the world.

Needless to say, they did it out of their own sheer self-interest, as

well as that of their collections, and a fascination with a much mystified and glorified Revolution in far-away Eastern European lands. (Another example: the exhibition that opened in 2019 at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in Grand Palais was called “Red. Art and Utopia In the Land of Soviets.”) Money just came easy, and, paradoxically or not, the interests coincided: attributing the complex, multi-local, often conflicting and contradictory history of the revolution itself, modernist art, and the visual and cultural history of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century simply to Russia. This homogenization flattened, silenced, or even erased other voices and stories – hybrid, heterogenous, connected to the plurality of local contexts and histories. Consciously or not, Western cultural institutions supported and promoted imperi-

## “WESTERN CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS SUPPORTED AND PROMOTED IMPERIALIST VIEWS ON BOTH THE CULTURAL AND THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF WHAT WAS ONCE THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE, THEN THE SOVIET UNION.”



The exhibition "Red. Art and Utopia in the Land of Soviets," at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in Grand Palais, 2019, showed such works of Kazimir Malevich as *Silhouette of a woman*, 1928–1929, borrowed from St Petersburg, The State Russian Museum. Malevich was born in Kyiv by Polish parents and is a represent for Ukrainian avant-garde art, but many art galleries present him as Russian.

alist views on both the cultural and the political history of what was once the Russian Empire, then the Soviet Union, the imperialist views of which transgressed the realm of the symbolic in February 2022 and launched a full-scale war.

**UKRAINIAN-BORN** art historian and curator Konstantin Akinsha believes that Western institutions' use of umbrella terms such as "Russian art" or, in particular, "Russian avant-garde" in reference to revolutionary art of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is market-driven. In his foreword to the catalog of the exhibition "In the Eye of the Storm. Modernism in Ukraine 1900–1930s," which he co-curated at the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid in 2022 <sup>4</sup>, he writes:

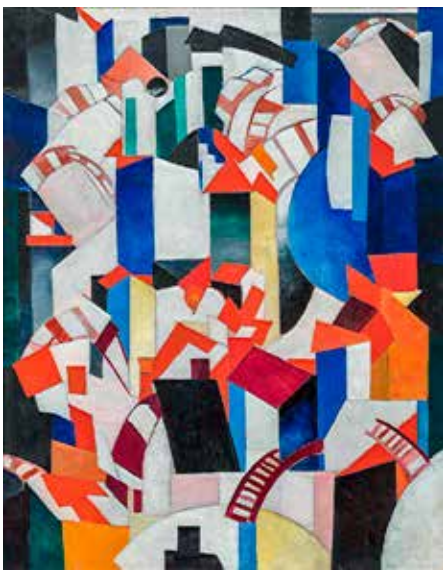
**The fashion for the Great Experiment of Russian Art led to the appropriation of Ukrainian artists, as they conveniently fell under the umbrella term 'Russian avant-garde', adroitly coined by the Western art market. By this market-driven alchemy, artists who had spent all their lives in Ukraine, and whose artistic experimentation was integral to the development of Ukrainian art, unexpectedly became 'Russian'. Western art dealers and museum curators alike followed the old Russian imperialist agenda. Few, if any, attempts were made to clarify the difference between the Russian and Ukrainian culture of the period within the art market.<sup>5</sup>**

Of all the various forms of art, it is the visual arts that are the most market-driven. The logic behind the art market is simple

in its own way: to sell, to make a profit. But the way price formation works in art markets is through reduction: fewer names or artistic phenomena equals easier branding, simpler marketing, and faster and higher sales. The underlying system behind this market-driven agenda, however, is capitalism with its *simplification and commodification of knowledge*. Capitalism, especially in its neoliberal version, is based on extractivism. It is about the power that is being acquired through extracting resources—natural, human, symbolic—in such a way that no one can else access them anymore. When natural resources are being extracted, what's usually left behind are barren, unlivable, poisoned lands, passed on to the locals to struggle with or simply abandon. When cultural or symbolic resources are being extracted, it is a cultural desert that awaits. For the extractivism of the symbolic, in a way, does not differ much from that of natural resources: It doesn't just take away what the power center sees as valuable and tradable—it also erases or severely damages the whole socio-environmental habitat.

**THE ECOSYSTEM OF** the symbolic realm is built on its diversity and heterogeneity, on the symbiotic interconnectedness of stories, contexts, peoples, localities, and on their mutual influences, on their various temporalities, on their inevitable materialities growing into each other. It was in 1973 that Mobutu Sese Seko, then the President of Zaire (which he had just rechristened from the Democratic Republic of the Congo), in his famous speech on the floor of the United Nations, drew a parallel between the extraction of natural resources and the removal of artworks. He stressed not only the fact of the forceful and illegal removal of





*Venice* (1915) by Aleksandra Exter, Museum of Modern Art, Stockholm.



*Three Female Figures* (1910) by Aleksandra Exter, National Art Museum of Ukraine.



Aleksandra Exter, one of the few female figures of the revolutionary movement, becomes a Russian artist and, in this capacity, is present in most of the “revolutionary” exhibitions in 2017.

artifacts but also their quite high market value at that time.

His speech inaugurated an intense public debate on the restitution of pillaged cultural heritage. This fact comes up in the book *Africa's Struggle For Its Art* by the French art historian Benedicte Savoy,<sup>6</sup> who is also known for a 2018 report on the restitution of African cultural heritage written together with Senegalese philosopher, economist, and writer Felwine Sarr.

In their writing, Savoy, and, even more so, Sarr and other thinkers of African descent, highlight one of the key dilemmas of restitution: when the objects were taken by colonial powers, their symbolic value and meaning was lost, the whole system of relations around them, their social and temporal as well as spiritual links were severed. “When returned, would these objects even speak the same language with what used to be their habitat?” Sarr asks in one of his lectures.<sup>7</sup> How to restore or regrow the severed links, forgotten histories, unseen or omitted relations? How to regrow symbolic deserts ecologically, without overpowering them yet again? And is it even possible?

**IN NO WAY** I am trying to equate the problems of the looting and restitution of artifacts from Africa to the decontextualization and marketing of artworks from the former Russian Empire and the USSR (although part of what Russia is doing nowadays in its war in Ukraine is looting to an enormous degree.) What I do intend to do here is to bring together and compare the ways imperial thinking, frames of reference, and coloniality work in the domain of symbolic and knowledge production: How, by and large, different empires think and act in similar ways.

When the art market takes on a few big names or concocts “umbrella phenomena” – which is the case with the “Russian avant-garde” as just one of many examples – it strips them of the complexity of various histories, the polyphony of voices, the innate contradictions that make them so revolutionary. In most cases, it reduces artists and their works to the two imperial centers – Moscow and St. Petersburg/Petrograd/Leningrad – severing all other geocultural connections or running them into obsolescence.

