

Russian and Rashism: Are Russian Language and Literature Really so Great?

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Following Russia's onslaught on Ukraine in early 2022, the novel term *rashism* (рашизм) rapidly coalesced for referring to and negatively assessing the mixed-bag fascist-inflected ideology of neo-imperialism that the Kremlin deploys for justifying and promoting its actions.¹ Yet, in the West too little attention is paid to the Russian language's role in this ideology. In the English-speaking countries, governments leave language use to citizens and their choices. Language politics is not actively pursued as a goal in itself or an instrument for furthering a specific policy. In contrast, this is a norm and even the fundament of politics Central and Eastern Europe, where the nation – in line with ethnolinguistic nationalism – is defined as all speakers of a language (or speech community).²

Not paying attention to this salient aspect of rashism and to how Russian language and culture are taught and researched at English-medium universities gives the Kremlin an upper hand in the ongoing world-wide mass media warfare that accompanies Russia's brutal and unjustified war on Ukraine. Miscomprehension of this kind is a tactical weakness that de facto privileges Russia in its irredentism-style empire-building efforts for 'gathering all the Russian-speaking lands' within Russia's frontiers. And again, the Ukrainians and other nations that border on Russia will pay the price for such a blunder of the West that unwittingly helps the Kremlin actualize its dream of a Greater Russia.

Warning

On 24 February 2022, when with Belarus's assistance the Russian military invaded Ukraine,³ the West woke up to a drastically changed, definitively post-Helsinki, Europe.⁴ The good old principles ironed out in 1975 between the Soviet bloc and the democratic world at the meeting in the Finnish capital were binned. Inviolability of state borders in Europe is no more. The European Union and Nato stick to the principle of equality between all member states, irrespective of their demographic and territorial size, or the sizes of their armies and economies. In Europe small and big states are equal. Yet, Putin's Russia will never abide by this rule, which the Kremlin sees as a bothering constraint. Rather Moscow and Beijing agree that 'a weak country must obey a strong country';⁵ hence, Ukraine must obey Russia, while Taiwan – China.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/22/magazine/ruscism-ukraine-russia-war.html>

² <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44983548>

³ <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/russia-ukraine-crisis/ukraine-passes-bill-to-recognise-belarus-as-russias-co-aggressor-and-impose-sanctions-on-it-articleshow.html>

⁴ <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2022/01/26/post-communist-russias-wars-and-eurasianism/>

⁵ <https://tdcenter.org/2022/05/12/fsm-is-the-second-country-to-severe-diplomatic-ties-with-russia-exclusive-comments-by-the-president/>

The fate of Europe and democracy is now being decided in Ukraine: whether the future will be free and democratic, or rashism prevails. Rashism – alongside Beijing’s ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics,’ North Korea’s official ideology of *juche*, Moscow’s ‘sovereign democracy,’ Hungary’s ‘illiberal democracy,’ or Poland’s ‘good change’⁶ – is a new name for authoritarianism. In the time of war and domestic strife for power, as now observed in Russia, this system appears to be quickly morphing into full-fledged totalitarianism. As a result, rashism seems set to join the odious ranks of Mussolini’s fascism, Hitler’s nazism, and Moscow’s stalinism.

Not surprisingly, this portmanteau word composed of ‘Russia’ and ‘fascism’ was actually coined in the wake of Russia’s 2014 annexation of Ukraine’s Crimea.⁷ At that time, it was modeled on an earlier neologism, *nashism*, for referring to the political practices of the Kremlin’s pro-government party United Russia that enables and promotes ‘sovereign democracy,’ or Putin’s dictatorship of two decades and still counting. In turn, the term *nashism* is derived from the name of this party’s youth wing Nashi (Наши ‘us, our people’) that was founded in 2005. The logic of the term *nashism* reflects stark bipolar opposition in which Putin steeps his domestic and foreign politics. It is us against them, the ‘Christian Russia of traditional values’⁸ against the ‘degenerate West,’⁹ autocracy against democracy.

Russian ultranationalism that ‘justifies’ persecution of democrats and liberals, forced assimilation of Russia’s ethnic non-Russians, and rabid expansionism for rebuilding a Greater Russia amount to a copy of Italy’s fascism and Germany’s nazism.¹⁰ The mere rhetorical difference between these two and rashism is that the proponents of present-day Russia’s state ideology actually denigrate their democratic opponents by branding them as ‘nazis’ and ‘fascists.’¹¹ In addition, rashists take offence when someone dubs them as nazis and fascists. Yet, their program and actions are antisemitic,¹² xenophobic¹³ and driven by the colonial-style civilizational mission that is bound to result in actual or cultural genocide of the colonized peoples.¹⁴ Rashism is a schizo-fascism, because rashists go to lengths to deny the fascist character of their ideology and politics.¹⁵ But it is obvious to outside observers that now Russia is a fascist country.¹⁶

Russian world

⁶ <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2021/11/23/how-many-communist-states-exist-in-the-early-21st-century/>

⁷ <https://graniru.org/blogs/free/entries/227015.html>

⁸ <https://fpc.org.uk/russias-traditional-values-leadership/>

⁹ https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/1dt-sh/russia_election

¹⁰ <https://online.ucpress.edu/cpcs/article-abstract/31/1/1/418/Fascism-and-the-New-Russian-Nationalism?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

¹¹ https://www.penopp.org/articles/fascism-memory?language_content_entity=en

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/25/vladimir-putin-ukraine-attack-antisemitism-denazify>

¹³ <https://www.dw.com/en/what-is-russias-foreign-agent-law/a-60652752>

¹⁴ <https://ria.ru/20220403/ukraina-1781469605.html>

¹⁵ <https://don24.ru/rubric/obschestvo/dobro-pozhalovat-v-ad-na-sezde-antifashistov-pokazali-kadry-pytok-rossiyskih-voennyh-na-ukraine.html>

¹⁶

https://www.repubblica.it/venerdi/2022/05/13/news/svetlana_aleksievic_intervista_putin_guerra_ucraina_russia_nobel_ezio_mau_ro_venerdi-348770767/

Already in 1995, the Chechens then under Moscow's genocidal attack, spoke of *rusism* (русизм).¹⁷ With this term they branded the Kremlin's policy of the planned destruction of their nation, alongside Chechen language and culture. Not a single school with Chechen as the language of instruction survived the Russian military victory in Chechnya.¹⁸

In 2007, the Russian government officially added ethnolinguistic nationalism to its ideological armory. Putin established the *Russkii Mir* (Russian World) Foundation. Ostensibly, this organization is tasked with promoting Russian language and culture across the world.¹⁹ Yet, in the post-Soviet countries and states with considerable numbers of Russian-speakers (such as Israel or Germany), the foundation strives to secure an official status for the Russian language, even to the de facto replacement of such a state's own national language, which is the case of Belarusian in today's Belarus.²⁰ On the other hand, this de facto governmental institution also makes sure that no one but the Russian Academy of Sciences retains the normative control over the principles of the 'correct use' of the Russian language.²¹

As a result, Moscow's politicized 'ownership' of Russian prevents the dethnicization of this language, which has been the norm in the case of other postcolonial languages of wider use (such as English, French or Spanish) that are employed in official capacity in numerous states. Instead, on the basis of Moscow's normative control over Russian in the post-Soviet countries, the Kremlin claims that all speakers of Russian are members of the Russian nation *only*.²² They are said to owe loyalty to Russia, and Putin pledges to 'protect' them by expanding Russia, so that finally the country's territory would fully overlap with the 'Russian world,' or the areas where Russian is a noticeable language of everyday communication.

This neo-imperialism and imperial-style irredentism is conveniently underpinned with ethnolinguistic nationalism and the Orthodox *mission civilizatrice*, which harks back to the early modern prophecy that Russia (then Muscovy) is destined to become a Third Rome. In Putin's eyes the Russian Empire of the turn of the 20th century was a near-perfect embodiment of this mixed bag of ideals, but for the 1867 'loss' of Alaska to the United States. Unsurprisingly, rashism curiously looks like a photocopy of the tsarist ideology of Orthodoxy, autocracy and nationality (that is, Russification), which Eussia's Minister of Education Sergei Uvarov coined in 1833.²³