In this manner, for example, Aleksandra Exter, one of the few female figures of the revolutionary movement, becomes a *Russian* artist and, in this capacity, is present in most of the “revolutionary” exhibitions in 2017. Featured at the main exhibition of the 59<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale – one of the key events in the global visual arts scene that has recently avoided nationalizing artists—she is described as only having “studied in *Kiev*,” while her life was mainly spent between Moscow and Paris. She studied and worked at the Kyiv Art Institute – in-between her visits to Moscow, St Petersburg/Petrograd, and Paris, to which she later emigrated and where she lived the second half of her life. However, her Kyiv studio was at the epicenter of Kyivan art life. Her deep involvement in collecting and exhibiting traditional Ukrainian hand-crafted fabrics—embroidery, carpets, towels, covers—and her work with a traditional embroidery workshop in Verbivka, for which she also created new modernistic patterns, demonstrate her particular attention to shapes, patterns, and colors that made her name as one of the key figures of her time,



and as a person who revolutionized theater and costume design.

The same goes for Kazimir Malevich, an ethnic Pole born in Kyiv whose life and work are intrinsically connected to the Belarusian Vitebsk School and to the Kyiv Art Institute and its intense and rich environment where he could work at the end of 1920s, when working in Moscow was no longer possible. And the same also applies to David Burliuk, Oleksander Arkhypenko, Oleksandr Bohomazov, and many more.

**MY POINT HERE** is not to compare Ukrainian and Russian avant-garde, nor is it to put an ethnic stamp on artists who were born in and/or had relations to Ukraine. But it is to do them epistemic justice by restoring the complexity of the interconnections, contexts, and traditions they grew out of and were inspired by, as well as the ones they reworked, deconstructed, and revolutionized. The point is to open a space where a polyphony of interwoven voices and overlapping histories can be heard, and where legacies of these artists and their cultural environments can be truly seen.

Oleh Ilnytzkyi, one of the major researchers on Ukrainian literary futurism, wrote that “[t]he goal is not to place a new “Ukrainian” straitjacket on cultural activities in the empire, but to find a way to do justice to the variety of sources and the myriad of cultural influences that flowed from so many directions.”<sup>8</sup> Ilnytzkyi’s approach is also referred to by the curators of the exhibition “In the Eye of the Storm. Modernism in Ukraine 1900–1930s,” who are doing justice to multiple “-isms” that appeared on the territory of what was then Ukraine by looking at them through the prisms of various local histories: Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Odesa.<sup>9</sup>

“Polyphony dominated the landscape of national modernism, with artists creating their own personal ‘isms’, such as the ‘colorism’ of Viktor Palmov (1888–1929). Others developed their versions of international trends, often quite different from the source of inspiration, a principal example being the Cubo-Futurism of Oleksandr Bohomazov (1880–1930) or the ‘Constructivism’ propagated by Vasyl Yermilov (1894–1968). Many representatives of Ukrainian modernism escape straightforward stylistic classification,” writes Akinsha.<sup>10</sup>

**THE TERMS** “Russian avant-garde” or “Russian art,” in general, overlook all these details and nuances, rendering them non-important, at best secondary to the main homogenizing, all-encompassing narrative of great Russian art and Russian culture. In this sense, the cultural landscape of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian Empire and the Soviet Union looks astonishingly similar when seen from Moscow and London, or New York, or, let’s say, Bern.

The latter city also hosted an impressive exhibition in 2017, in two parts and at two institutions—Kunstmuseum Bern and Zentrum Paul Klee. “The Revolution is Dead. Long Live the Revolution!” was focused on the revolutionary moment of the

avant-garde and its collapse under the ideological pressure of Stalinism, turning into socialist realism. The historical and visual narrative started with the ornithological congress in Bern in 1915 (the first conference of international socialists) and goes through the revolutionary period, Stalin’s purges and repressions, “the great famine,” and all the way up to the fall of the USSR and the revolutionary movements and moments in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, the famine, however “great,” does not have either a name or a place, the purges are uniform, and their context is irrelevant, the revolutions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are happening elsewhere, not in the countries of the former Soviet Union, all the artists are seen exclusively through the lenses of their work and engagement in Moscow and Leningrad, all the “regional” catalog contributors are only Russian. And then there are the catalog covers: one features a Malevich suprematist composition, while the other features a fragment of the large-scale painting by the Russian pop artist duo Aleksander Vinogradov and Vladimir Dubossarsky with the Russian flag.

**THE AFTERMATH OF** this imperial gaze is a pretty barren landscape, stripped of any local and embodied knowledge and experiences. Attempts at doing it justice by reclaiming extracted names and histories, the polyphony of their connections and influences, their tragedies and losses, or simply to speak with an awareness of their own positionality are mostly dismissed as expressions of vengeful nationalisms or non-objective emotional pettiness. This, yet again, brings into question the notion and localization of “objective” knowledge. Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gomez uses the phrase the “hubris of the zero point” to refer to Eurocentrism with such a delocalized, detached, and disembodied position that it produces supposedly universal objective knowledge. As Eurocentric as it is from the global perspective, this position is also deeply imperial, based on the power of grabbing, naming, assimilating, and extracting what is believed to be useful, and rendering the rest obsolete. That is the position where empires from the past and present meet, and from which what they see is (un)surprisingly similar.

Let me reverse the angle for a moment and bring in yet another example from a different time. A few weeks ago, I received a couple of peer reviews on my essay on Ukrainian art during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The essay is to appear soon in an academic volume about “images and objects in the Russo-Ukraine war,” published in Berlin. The reviewers’ main suggestion was not to assume that “Western audiences” are familiar with the subject, thus highlighting the need for additional contextualization of the artists I write about within the Ukrainian and global art scene.

I must admit, these reviews left me puzzled for a while. What level of familiarity with art in Ukraine is to be expected from

## **“THE AFTERMATH OF THIS IMPERIAL GAZE IS A PRETTY BARREN LANDSCAPE, STRIPPED OF ANY LOCAL AND EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCES.”**

Western audiences, even when these audiences are presumably interested in the analysis of the use of images in the current war? What amount of context is sufficient to place Ukrainian artists and their practices on a mental map of the Western reader, supposedly interested in visual arts? How should one squeeze the right amount of context, and with which necessary references to the political and cultural history of Ukraine—considering that history is seminal to Ukrainian art—without turning an essay into a book?

**HOW SHOULD ONE** fill in the gaps in the history of art in Ukraine, when, throughout decades, it has been predominantly seen under various other umbrella terms, be it “Russian,” “Soviet,” or “Post-Soviet”? How should one recreate, even if schematically, all the complex and rhizomatic connections that these umbrellas overshadowed and silenced?

I came to think of the book published in 2018, when the war in Eastern Ukraine was already raging, by the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), one of the most important art institutions in the world. *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology* is a volume of over 400 pages, and is part of their Primary Documents series. The book is the result of research by an editorial team that took over eight years and included trips and interviews with arts professionals in 16 cities of 11 countries of the region. These trips are visualized as maps in the annexes of the book, where one can observe a vast whiteness stretching between Berlin, Warsaw, Vilnius, and Moscow.

Neither Kyiv, nor Odesa, Lviv, or Kharkiv are there.<sup>11</sup>

In 2019, the year following this publication, Open Group, a Ukrainian collective of artists and curators that created a project for the Ukrainian Pavilion at the Venice Biennial, wrote in their curatorial statement referring to this book: “A careful reader flipping through the end pages of this book would land on maps of the cities that the members of the research team and curators from the institution visited. Amidst all the notable capitals of central-eastern European countries (and not just capitals), a glaringly blank space appears in the place of Ukraine.” Open Group called this spread of whiteness over this part of eastern Europe a “thick blanket of snow.”<sup>12</sup>

**THE EDITORS OF** the MoMA anthology wisely avoided the umbrella of “post-Soviet” or in this case “post-socialist” but still used an overarching notion of “post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe”. Since the Cold War ended and the blocs and unions fell apart, researchers, as well as politicians, have been having nothing but trouble trying to coin a universal term that would somehow—yet again—embrace it all, package these lands, and peoples, and their histories, and aspirations into a more or less easily comprehensible and relatable concept. While “post-1989 Central and

Eastern Europe” might be more balanced and neutral than other “posts,” it still pins all the possible heterogeneous phenomena in this realm and their various temporal and spatial links and connections to the “fall of the wall” or the “end of history” like a butterfly in a collection of a meticulous entomologist. More than thirty years later, “post-Soviet” or “post-1989” still traps the multiple subjects and their various positionalities and references within the time/space capsule of collapsed political formations, making their histories, among other things, linear and uniform as if their past before 1989/1991 holds more power over their futures than everything that has happened after that moment.

**IN QUITE AN EXPECTED** twist of capitalistic imperial irony, more than ten years ago, the boring and unsexy notion of these “posts” was rebranded as the new cool notion of the “New East.” It started spinning through the London-based Calvert 22 Foundation that published the eponymous Calvert Journal, an online publication “covering culture and innovation across Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Central Asia.” The announced culture and innovation of the “New East” was hip and

completely depoliticized, globalized with a little tinge of regional exoticizing. Artists and designers from this rather vast and diverse region appeared to be a bit different, but essentially the same.

Ukrainian art researcher Asia Bazdyreva wrote about Calvert in 2018:

And now, just as these processes needed analysis and explanations, Calvert pops up and

**“THE ANNOUNCED CULTURE AND INNOVATION OF THE “NEW EAST” WAS HIP AND COMPLETELY DEPOLITICIZED, GLOBALIZED WITH A LITTLE TINGE OF REGIONAL EXOTICIZING.”**

offers the new universalizing concept of the New East, which commodifies the remnants of the Soviet visuality. Through this concept, it generalizes again the geography and people and constructs for them a single, unified identity. When fragile local contexts need to understand themselves and articulate themselves through media, Calvert undertakes popularizing generalization.<sup>13</sup>

The term was quickly picked up by mainstream and cultural media and was touched upon in the art world through a series of various exhibitions. In 2014, the Guardian opened a special section “The New East Network” focusing on the 15 states of the post-Soviet world. The money and the driving force behind the Calvert 22 Foundation was Russian.

**OVER THE LONG YEARS**, the umbrella terms “Russian,” “Soviet,” “post-Soviet” (or “New East”) conveniently universalized and homogenized the multiple, complex, heterogenic, interconnected voices that temporally and spatially fell within the boundaries of the Russian Empire in its various forms. Regardless of their origin – be it in Russia or in the West – they served the same



The exhibition "In the Eye of the Storm: Modernism in Ukraine, 1900–1930s" presents the ground-breaking art produced in Ukraine in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, showcasing trends that range from figurative art to futurism and constructivism.

Artworks include (clockwise from top left):

*Sharpening the saws* (1927), Oleksandr Bohomazov, National Art Museum of Ukraine; *Dairy maid* (1915), Mykhailo Boichuk, National Art Museum of Ukraine; *Ukrainian peasant woman* (1910–1911), Vladimir Burluk, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid; *Sketch for choreographic movement "Masks" for Bronislava Nijinska's School of Movements, Kyiv* (1919), Vadym Meller, Museum of Theatre, Music and Cinema Arts of Ukraine; *Adam and Eve* (1912), Wladimir Baranoff-Rossiné, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid; *The 1<sup>st</sup> of May* (1929) Viktor Palmov, National Art Museum of Ukraine.





purpose of knowledge commodification and symbolic extractivism, where cultural as well as academic institutions took an active and important part as the center of knowledge production. Empires may change, and the economic and epistemic grip they have over lands and peoples might alter, but, by and large, their goals and methods are quite similar.

What various cultural institutions of the so-called Global North were doing over the long years was de facto supporting and perpetuating the neo-imperial appetites and frenzies of Russia, both for profit and for pleasure. Among other things, they legitimized and amplified homogenizing patterns of knowledge production that erased local embodied interconnected voices and agencies, and their complex interrelations. And they often did it with significant support from tainted Russian money.

**DECOLONIZING CULTURAL** institutions and academia is long overdue, as is doing epistemic justice to all the deserted cultural landscapes and their symbolic ecosystems. And even though the core of the ideas of “coloniality” and “decoloniality” are about shifting attention from the materiality of liberatory political struggles to the more “soft spheres such as knowledge production and aesthetics,” as Madina Tlostanova, among others, insistently writes,<sup>14</sup> these two are inseparably entangled and connected. Reductive and repressive mechanisms of imperial knowledge production have irrefutably material consequences. The war in Ukraine is one example among these that should never have happened.

Algerian-French decolonial thinker Seloua Luste Boulbina, in her accounts of decolonizing Africa, writes that decolonizing interlinked imaginary spaces starts only after the act of political decolonization when emancipatory thinking becomes the thinking of society itself. She suggests thinking of a shared space between the diversity of various experiences of domination and struggle across the world, a space where decolonizing knowledge can be created in solidarity. The war in Ukraine and this present discussion, among many others, can and should be a step into such a space.

Embodied, localized, caring knowledges that embrace the complexity, hybridity, and simultaneity of experiences is what we need to be striving for. ✖

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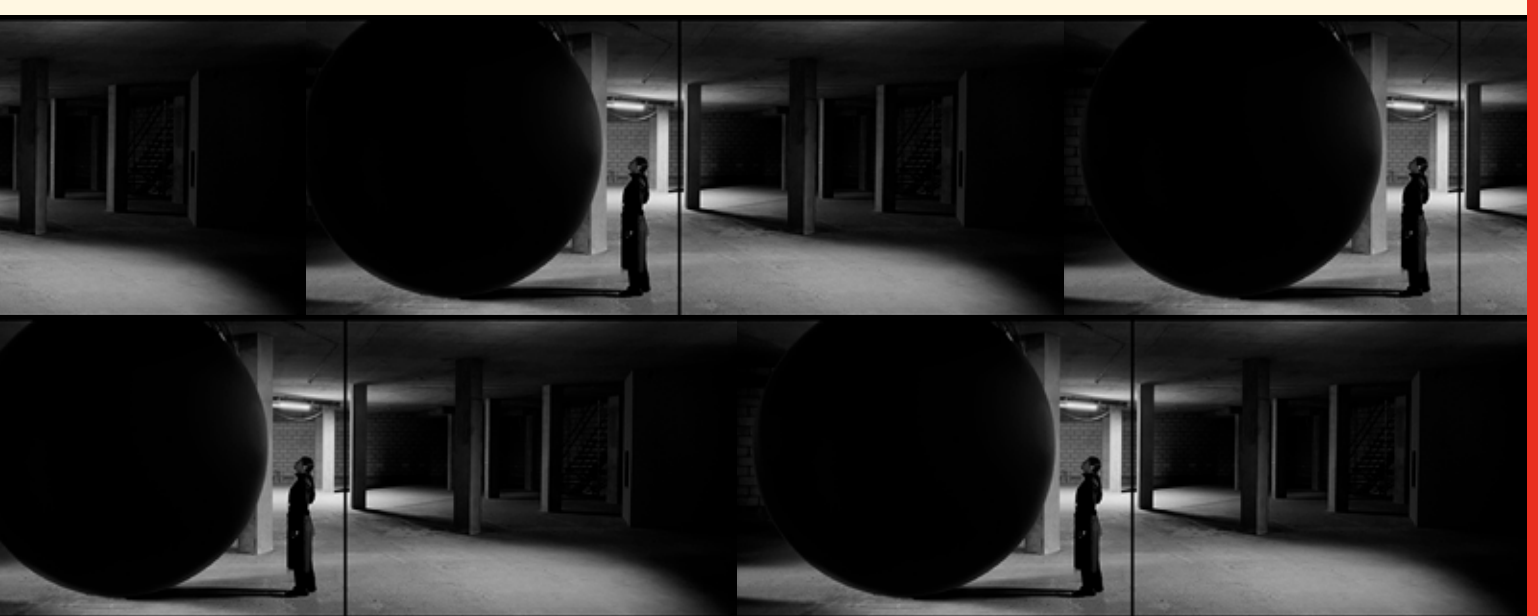