A fifth of Russia's inhabitants are not ethnic Russians, while 60 percent profess religions other than Orthodox Christianity or are atheists.²⁴ This ideological discrepancy within

¹⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/1995/dec/09/chechnya>

¹⁸ <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/chechnyas-language-dilemma>

¹⁹ <http://ruskiymir.ru/en/>

²⁰ <https://dgap.org/en/events/ruskiy-mir-russian-world>

²¹ <https://ispan.waw.pl/journals/index.php/ch/article/view/ch.2018.010/4468>

²² <https://wuwr.pl/swr/article/view/12880/11625>

²³ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/128466>

²⁴

https://docviewer.yandex.com/view/0/?page=2&*=rvAv5PGTc%2Fw%2BBFV6QOUZtaf5gYF7InVybcI6InLhLWRpc2stcHVibGJiOi8vM

Russia itself is bridged by the deployment of the 'Russian alphabet' of Cyrillic for the sake of securing 'all-Russian' unity. As of 2002, each of Russia's over 30 official languages in the country's autonomous republics must be written exclusively in Cyrillic.²⁵ In practice not only Russian but also Cyrillic is equated with the Russian world. That is why, in the post-Soviet states of Azerbaijan, Moldova, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan Cyrillic was replaced with Latin letters for writing the countries' official languages. The Azeris, Moldovans, Turkmens and Uzbeks do their best to distance themselves from resurgent Russia, so that the Kremlin would not use Cyrillic or another 'argument' to try to invade and 'reabsorb' their countries. Kazakhstan aspires to follow the same path, but Moscow does its best to prevent such a change in alphabet for writing the Kazakh language.²⁶

How the world sees Russian

In the West, rather unwittingly, the perception of Russian language and culture largely follows wishes of the Kremlin's propaganda and the ideology of the Russian world. No one questions the fact that Russian is an important language of global communication. After all, it is one of the UN's six official languages. The Cold War made the West oblivious to that fact that quite strangely – in comparison to Arabic, English, French, Spanish and even Chinese – Russian was official only in a single country, namely, the Soviet Union. This lack of attention to language politics prevented Western observers from pondering on how come that after the 1991 breakup of this communist polity, Moscow may still claim the exclusive ownership of the Russian language. Especially so, that such a claim directly impinges on sovereignty of the post-Soviet states. Like in Central Europe, post-Soviet states are legitimized through ethnolinguistic nationalism. In practice this means that a 'proper' state must be earmarked for a single nation who speak their own specific language, be it Estonian, Georgian or Ukrainian.

In the wake of the 1991 breakup of the Soviet Union, language and culture were still seen as elements of soft power. All changed when the Kremlin weaponized language and culture for hard power uses, following the Russian annexation of Ukraine's Crimea in 2014.²⁷ Even after this point break, most Western commentators have failed to see how Moscow's control over Russian translates into cultural and political influence and control over Russian-speaking communities outside Russia. In turn, the existence of such Russophone communities is used by the Kremlin's ideologues to propose that Belarus or Ukraine are 'pseudo-states,' because Belarusian and Ukrainian are not 'real languages.' Hence, in Moscow's skewed neo-imperial 'logic,' neither the Belarusian nor Ukrainian nation exists. Their existence is an offense to rashists and their vision of a reborn Russian Empire. After all Belarus and Ukraine should constitute the ethnic and economic core of Greater Russia.²⁸

[WV1aDI5RDFpcnZKeVZNNsSwWWFaZktqRFhoOXZDNWhldUIGTU5uQU4zQT0iLCJ0aXRzZSI6IINyZWRhX2Jsb2tfcHJlc3Nfc20yLnBkZiIsInVpZCI6IjAiLCJub2lmcmtZSI6ZmFsc2UsInRzljoxNTI0NDg3NTUzMTcwfQ%3D%3D](http://www.rferl.org/a/1101584.html)

²⁵ <https://www.rferl.org/a/1101584.html>

²⁶ <https://wachttyrz.eu/speaking-in-a-forked-tongue-russian-help-for-autocracy-in-kazakhstan/>