Image from the video *In Vitro* by Larissa Sansour.

# THE DEADLOCKS OF MEMORY AND THE (NO LONGER) POST-SOVIET COLONIALITY,

by **Madina  
Tlostanova**

# OR CAN MEMORY BE DECOLONIZED?

## abstract

The article reflects if it is possible to decolonize memory in the former Soviet republics that have been gradually moving centrifugally towards different political allegiances. It is needed to go beyond the postcolonial/post-Soviet national optic and consider inter-imperial (Doyle) and non-nation-state post-imperial (Burbank and Cooper) models and other unrealized alternatives. The article focuses on coloniality of memory critically engaging with various concepts including “dismembering” (Thiong’o), “mankurtism” (Aitmatov), “Myalism” (Brodber), “multidirectional memory” (Rothberg), “double critique” (Khatibi), “species memory” (Kaiser and Thiele), and the “third way” (Wynter). It sets the goal of tracing possible paths for rethinking of what it means to remember in a human way and what it takes to engender a global mnemonic transversal network of solidarity for refuturing.

**KEYWORDS:** coloniality of memory, the no longer post-Soviet, victimhood narratives rivalry, multiple critique, relationality.

“No one bears witness for the witness.”

*Paul Celan*

**T**he (no longer) post-soviet in the title of this article is my desperate attempt to overcome the still prevailing urge to lump all the former Soviet countries together in some distant past, ignoring the dynamics of their present and future by marking them with the empty prefix “post-”. This prompts us to reflect once again on the pitfalls of the euromodern conception of time and the uneasy place it reserves for those who are left behind. For the last several decades major contemporary Western theorists of temporality have insisted on the cancellation of the future. This is how Bifo Berardi formulated the problem in his book of the same name.<sup>1</sup> Mark Fisher offered a metaphor of the horrible corpse of the past that we cannot leave behind.<sup>2</sup> Derrida<sup>3</sup> suggested the idea of hauntology that keeps human societies bound to previous unfinished

scenarios. Lisa Baraitser<sup>4</sup> addressed current temporality as “ending time” – a time that came to a halt and stopped becoming. Aleyda Assmann came up with the idea of “interrupted” time<sup>5</sup> as a form of betrayal of modernity’s initial impulse of linking time with perpetual and accelerating movement understood as progress and development, of reaching a social utopia, which replaced religious eschatology. Indeed, falling out of progressivist teleology leaves people confused and unsettled.

However, these typically decontextualized Euromodern reflections acquire a special disturbing meaning in the case of the former Soviet republics who in the early 1990s experienced a painful exclusion from the course of the petrified global history and found themselves in an impasse from which they emerged with divergent allegiances, dreams, and ideas of the past and the future. The early post-Soviet congealed time was a result of the sudden cancellation of the previous progressivist narrative. The latter stemmed from Euromodernity yet was always positioned as different and opposite to and rejected by its capitalist rival. The lost continuity of the Soviet myth, even in its negative form, intensified the sensibility of the void<sup>6</sup> and led to ossification of the early post-Soviet cultures into incoherent collages of contradictory ideological remnants. The next three decades gradually took the former Soviet countries away from this impasse and led them in different directions and towards old and new loyalties and differently framed problems of national identity, ideology, and contemporaneity facing the challenge of inserting themselves back into the larger historical time and global order. The latter becomes increasingly problematic in the current disjointed time, a temporality pregnant with catastrophe which has not happened yet, but whose scale and consequences are already known and, therefore, belong to the past<sup>7</sup>. This temporal aberration cancels the possibility of a simple rejection of one model of modernity in favor of the other that is deemed more correct or authentic. Therefore, the post-Soviet impasse results not in a happy ending of fully joining Euromodernity on equal terms but in many cases, in a nervous condition of a semi-peripheral anxiety that does not have a choice but to juggle several different victimhood narratives and practice its trickster’s skills in order to have any future.

**MOREOVER, THREE** and a half decades that have passed since the collapse of the state-socialist system, have been filled with many violent conflicts and several wars, hope and disillusionment, poverty and inequality, centrifugal efforts to separate and go their own ways, and a bitter realization of the inescapable new or old/new dependencies. The process of emancipation from the Soviet commemoration regimes and building alternative, mostly national ones, has been continuously marked by exhausting monument wars, archival fever, and weaponization of archeology.<sup>8</sup> This newest history hardly allows to continue

putting the former Soviet republics together under the “post-Soviet” umbrella misnomer. It dismisses the experience of the last thirty years as a result of which multiple and diverse groups who had a misfortune of being born on the territory that was claimed by the Russian/Soviet empire as its own and therefore did not have a choice to not be part of it, have been finally able to choose alternative allegiances and, in some cases, restore their forgotten histories and memories (linked with other empires, with national histories or alternative political and cultural coalitions). Can we insist today that the memory of Soviet repressions including its colonialist versions is a sufficient condition for uniting all former Soviet colonies into a community, particularly that they have radically different trajectories towards their current conditions and their ideas/ideals of the future are extremely divergent as well? Can a Soviet version of coloniality be a good enough reason to link Ukraine and Kazakhstan, Chechnya and Estonia? Yes and no.

## What do we share if anything?

The post-Soviet coloniality is not a homogenous, unanimously shared belief or a human condition but a specific, complex, heterogeneous form of modernity control grounded in the Russian and later Soviet imperial matrix and its current distorted resurrections. Its major characteristic is mimicking secondariness, a chronic catching-up mode, a learned inferiority that periodically explodes into rebellion against the demonized West<sup>9</sup>. A constant adjustment of the imperial tactics (including memory censor-

ship) to the incredible variety of peoples and cultures that the empire attempted to swallow in its eternal rivalry with other modern empires had led to diverse and contradictory policies and hence, to different experiences and memories of the Russian and Soviet coloniality by the colonized nations. Having a complete arsenal of Western colonialist tools at hand, the Russian empire and later the USSR adapted them to their own changing needs in different regions and local historical contexts which were always inevitably reacting to the global situation.