²⁷ <https://ispan.waw.pl/journals/index.php/sn/article/view/sn.1637/4385>

²⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YnGcbxxOMwE>

Only in the wake of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, rebroadcasting of Russian television and radio stations was banned in the post-Soviet states that now are members of the EU and Nato, namely, in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.²⁹ In March 2022, a month after Russia had attacked Ukraine, the EU itself followed with a blanket ban on Russian media outlets that broadcast in Russian and Western languages.³⁰ But somehow Moscow is still able to evade these bans and pumps Russian propaganda across the European Union.³¹ At the same time, the near-totalitarian control of the mass media in Russia, prevents any Western news outlets from broadcasting to the Russian public,³² who are duped and conditioned by propaganda.³³ On top of that, Russia appears to be winning the propaganda war³⁴ in the global South, where the Kremlin's war on Ukraine is widely seen as justified.³⁵

Moscow's official position is that neither the Ukrainian language nor nation exists;³⁶ hence, Ukraine must be 'denazified.'³⁷ What does this 'denazification' mean in practice? At present, in Ukraine the Russian invaders target and destroy museums,³⁸ monuments,³⁹ archives,⁴⁰ schools⁴¹ and hospitals.⁴² Hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian children have been already deported into the heartlands of Russia, ensuring speedy russification.⁴³ In the areas under Russian occupation the libraries and schools are 'cleansed'⁴⁴ of summarily destroyed Ukrainian books.⁴⁵ Russian replaces Ukrainian as the language of instruction, and Russian syllabuses supersede Ukrainian ones.⁴⁶ Plans are underway to force these areas' children into summer camps for the purpose of teaching them 'proper Russian,' before the new school year commences in September.⁴⁷ Russian mobile operators supersede their Ukrainian counterparts in the occupied areas,⁴⁸ the Russian ruble replaces the Ukrainian hryvnia there,⁴⁹ and to the levelled Ukrainian cities

²⁹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/estonia-fight-back-pro-russia-propaganda/>

³⁰ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/02/eu-imposes-sanctions-on-state-owned-outlets-rt-russia-today-and-sputnik-s-broadcasting-in-the-eu/>

³¹ <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/05/04/rt-and-sputnik-kremlin-backed-media-evading-eu-ban-on-content-says-report>

³² <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/02/media/journalism-crackdown-russia/index.html>

³³ <https://wyborcza.pl/7,173236,28251077,nobel-laureate-dmitry-muratov-kremlin-propaganda-is-like-radiation.html>

³⁴ <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/russian-disinformation-is-taking-hold-in-africa/>

³⁵ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/03/22/west-losing-information-war-russia-didnt-even-notice/>

³⁶ <https://euobserver.com/opinion/154963>

³⁷ <https://tass.com/politics/1444523>

³⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/shelling-destroys-museum-dedicated-famous-ukrainian-philosopher-regional-2022-05-07/>

³⁹ <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/05/03/destruction-cultural-sites-ukraine-00029655>

⁴⁰ <https://qirim.news/en/novosti-en/occupiers-destroyed-the-archive-in-the-chernihiv-region-about-the-repression-of-the-soviet-regime-against-ukrainians/>

⁴¹ <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/school-year-nears-tragic-end-ukraine-amid-child-deaths-empty-classrooms-and>

⁴² <https://globalnews.ca/news/8814156/ukraine-russia-war-hospitals-destroyed-zelenskyy/>

⁴³ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-accuses-russia-forcibly-deporting-over-210000-children-2022-05-13>

⁴⁴ <https://www.independent.co.uk/russias-war-on-literature-an-attempt-to-erase-ukrainian-history>

⁴⁵ <https://euromaidanpress.com/2022/04/02/russian-occupiers-launch-war-on-ukrainian-history-burning-books-and-destroying-archives/>

⁴⁶ <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-kherson-education-russian-occupation/31862426.html>

⁴⁷ <https://prm.ua/russia-wants-to-set-up-camps-for-the-forced-teaching-ukrainian-children-the-russian-language/>

⁴⁸ <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/05/27/occupied-ukrainian-territories-switch-to-russian-area-code-state-media-a77822>

⁴⁹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/01/kherson-russia-ruble-internet-referendum/>

and towns under Russian control vans arrive with huge screens on their sides to spread Russian propaganda in the streets.⁵⁰ The Kremlin's 'denazification' is a new name for the old imperial policy of russification that entails the forced liquidation of other languages cultures and nations.⁵¹