Thus in the case of the North Caucasus the local population was depicted by imperial propaganda as uncivilizable savages and a losing race that must leave the historical stage to give its territories to Russians, while in the case of Ukraine the tactic was more of a forced affinity and “Russification”<sup>10</sup> as a specific violent official imperial nationalist assimilatory tactic of eliminating memory, identity, language, dignity, and turning Ukrainians into a special sort of inferior Russians with a cultivated gratitude for being allowed to assimilate. In several former Soviet colonies, the memory of preceding unions, alliances, and dependencies as well as periods of national sovereignty overweighs any Soviet/Russian allegiances and materializes in attempts to rejoin with these former allies or patrons at least in revamping the glorious memories of the past. In other cases, such opportunities were

**“THE EARLY POST-SOVIET CONGEALED TIME WAS A RESULT OF THE SUDDEN CANCELLATION OF THE PREVIOUS PROGRESSIVIST NARRATIVE.”**



The Museum of Victims of Political Repression, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

limited or severed by the empire early on and national independence remained solely a matter of political mythmaking. Therefore, the trajectories of the post-Soviet decoloniality also differ a lot which is reflected in the collective memory construction, preservation, manipulation, and resurrection. The Janus-faced Russian/Soviet coloniality<sup>11</sup> remains the common denominator of these diverse experiences and trajectories but its concrete forms can be very different which often confuses the current inhabitants of the no longer post-Soviet postcolonial countries. Their newly constructed national interpretative frames and ways of joining global neoliberal modernity inevitably alter their view of the Russian and Soviet imperial/colonial past and neo-imperial present. A community based on difference and variation is at work here. It requires a special optic of discerning possible elements of alternative worlding(s) in the interplay of our differences and the forced affinity of the imperial dictate.

The genealogy of museums focusing on the Soviet/Russian rule in the former Soviet colonies is a good illustration of the variety of the approaches to the collective official take on memory, in most cases promoted by the current national ideologies. These context-specific memory reservoirs demonstrate the impermeability of the post-Socialist and postcolonial narratives in relation to each other and their subsequent merging. Originally most of these institutions were called the museums of Soviet occupation. Examples include Kyiv, Tbilisi, Tallinn, Vilnius, Riga, in whose titles the word “occupation” is key yet none of which address specifically the colonial sides of the Russian/Soviet rule accentuating the full statehood of these countries prior to the Soviet upsurge. Yet occupation as the organizing museum principle remains limited as it erases the imperial/colonial traces of the Soviet techniques in relation to the occupied. Interestingly, it

is the Central Asian museums of the Soviet political repressions that have allowed the use of the colonial and anticolonial rhetoric and included the pre-Soviet history of these regions’ colonization and resistance. For instance, the Museum of Victims of Political Repression in Tashkent starts its narratives in the 1860s when the Czarist empire annexed Central Asia (not yet divided into the modern nation states) or the Kazakhstan museum of ALZHIR – the Akmola camp for the wives of traitors of the motherland which also extends the terrible history of a concrete camp into a much broader discussion of Kazakhs’ suffering from Russian/Soviet colonialism.

**THE LOGIC OF** representation in these museums as well as generally in the modern museum as an institution, fully corresponds to the idea of coloniality of museum and (im)possibility of its decolonization that has been widely discussed in the last two decades.<sup>12</sup> There is no room in this article for a detailed replication of the long-recognized opinion of museum decolonizers, including the author of this text,<sup>13</sup> that museum as a colonial institution, transmitting a specific version of worlding, acts in progressivist logic<sup>14</sup> and follows a rigid vector scheme of historical development from colonial to national. In accordance with this framework the pre-independence past is represented in simplified and exclusively negative terms and often appears in a small set of myths and tropes which are then illustrated in museum expositions.

The dark memory of the Soviet past is then safely musealized whereas the wonderful present and magnificent future are carefully detached from the traumatic history and framed exclusively in the current national paradigm which is highly selective in remembering the past and attempts to overstate those features



that have to do with the presently relevant allegiances and erase those that are disappearing, gone, or deemed shameful and inappropriate. In a broader sense of nation building as such this rationale is insightfully analyzed by Laura Doyle in her recent *Inter-imperiality. Vying Empires, Gendered Labor, and the Literary Arts of Alliance*<sup>5</sup> and convincingly illustrated by Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă in their analysis of Transylvanian identity building.<sup>16</sup> In accordance with this logic, completely or partially freed from the Soviet dictate, the post-Soviet postcolonial nations are immediately drawn into the legitimized competition among the often-weak nation-states for the sake of survival. After it takes an established official form, the former anticolonial nationalism starts to discourage the “non-arrogant perception”<sup>17</sup> of and the genuine interest in the other(s) as it continues playing the modern/colonial game grounded in agonistics and fixed on essences while ignoring relations and hence, ultimately reproduces the logic of coloniality.

## Inter-imperiality and postimperial non-nation-state alternatives

A convincing way to interpret this uneasy entanglement is the above mentioned Laura Doyle’s idea of inter-imperiality which claims that “most nations, including European nations, have emerged in relation to past and contemporaneous empires (although Europeans have typically traced their origins to one empire and erased their borrowings from others). To grasp the conflicts of the national or transnational, we [...] need to study the legacies of this multiply inter-imperial history.”<sup>18</sup> Doyle focuses on selectivity in the construction of national identities, histories, and memories based on a careful erasing of certain colonial features and nurturing of others depending on what empires they come from. The same logic is found in the no longer post-Soviet cases when often the main bitter question remains which empire is more prestigious to be conquered by and consequently, which imperial legacy is more important to remember. Doyle accurately captures the hidden complexity of the current collective sensibilities typical for the societies that went through multiple and entangled experiences of politically, socially, existentially, aesthetically, and epistemically repressive regimes grounded in modern/colonial unfreedom and violence. Often these societies, including the no longer post-Soviet ones, tend to come up with complex and at times conflicting responses to the wiped out or severely censored memories in their post-dependence phases where it is hard to cope with the traumatic and uncomfortable but also “desubstantialized past that is never dead and never the same”.<sup>19</sup>

**WITHOUT A CAREFUL** investigation into these historical entanglements that always spill over the national borders, the no longer post-Soviet colonies will not be able to fully grasp the complexity of the present or much less imagine a future. In this respect, the danger of the closed national consciousness is its provincialism, a lack of interest in the memories and lives of other(s), and consequently an absence of efforts to see parallels and intersections, as well as affinities in the ways resistance was performed within the space of Soviet coloniality. The imposed nation-state

normativity immobilizes any transversal solidarity, encourages a top-down relation via the new superpowers and disqualifies any models that could go beyond the opposition of the nation-state and the empire in the collective memory and political imaginary.

The no longer post-Soviet postcolonial nations further complicate the earlier problem of massive postimperial establishment of postcolonial nation-states instead of quickly discarded alternative transversal global projects of political organization beyond the nation-state and the empire such as Eurafrika and Afroasia.<sup>20</sup> By the time of the collapse of the USSR the postcolonial nation state was already fully normalized and appeared to be an attractive model although pitfalls of the post-Soviet post/neocolonial nation building became obvious quite soon. Importantly it was Eurasia as the third postimperial non-nation state model that was quickly revamped in the post-Soviet space in its most neo-imperial top-down toxic version supported by the current Russian ideologues as a justification for their invasive appetites and a source of dangerous geopolitical imaginaries.

Perhaps for the no longer post-Soviet nations the singular focus on the troubled pasts should give way to a more stereoscopic dialogue with full awareness of the previous traumas but not paralyzed by them. It is impossible to provide a recipe for such a dialogue because it simply does not exist. It needs to be created every time anew and relationally. However, a prerequisite for such a dialogue is a refusal to focus exclusively on the past or on going back to some idealized past and a willingness and readiness to collectively politically imagine a future<sup>21</sup>. This task is inevitable if we wish to be able to see what is still relevant, what has not disappeared in the folds of the past, and what can birth a future. Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind reflect on this difficult step, divergent from common standpoint reasonings but honest to life that cannot be caught up in the tenets of memory, in their artistic speculative fiction project *In Vitro*<sup>22</sup> based on intergenerational debate on the value of memory and the dilemma of the stern loyalty to the past and the need to live on. The younger character in the film who does not have direct personal memories of the disaster, claims that at some point one needs to let the past go to be able to start the dialogue from scratch and see what will not disappear in the present, what will remain important. Under all the differences and increasingly divergent paths are the no longer post-Soviet countries still interested in finding out if there is something important in their shared imperial/colonial pasts that matters for the present beyond shallow nostalgia or indignant damnation? Particularly that this present is a grim moment of the major redivision of the world and it is already clear that on the next turn of redistribution of power and selection of allegiances, the former Soviet republics/colonies are likely to completely erase from their collective memories the uneasy details of the former Russian/Soviet loyalties and dependencies.

## Is it possible to truly decolonize memory?

In the current reactionary climate of extreme right, nationalist and populist sensibilities on the rise, when calls for decolonization are often hijacked and trivialized by a wide spectrum of ide-

ologies with hidden or open imperial agendas as well as status quo liberal stances, it is important to realize that memory cannot be decolonized once and for all. Decolonizing one's personal memories is a private self-reflexive process, for personal memory is emotional, affective, capricious, and ultimately untrustworthy: we remember not what happened but how we felt about what we think happened, in a specific context. Even testimonies of the devastating massive historical crimes and tragedies such as genocides, the Holocaust, ethnic cleansings, forced deportations, are never simply factual. As Jacques Derrida famously pointed out, bearing witness has both a political and a poetic dimension, which makes it unreliable and prone to manipulation. When the actual time is "kneaded into the dough of memory"<sup>23</sup> it is often unrecognizably transformed.

**COLLECTIVE MEMORIES** are difficult to decolonize because they are highly politicized and contested instruments of ideological control on many levels. Imperial and postimperial, national, continental, civilizational and other narratives of greatness and legitimation immediately switch on their repressive and defamatory selecting mechanisms (often under the fake decolonizing umbrella) at the very emergence of decolonial processes of collective memory (re)making. Ariella Azoulay's concept of "potential history"<sup>24</sup> may be useful here as it asks us to unlearn imperial modes of thinking, the archive, the museum, the document, and ultimately, history itself. To unlearn imperialism, Azoulay suggests that we reject a temporality that consigns violence to the distant past and instead attend to its still-present potentialities. In other words, it is about seeing the living traces of the toxic past in the present. But should not it also be about an optic of scaling which allows seeing that the momentary political goals serving particular narratives today, tend to change their meaning at medium and long distance, and then the ultimate final decolonization is impossible and can even turn into an exclusionary repressive discourse at the next historical turn.

The collective traumatic experience intersecting the Soviet and colonial dictate often remains unspoken whereas the reliable witnesses, as in Celan's poem "Ashglory" quoted in the epigraph,<sup>25</sup> are not those who survived to tell the story but rather those who perished, often leaving descendants who are paralyzed with fear, drowned in silence and invisibility, marked by epigenetic traumatic memory which is carried by/in human bodies even when there are no witnesses left.

## **A critique of coloniality of memory**

Rather than aiming at the impossible complete decolonization one can turn instead to a comprehensive critique of coloniality of memory – an effective and violent instrument of euromodernity as a repressive onto-epistemic system that controls people through imposing specifically constructed and legitimized memory models and excluding all other ways to remember.

Coloniality of memory leads to extreme forms of brainwashing and biopolitical control disciplining and suppressing the most personal, affective, and corporeal forms of remembering.

Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o envisioned coloniality of memory through metaphors of dis-membering and re-membering which allow to feel the material/corporeal element in memory subjected to Euromodern memory violence:

**"They are enactments of the central character of colonial practice in general and of Europe's contact with Africa in particular since the beginnings of capitalist modernity and bourgeois ascendancy. This contact is characterized by dismemberment. An act of absolute social engineering, the continent's dismemberment was simultaneously the foundation, fuel, and consequence of Europe's capitalist modernity" [...]'An even farther-reaching dismemberment: that of the colonial subject's memory from his individual and collective body. The head that carries memory is cut off from the body and then either stored in the British Museum or buried upside down' [...]'Of course, colonialists did not literally cut off the heads of the colonized or physically bury them alive. Rather, they dismembered the colonized from memory, turning their heads upside down and burying all the memories they carried."**<sup>26</sup>

This "turning the heads upside down", emptying them of previous notions and memories and filling up with different ideas,

narratives, and commemorating rituals, assigning the people with dismembered memories a predetermined subordinate and silently obedient place, is what coloniality of memory has been doing for centuries. The metaphor of dismembering captures the disorientation of the divorced bodies and souls, minds and feelings, the brokenness apart, which does not allow one to be fully aware of one's self in its complex entanglements

with the world. This artificially enforced alienation, severance, fragmentation and dismemberment manufactures incomplete people who are forced to living someone else's mind because their own is delegitimized and discarded.

The process of healing the colonial wound, in Anzaldúan terms,<sup>27</sup> does not have an ultimate resolution. Decolonization of memory is an open-ended process with no concrete attainable results. It requires from the people who remember, to be multiply critical, self-critical, honest, unafraid of uneasy discoveries and contradictions, welcoming impurity<sup>28</sup> and pluriversality and learning to live with and encompass complexity without trying to simplify it or fit into habitual binary schemes.

## **No Myalists for Mankurts?**

But does not this dismembering metaphor as a memory control colonial devise sound very familiar to the people originating

**"WHEN THE ACTUAL TIME IS 'KNEADED INTO THE DOUGH OF MEMORY' IT IS OFTEN UNRECOGNIZABLY TRANSFORMED."**

from the post-Soviet space? Does it not resemble the once famous novel by Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*?<sup>29</sup> The most disturbing and memorable metaphor in the book is the story of Mankurt. When Aitmatov constructed this word using the existing linguistic elements and a passing mention in the epic *Manas* of a terrible torture resulting in destroying the enemy's memory, the concept immediately caught on. It perfectly reflected the late Soviet atmosphere of ethnic renaissances and another round of awakening of the "national consciousness" among the non-Russian peoples of the Soviet Union. Metaphorically, the story of Mankurt confronted a dangerous colonial distortion that due to censorship could not be directly addressed by sociology, psychology or historiography of the time. The Mankurt syndrome was what many people felt but were afraid to mention or had no words to describe it. Ultimately the story was an unintentional decolonial intervention accurately detecting the signs of coloniality of memory.