And again, the Kremlin's fixation on such monumental feats of language engineering as its main instrument for furthering the goals of Russian neo-imperialism has evaded the West's scrutiny. Eventually, Western commentators awoke to the ugly reality of Russian war crimes,⁵² only when faced with the widespread employment of rape as an instrument of warfare⁵³ by Russian troops and with numerous genocidal-scale massacres methodically committed by the Russian army.⁵⁴ The thin red line has been crossed. It is undeniable that the Kremlin's criminal rashism seeks to emulate the Third Reich's genocidal nazism in methods, justifications and goals, including concentration camps⁵⁵ and Einsatzgruppen (special task forces) to kill⁵⁶ captured members of the Ukrainian elite and military forces.⁵⁷ The nazi dream of a racially pure and homogenously German-speaking Greater Germany provides a ready-made blueprint for Putin's vision of a healthy (non-LGTBQ), traditional (totalitarian) and homogenously Russian-speaking Greater Russia. Great Russian chauvinism is back. Stalin and Hitler's totalitarian alliance (1939-1941) seems to be on the cusp of yielding a late fruit.

Meanwhile, in the Western mass media and capitals voices can be heard that what journalists report from Ukraine under the relentless Russian onslaught should not be identified with Russian language and culture.⁵⁸ Why not? This callous attitude rightly offends Ukrainians, because it is none other than Russian soldiers and officers, educated and bred on 'great Russian literature,' who keep committing heinous crimes in Ukraine.⁵⁹ After 2014 some high-minded Ukrainian intellectuals believed that Kyiv's efforts to limit the supply of Russian books in Ukraine, including those openly anti-Ukrainian, was harmful to the freedom of speech and thought.⁶⁰ Now they have no doubts of this kind. After the genocidal massacres in Bucha⁶¹ or Borodyanka,⁶² and over 22,000 casualties in the completely levelled Mariupol,⁶³ the question about the link between Russian imperialism and culture needs to be urgently and seriously addressed.⁶⁴

⁵⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/26/russia-uses-orwellian-propaganda-news-vans-in-mariupol>

⁵¹ <https://ru.krymr.com/a/rossiya-ukraina-voyna-yug-ukrainy-okkupatsiya/31870202.html>

⁵² <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/03/ukraine-apparent-war-crimes-russia-controlled-areas>

⁵³ <https://www.npr.org/2022/04/30/1093339262/ukraine-russia-rape-war-crimes>

⁵⁴ <https://theconversation.com/as-horrific-evidence-of-massacres-is-uncovered-in-ukraine-russian-propaganda-gathers-pace-180657>

⁵⁵ <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/05/23/europe/russia-ukraine-filtration-camps-intl-cmd/index.html>

⁵⁶ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-has-list-of-ukrainians-to-be-killed-or-sent-to-camps-us-officials-say-b2019525.html>

⁵⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/25/wagner-group-fighters-accused-murdering-civilians-ukraine-war-crimes-belarus>

⁵⁸ <https://inews.co.uk/opinion/banning-russian-literature-ignores-history-tyranny-1593431>

⁵⁹ <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75410,28305098,andruchowycz-buczna-to-prawdziwa-wielka-rosyjska-kultura.html>

⁶⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/feb/14/ukraine-publishers-speak-out-against-ban-on-russian-books>

⁶¹ <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/86929>

⁶² <https://www.euronews.com/2022/04/04/fears-over-more-civilian-massacres-as-russian-troops-retreat-north>

⁶³ <https://ua.interfax.com.ua/news/general/834794.htm>

⁶⁴ <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/russian-literature-bucha-massacre-essay-oksana-zabuzhko/>

Isn't it so that in Leo Tolstoy's eponymous novel, following *Anna Krenina's* suicide, her lover, the dashing cavalry officer Count Alexei Kirillovich Vronsky, in search of solace, joined the Russian army? He did just in time to participate in the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-1878. The Russian troops, Vronsky included, massacred and displaced hundreds of thousands of Turks and Muslims in what today is Bulgaria. Quite a suitably imperial-style pastime for a frustrated Russian nobleman, who dreams of regaining love lost through the mass killing of subhuman 'infidels, orientals and colonials,' eh?

Tolstoy knew well what he was writing about. After all, during the 1850s, he served as an officer, first, in the Caucasus, battling Chechens and other Muslims, and then in the Crimean War, when the Russians struggled against the Ottoman Empire's Tatars and Turks, to whose aid the Western great powers came. Neither Tolstoy, nor beloved by the Russians Alexander Pushkin did condemn Russian imperialism.⁶⁵ On the contrary, both writers actively espoused this ideology and promoted the then ongoing colonial expansion of the Russian Empire.⁶⁶ Somehow, not a single great Russian novel has been devoted to the first 'modern' large-scale genocide of the Circassians, which the Russian army carried out in the fateful year of 1864.⁶⁷ Nowadays, in Circassia (Adıgə Xəku) denuded of Circassians, Russians enjoy sunshine at their north Caucasian Riviera, located on the Black Sea littoral, with the main resort of Sochi, which once used to be Şâçə in Circassian.

Blind in one eye

How did the West manage to fail taking note of Moscow's continuing weaponization of culture and language? During the long decades of the Cold War confrontation, 'great Russian literature' offered consolation,⁶⁸ even a hope that a free Russia of the future is possible, that it may yet turn out to be a 'normal European' country.⁶⁹ At the same time, Western sovietologists and scholars of literary studies did not question the Soviet practice of *not* publishing fiction written in other Soviet languages than Russian before a Russian translation was released. Only then a translation of such a non-Russian-language Soviet piece of writing into a Western language could be permitted. But it had to be conducted solely from the approved Russian translation, not from the Ukrainian, Azerbaijani or Georgian original.

Obviously, this ideologized practice of translating Russian translations made non-Russian Soviet literature appear a poor relation of 'great Russian literature.' To this day, in the West, the belief is rife that Ukrainian with 40 million speakers, or Uzbek with 35 million speakers are 'small languages.' Hence, a Ukrainian or Uzbek novel can be translated into a Western language – for instance, Swedish with 10 million speakers – only after it has appeared in a well-acclaimed Russian translation. The Soviet Union split three decades ago, but such practices of Soviet cultural and linguistic imperialism still persist

⁶⁵ <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/7711>

⁶⁶ <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/poldiscourse/ewt/2.html>

⁶⁷ <https://www.rutgersuniversitypress.org/the-circassian-genocide/9780813560670>

⁶⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/apr/10/elif-batuman-possessed-russian-literature>

⁶⁹ https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w10057/w10057.pdf

nowadays. Also on this basis, the Kremlin claims its 'right' to the post-Soviet countries as parts of the Russian world, because they have 'no culture worth speaking of' beyond the Russian language. Russian ideologues claim that post-Soviet non-Russian literatures are poor and derivative, merely a pale shadow of 'great Russian literature.'

This noxious view has been time and again repeated by acclaimed Russian authors, including the famous Russian dissident and poet Joseph Brodsky,^{70,71} who found safe haven in the West. Unthinkingly and without having read among these non-Russian literatures, Western pundits keep nodding in agreement. As a result, they do the Kremlin's bidding, and extend the Western seal of approval to Russian cultural imperialism. Some realize what they are doing and in return expect accolades, help and money from Moscow.⁷²

Tolstoy and Brodsky, apart from being representatives of 'great Russian literature,' they were also unrepentant Russian imperialists. Quite recently, in 1998, Brodsky de facto denied the right to independent existence for the former Soviet bloc countries. Countering Milan Kundera's 1984 definition of Central Europe as this part of the West that Moscow kidnapped,⁷³ Brodsky infamously dubbed this region 'Western Asia.'⁷⁴ He did not balk at equating the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia with Asia, as long as Central Europe would remain under Moscow's suzerainty. The will and opinions of the nations concerned were of no import to Brodsky. Why should an imperialist care about some 'uncivilized natives'?