**IT IS SYMPTOMATIC** that in the novel there is no way out from Mankurtism. It is irreversible. And even motherly love is unable to restore memory to her son who turned into a Mankurt. Here lies an important difference of Aitmatov's model from many well-known Anglophone and Francophone postcolonial novels, in which a major part of the narrative is about the hard work of reinstating the distorted and destroyed memories, stolen souls, histories, relations with ancestors, human dignity, and ability to independent thinking. Thus, Jamaican writer Erna Brodber in her novel *Myal*<sup>30</sup> famously uses Myalism as a specific liberation exorcist magic that brings the protagonist back to interrupted relations with ancestors, memories, and the healing power of community and roots. The dominant creative impulse of Myalism is the overthrow of imposed idols and the careful restoration of the expelled and trampled "spirits" of one's rejected past. Aitmatov's novel is also about this task, yet he seems to realize that it is impossible to expel the evil spirits of oblivion and submission, which the Soviet coloniality allowed to sprout too deeply into the fabric of Mankurts' memory. Currently Kyrgyz platform *Esimde* (Remember)<sup>31</sup> attempts to revamp the image of Mankurt through introducing the metaphor of "Mankurt's dreams". It seems to be one more attempt to make the process of Mankurtization reversible and by means of dreams allow the Mankurts to have a loophole into the life that they forgot about due to coloniality of memory.

## Is "multidirectional" memory enough?

If memory cannot be decolonized once and for all then we are likely to work for a long time on refining the ways to complexify, nuance, deconstruct, and contextualize multiple memories. Michale Rothberg's idea of multidirectional memory<sup>32</sup> as a way of putting together the Holocaust and the anticolonial memories is a good way to describe what needs to be done. Multidirectional memory points to a potential coalitional ability to see different histories and positions sharing the same historical space. Importantly, it also claims that major historical narratives and the prevailing interpretations do not necessarily have to displace

one another or compete with one another. The heterogeneous pluriversal past cannot be represented in a linear and clean simplicity of the imperial or national history book effectively sealing the past as something over and done with, yet also should not reproduce the romanticized versions of the imagined originary stories to which one can supposedly return, miraculously overcoming the burdens of coloniality.

This multidirectional, nuanced, and complex perception of memory does not fit into the current simplified populist trends in historical revisionism, both national and neo-imperial, and demands to go beyond a mere giving voice to the forgotten and erased historical narratives and traumas and mechanically adding them to the undisturbed larger histories of greatness. Memory work with the darker and forgotten imperial/colonial/Soviet pasts, although important in itself, should lead to a change in the present way of thinking and agency, to revamping or establishing critical thought and doubt instead of self-confidence and complacency. Memory collections and archives, even the most inclusive ones, are useless if they do not help us radically rethink the very principles of making sense of the world, including the way we remember.

A convergence of seemingly isolated narratives needs to take place in the case of anti/post-Soviet and anti/post-colonial drives that are still often being interpreted separately and in a competitive way. In the case of East European thinkers and artists such a convergence has already taken place<sup>33</sup>, but for the post-Soviet space at large it is still a new and uneasy realization and not many commentators are able to correlate Euromodernity/coloniality and its specific Russian, Soviet and post-Soviet forms which clash with global coloniality yet paradoxically continue to be derivative from it. Therefore, collective memory selection process inevitably becomes complex and cannot be grounded in a binary choice or singularly in accordance with the newly selected frameworks that tend to erase and simplify the actual links and multifaceted historical connections.

## Double critique revisited in the context of "competitive victimhoods"

The intricate interplay of conflicting memory regimes in the no longer Soviet ex-colonies requires a decolonial double or multiple critique in the interpretation of historical and current narratives, which has been gradually shrinking everywhere in the recent decades. The idea of "double critique" was formulated by Moroccan thinker and writer Abdelkebir Khatibi<sup>34</sup> and targeted both Eurocentric or Orientalist discourses and ethnocentric local narratives. Double critique refuses to see just one enemy – the homogenized West, and idealize anyone who is criticizing this imagined West including petty dictators and autocratic regimes. This approach is equally attentive to local sources and circumstances of discrimination and inequality, which need to be scrutinized in relation to the larger forces of oppression. The same logic is true in reverse. Double critique prevents us from idealizing Euromodernity and extrapolating all its darker irrational sides to the opponents of the West. Thus, this approach attempts to question binaries and strives to maintain multiplicity,



complexity, and impure entanglements, each of which remains a subject of critique.

**DOUBLE CRITIQUE** approach does not divide humanity into clear-cut victims and perpetrators following a dynamic intersectional approach instead according to which, in Patricia Hill Collins's words, "a matrix of domination contains few pure victims or oppressors".<sup>35</sup> In critical memory studies Michael Rothberg formulated a similar idea of "implicated subjects"<sup>36</sup> who are neither victims nor oppressors but rather not always voluntary participants in social orders that generate the notorious binary divisions. In the no longer post-Soviet histories and collective memories this approach entails a critical conceptualizing of at least two but in fact many more forms and levels of imperial control, such as the global Euromodernity as a set of onto-epistemic but also social, economic and political frames, which gets entangled with specific, often contradictory and insecure local imperial histories of the less successful modern empires and their internal and external colonial others, and importantly, their current involvement into different forms of nationalism and neo-colonial regimes and essentialized identities<sup>37</sup>.

Taking this critique further, Łukasz Bukowiecki, Joanna Wawrzyniak and Magdalena Wróblewska in their analysis of recent artistic urban memory activism in Poland coined the terms "duality" or "dual decolonial option" to claim that artists "not only directly address the legacies of foreign dependencies, but in addition, and with an eye on the future, seek to destabilize nation-oriented essentialist interpretations of those dependencies[...]working through the national myths that have emerged in the aftermath of the period of foreign dependencies".<sup>38</sup> In the Polish case the double critique is targeted at both the historical trajectories and current traces of various foreign influences and the often-contested developments of the post-dependence national(ist) imaginaries that prefer a one-sided victimhood stance.

"**COMPETITIVE VICTIMHOOD**"<sup>39</sup> is not a uniquely East European phenomenon as Jie-Huyn Lim argues in his account of global transnational trend of victimhood nationalism. Lim points out the dynamics of under- and over-contextualization in national victimhood constructions leading to politically biased results:

**If the over-contextualization inherent in historical contextualism gives rise to historical conformism of whatever happened in history, the de-contextualization results in a form of a-historical justification of the historical aftermath. Indeed, the spectres of de-contextualization and over-contextualization hovering over the victimhood controversy make historical reconciliation vulnerable to politicization.**<sup>40</sup>

Therefore, it is important to open victimhood nationalisms to a rigorous multilayered critique to avoid the absolutization of one enemy and blindness in relation to other factors and levels of coloniality. Such an approach can at least potentially trigger transversal dialogues among the no longer post-Soviet subjects many of which continue to experience current neo-imperial Russian advances, as well as navigate the intricacies and limitations of the so-called European choice, while others (and particularly Central Asian countries) face the reality of yet another reproduction of their racialization and orientalization both by Russians but also by the West and sadly at times, by the former fellow sufferers from the Soviet regime who have made a European choice. The double critique injection is therefore much needed in the case of the no longer post-Soviet memory regimes.