Principled Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn who in his writings tore away the veil of oblivion from the genocidal horror of the Soviet gulag concentration and death camps,⁷⁵ in the end proved another convinced Russian imperialist. Putin coopted the writer for his political system, and Solzhenitsyn was only too happy to follow.⁷⁶ Both abhor the West and share the vision of a 'pure Orthodox and imperial Greater Russia.' In 2007, upon receiving in the Kremlin the State Prize of the Russian Federation from the hands of Putin himself, Solzhenitsyn reflected about Russia's future. He said: 'Should someone ask me whether I would indicate the West such as it is today as a model to my country, frankly I would have to answer negatively. [...] The next war (which does not have to be an atomic one and I do not believe it will) may well bury Western civilization forever.'⁷⁷

This war of Solzhenitsyn's prediction is now taking place in Ukraine. Democracy, human rights and basic political freedoms are at stake.⁷⁸ Some Western intellectuals start sensing that 'great Russian literature' is part and even a weapon of this confrontation. That the beauty of the Russian belles-lettres cannot be responsibly enjoyed in separation

⁷⁰ https://www.100bestpoems.ru/item_info.php?id=12502

⁷¹ <https://brodskiy.su/na-nezavisimost-ukrainy/?lang=en>

⁷² <https://tass.com/society/1392375>

⁷³ <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1984/04/26/the-tragedy-of-central-europe/>

⁷⁴ <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/05/17/specials/kundera-brodsky.html>

⁷⁵ <https://www.solzhenitsyncenter.org/his-writings/large-work-and-novels/the-gulag-archipelago>

⁷⁶ <https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2022/03/solzhenitsyn-putin-joseph-pearce.html>

⁷⁷ <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/02/vladimir-putin-guru-solzhenitsyn-115088/>

⁷⁸ <https://english.nv.ua/opinion/yale-history-professor-timothy-snyder-on-10-reasons-why-ukraine-should-beat-russia-50240704.html>

from a conscious reflection on the broader context of brutal Russian and Soviet colonialism and imperialism. Despite some qualified and muted criticisms, most Russian authors, quite happily, have supported the imperial expansion of tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union and now the Russian Federation.⁷⁹ Whatever the name can be current at a given moment, it is none other than Mother Russia, the Russian world, or just the empire that remains their lodestar.

Western readers should be aware what they are doing. That perusing big Russian novels is often imbibing on Russian imperialism and anti-Westernism. Let us read critically. Maybe this moment when Russian tanks roll over much of Ukraine is the time to focus on works by these Russian-language authors, who are aware of and condemn Russian imperialism, such as, Maxim Kantor⁸⁰ or Mikhail Shishkin.⁸¹ It comes as no surprise that both had to leave Putin's Russia, the former for Germany and the latter for Switzerland.

A way forward

The recent proposal that Western publishers should make the highlights of Ukrainian literature readily available in high quality translations conducted directly from the Ukrainian originals is a good start.⁸² But it is late in the day. What about achievements of Armenian, Belarusian or Tajik literature? Why not to extend this translation program to masterpieces created in the official languages of Russia's autonomous republics, for instance, in Bashkir, Chechen, Kalmyk, Sakha (Yakut), or Tatar? A whole continent of Soviet and post-Soviet literatures in about 50 languages remains hidden from the western reader's view behind the impenetrable iron curtain of 'great Russian literature.'

Even if such a widened program has been actualized, the main constraint is the dearth of qualified translators and researchers in these languages. Another bottleneck comes in the form of how the Soviet Union and post-Soviet states are *not* covered at Western universities. Attention is almost exclusively paid to Russian language and literature. In the vast majority of cases, at universities in Britain and North America, departments of Slavic studies are 'Slavic' in the name only. In reality students are required to master Russian as the obligatory entry gate to the Slavic world. This methodological narrowmindedness leaves them convinced that Brodsky was right, that there cannot be any great literature in Bulgarian, Czech, Polish, or let alone in Belarusian and Ukrainian.

Somehow, an aspiring student of Germanic languages and cultures is not obliged to master German first, before she would be allowed to focus on her beloved Dutch, English or Swedish. Why not then to extend this open-minded approach to the Slavic studies, so that at least two-thirds of incoming students be encouraged to focus on other Slavic languages and cultures than Russian. Yes, for the time being, Ukrainian language and literature should be the main priority! Likewise, more attention needs to be given to non-Russian languages and cultures in today's Russian Federation. For the time being

⁷⁹ <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3218149>

⁸⁰ <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/04/29/russian-artists-new-exhibition-decries-war-in-ukraineand-suggests-western-art-world-enabled-putin>

⁸¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/07/russians-ukrainians-putin-army-freedom-mikhail-shishkin>

⁸² <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/10/books/ukraine-translate-books.html>

one can study these only after becoming able to read Russian-language textbooks of such languages. Only rarely do native-speakers of these languages are employed at Western universities. Russian imperialists approve. But do we? Need we be complicit in facilitating and humoring Russian imperialism, that is, rashism?

It is not just an idle proposal of change for change's sake, but an answer to the West's blind acceptance of Russian imperialism in culture, as embodied by the unthinking worship of Russian language and literature. After all, it is this unquestioned acceptance, which helped guaranteeing impunity for Putin when he attacked Georgia and grabbed Abkhazia and South Ossetia, annexed Crimea and seized eastern Ukraine, or when he levelled democratic Syria. The Kremlin sweetened this poisonous 'deal' dished out to the West with gas and oil, including well-paid sinecures for retired German and French politicians, and corrupted money for London's financiers in the greedy City. Now with Europe's overdependence on Russian carbohydrates and money, Putin excels at frustrating the EU and Nato's united reply to Moscow's ongoing war on Ukraine, that is, the sanctions and deliveries of weaponry for the Ukrainian army. Indeed, it is high time, the West would take its head out of the Russian noose, before it is too late.

In such a situation, should we keep reading 'great Russian literature'? Yes, of course, but let us peruse it critically, as products of tsarist imperialism, Soviet totalitarianism, and Putin's rashism. And importantly, first of all, we need to make up for the lost time and get acquainted with masterpieces of Belarusian, Chechen, Tatar, or Ukrainian literature that Russian and Soviet imperialists have made such a good job of hiding from the world in plain sight.

One needs to approach Russian belles-lettres with caution, until a Russian Viktor Klemperer, Primo Levi and a Russian Thomas Bernhard appear on the literary and intellectual horizon. In Russian literature no robust trend critical of Russian and Soviet imperialism and totalitarianism has emerged yet. Russian authors prefer not to talk back to the powers that be. They leave politics to politicians, and then, in private, where no one can hear, they sob in their writings on the loss of liberty. An overflow of feelings and emotions replaces a sober analysis of the causes of this perennial state of Russian unfreedom. It is easier to lament beautifully and give in to evoking the tired trope of the unknowable 'Russian soul,' rather than invest time and effort needed for analyzing the obtaining situation in the form of an excellent piece of fiction.

The direct and unsparing prose of Varlam Shalamov's stories on the Soviet concentration and death camps was an auspicious beginning. He proved to be a worthy successor of Anton Chekhov, who saw his study of the tsarist penal colony on the island of Sakhalin as his main contribution to literature. Yet, by large, Russian writers shy away from the task of coming to terms with the imperial, totalitarian and genocidal past of Russia and the Soviet Union. One of the reasons is the fact that Putin's rashist regime now actively rehabilitates stalinism, the KGB, Russian imperialism, Soviet totalitarianism and russification as the pillars of a future Greater Russia. To most Russians and Russian intellectuals, brought up in this odious adoration of power and naked violence as a sign of greatness of their state, the program is curiously attractive. They know nothing else, even when they sojourned in the West. Their choice is imperial Russia, rashism in short.

A certain hope is that Ukrainian, Belarusian, Tatar, or Chechen literature may yet turn out to be a vaccination not only to the West's blind veneration of Russian literature, language and culture, but also to the Russians' masochistic love of totalitarianism and unfreedom. Let the healing begin. It is way overdue. I look forward to at least a steady stream of novels, stories, plays and poems translated into Western languages from Ukrainian, Tatar, Buryat, Chechen, Sakha, Tuvan, Uzbek.... Although, what we really need is an avalanche for countering the ravages that rashism – Russian imperialism and totalitarianism – has left both in people's heads worldwide and on the ground in Ukraine. Yet, I fear, that what will remain of these high-minded promises will be again words, words, words.

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