## **Rethinking the human: from group memory to "species memory"?**

There is one more take on memory that begs to be considered if we want to follow the open-ended decolonial re-membering path to the end. It is "species memory" as opposed to group specific memory, as formulated by Birgit Kaiser and Kathrin

Thiele in their insightful reading of Sylvia Wynter's essay "1492. A New World View".<sup>41</sup> One of the major decolonial interventions which retains its value despite some recent disappointing political utterances of the leading decolonial scholars<sup>42</sup>, is thoroughly questioning the binary structure of modern/colonial thinking that divides the world into us and them, nature and culture, human and animal, men and women, modernity and tradition, subject and object, victim and perpetrator, the colonizer and the colonized. Once we do more than lip

service to this decolonial move we cannot continue accepting the milder revisions of memory studies such as including more forgotten and erased voices and testimonies, taking into account the multi-directionality of history and memory or even turning the tables in historical reinterpretations of victims and perpetrators which would still be based on the same violent logic of othering and dehumanization. The problem of such revisions is that they are deeply grounded in coloniality of thinking and therefore cannot come up with anything but mere accumulation of memories and archival materials or constructing narratives of reconciliation including synthesizing of conflicting models of memory, as a form of dialectical sublation. These acts are not sufficiently decolonial as they merely adorn the existing structure with diversity, complexity, and inclusivity, yet do not "change the terms of the conversation".<sup>43</sup> They do not attempt to destabilize the main modern/colonial principles of relating to the world, to other people and other species. The endless victimhood rivalry so typical in current memory battles

**"DOUBLE CRITIQUE PREVENTS US FROM IDEALIZING EUROMODERNITY AND EXTRAPOLATING ALL ITS DARKER IRRATIONAL SIDES TO THE OPPONENTS OF THE WEST."**



Images from Aslan Goisum's film *Keichyueha*, 2017, HD video, color, sound, 26 minutes.

is only a logical result of such unchallenged modern/colonial ethico-onto-epistemic regime.

Therefore, it is important to revisit Sylvia Wynter's reflections on possible ways out of the normalized modern/colonial understanding of what it means to be human. Rather than arguing for inclusion she calls for discarding this principle and coming up with new and multiple stories of origin(s) that would not be grounded in coloniality and therefore, would not exclude anyone or anything to begin with. Wynter's "third way"<sup>44</sup> is an effort to go beyond the existing binaries by starting with a deeper transformation of our very conception of humanness. She avoids offering a single correct understanding of what it means to be human, for there should be many different and relationally entangled narratives of humanness (for Wynter human being is famously first and foremost a story-telling animal – Homo Narrans) which can emerge only as a result of a profound reconceptualizing of ourselves in the world, in history and consequently, in memory.

This enormous task is more relevant now than ever when the world is in a futureless dead-end thanks to the dominant narratives of humanness that Wynter so effectively denounces in her work. Coming up with many alternative pluriversal stories of what it means to be human could attempt to offer various paths towards refuturing. But for that we need to combine the forces of memory and political imagination. Kaiser and Thiele formulate it as a temporal paradox: "The future will first have to be remembered, imagined".<sup>45</sup> One could add that the future, in dialogue with the complexity and plurality of the living past, would have to be grounded in political responsibility but also in a political form of love for often a distant and opaque other,<sup>46</sup> and in restoring dignity to living beings, not only human, and their right to remember their past, decide their present, and imagine their future.

### Decolonial artistic memory work

Such unconventional tasks are best handled not by academia or politics, but by potentially participatory artistic forms of inquiry and agency, often intuitively working out relational worlding principles grounded in complex memories and plural pasts. Artistic memory work should not be mistaken for mere illustration of memory issues or much less a promotion of one correct

way to remember. Rather it acts as a specific mode of knowledge production and multiplication of memory paths and traces. As Wilson Harris reflected in relation to Caribbean fiction and art, philosophy of history remained there "buried in the art of imagination".<sup>47</sup> The reasons for this primacy of the art of imagination in decolonizing memory lies not only in the imperial censorship that is harder to maintain in art than in other spheres, but also in the free mode

**"INDEED,  
IMAGINATION  
WORKS WHERE  
HISTORIOGRAPHY  
CANNOT, AND ART  
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ARCHIVES FAIL US."**

of artistic expression which is less subject to logocentric rational logic of modernity and its positivist verificationist cognitive criteria. Indeed, imagination works where historiography cannot, and art takes over where archives fail us.

Artists come up with powerful metaphors of memory that speak directly to the audience's affects, their reminiscences of smell and taste, sound and image, their spatial and corporeal intergenerational links. Andrii and Lia Dostlievs' poignant series "I still feel sorry when I throw away food – Grandma used to tell me stories about the Holodomor"<sup>48</sup> that links the memory of the hushed up genocidal catastrophe to everyday life of contemporary people where there are no special places of commemoration for the famine victims, and Saule Suleimenova's plastic bag collages<sup>49</sup> recapturing the key moment of national history and trauma, artworks, that are as stubbornly resilient as memory itself, are materialized indications of the same painful yet healing mnemonic sensibility.



PHOTO: DIOCESAN ARCHIVE OF VIENNA  
IDIOCESANARCHIV WIEN/BA INNITZER

"March 18th, 2018 – breakfast. Couscous and fried egg leftovers", "April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018. A handful of old raisins". Images from Lia Dostlieva and Andrii Dostliv's artistic project "I still feel sorry when I throw away food — Grandma used to tell me stories about the Holodomor".

Alexander Wienerberger. *Hungry girl from Kharkiv*, 1933.

One of the most haunting and disturbing artistic renderings of the no longer post-Soviet/postcolonial memory and the ultimate failure to re-member or return to one's culture that is no longer there or perhaps never was to begin with, as in Afro-pessimist stance, comes through many of Aslan Goisum's works but especially in his film *Keicheyuhea*.<sup>50</sup> Here the spatial memory and the recognition of once familiar humanized landscape, now completely reclaimed by nature, is the only thing left for the protagonist – the artist's own grandmother who is taken for the first time in over seventy years after the deportation to the place where her village used to be, to search in vain for any remaining signs of her familial memory and history. The audience unwittingly plays the role of the missing "witness for the witness", when it observes how this silent witness of Soviet crimes painfully journeys back to speech and to memory only to realize that there are no words to describe the unhealed wound. It aches for an act of exorcism and healing yet "some things can be left unsaid" as the artist's grandmother bitterly concludes in the film, because it is painful to talk about them, but also because of the inadequacy of language to express the suffering and the realization that in the end, a space abandoned by the people is just a physical landscape devoid of any human meaning, while its own memories will remain unknown to humans for indefinite time.

## Coda

Like the process of memory decolonization this article is open-ended and does not have a clear-cut conclusion as the task of rethinking what it means to be human and therefore, what it means to remember in a specifically human way is just barely formulated. In front of humans lies an enormous field of opportunities and responsibilities to engender a mnemonic transversal network of solidarity which would be based on a fundamentally different principle from the current alienating group divisions and rivalries. The multiple memories of the increasingly no longer post-Soviet spaces, people, plants, animals,

mountains, rivers, and other forms of life will hopefully take their due place in this giant memory network in the making. ✖

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