

## HOW POST-SOVIET COUNTRIES CAN OVERCOME THE COLONIAL PAST: THE UKRAINIAN EXPERIENCE

## ЯК ПОСТРАДЯНСЬКИМ КРАЇНАМ ПОДОЛАТИ КОЛОНІАЛЬНЕ МИНУЛЕ: УКРАЇНСЬКИЙ ДОСВІД

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**Abstract.** *The article examines, through the Ukrainian case, the occupation nature of the Soviet communist regime and its colonial exploitation of the union republics from the 1920s to 1991. Using principles of historicism, systemic analysis and historical-genetic and typological methods, the authors reconstruct how the Bolshevik center subordinated Ukraine's political institutions and economic administration, extracted resources through centralized planning, and imposed a ruling elite largely recruited and controlled from Moscow. The study integrates classic and recent scholarship (Volobuiev; Mazlakh & Shahrai; Vynnychenko; Motyl; Shporluk; Hrynevych) and primary materials to argue that Soviet Ukraine functioned de facto as a colonially dependent territory. Special attention is paid to demographic engineering, Russification, and the Holodomor's long-term effects, which reshaped regional identity and undermined state-building. The paper contends that a coherent historical policy is an essential instrument for overcoming the colonial legacy in post-Soviet states: beyond renaming spaces, it requires confronting uncomfortable questions about the imperial character of the USSR and liberating public memory from imperial narratives. Such a policy is presented as a prerequisite for consolidating national sovereignty and international subjectivity in the post-Soviet space.*

**Keywords:** *colonialism; Russian Bolshevism; Soviet empire; occupation regime; Soviet Ukraine; Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine; historical policy.*

**Анотація.** *Метою статті є наукове обґрунтування на прикладі України окупаційної природи радянського комуністичного режиму та його колоніального визиску союзних республік у 1920-х—1991 рр. Спираючись на принципи історизму, системності й спеціально-історичні методи, автори відтворюють механізми політичного підпорядкування й економічної централізації, через які більшовицький центр інституційно контролював радянську Україну, експлуатував її ресурси та формувалася керівна еліта, залежна від Москви. На основі класичних і нових праць (Волобуєв; Мазлах і Шахрай; Винниченко; Мотиль; Шпорлюк; Гриневич) та архівних матеріалів доводиться, що радянська Україна фактично функціонувала як колоніально залежна територія. Окрему увагу приділено демографічній інженерії, русифікації та довгостроковим наслідкам Голодомору для ідентичності й державотворення. Стаття обстоює необхідність цілісної історичної політики як інструмента подолання колоніальної спадщини в пострадянських державах: поза перейменуваннями йдеться про готовність відповідати на «незручні» запитання щодо імперського характеру СРСР і звільнення колективної пам'яті від імперських наративів. Така політика є передумовою консолідації суверенітету та міжнародної суб'єктності на пострадянському просторі.*

**Ключові слова:** *колоніалізм; російський більшовизм; радянська імперія; окупаційний режим; радянська Україна; КП(б)У; історична політика.*

**Introduction.** The policy of the Russian Federation in the post-Soviet space, based on the idea of restoring the Soviet Union, has actualized the topic of the colonial past of peoples oppressed by the Russian and Soviet empires. This topic, which national historiographical schools of post-Soviet countries unanimously classify as a colonial experience requiring a long process of overcoming its negative consequences, is presented in Russia as a progressive phenomenon.

However, while there is a certain consensus regarding Russia as a colonial empire, the discussion about the occupational nature of the Soviet communist regime - which exploited the resource potential of the union republics as colonially dependent territories - began during the perestroika era in the USSR. At that time, there was also a public demand to develop a memory policy in the national republics occupied by Soviet Russia and the USSR. The realization of the distinctiveness of national histories, which the Soviet center in Moscow carefully concealed, became the foundation for the political will of most of the former Soviet republics to achieve state sovereignty. The collapse of the USSR and the proclamation of independent states, one of the reasons for which was the truth about the crimes of the Soviet communist regime, brought to the agenda the question of the nature of Russian Bolshevism. Behind the facade of a "workers' and peasants' republic" it skillfully concealed the imperial essence of the Soviet regime.

The societies of the European republics of the former USSR, which emerged from its structure as occupied and colonially dependent territories, like the Baltic states, formed a consensus vision of their Soviet past as early as the first half of the 1990s. Accordingly, they determined that the primary priority of their foreign policy strategy was European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

Regarding the Russian Federation, where most of the population supported the government's course towards restoring a new version of the Russian empire, the European, - and therefore democratic - path of development was abandoned at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries with the selection of KGB-backed Vladimir Putin as the successor to "democrat" Boris Yeltsin. In post-Soviet Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine, where such a consensus was not formed, the process of moving away from the Soviet vision of collective memory is still ongoing. This complicates the search for their place in the European community of nations. How quickly the Belarusian, Moldovan, and Ukrainian communities find a collective answer to the question of their attitude towards their Russian and Soviet colonial past will determine whether they can become an organic part of Europe or dissolve into the Russian imperial "sea". This paper attempts to illustrate this by examining the professional discussion regarding Ukraine's status within the USSR.

**The purpose of the study** is to analyze the political, economic, and humanitarian relations between the Ukrainian SSR and the Soviet center to determine whether Soviet Ukraine functioned as a colony of the USSR.

**Literature review.** In the polemic regarding the status of the Ukrainian SSR within the USSR which has been going on since at least the time when the Ukrainian People's Republic lost its independence due to the armed aggression of Soviet Russia in the early 1920s, domestic and foreign scientists use the arguments both in favor of the version "Ukraine is a colony of the USSR" and those that deny this thesis. For the most part, the authors of the statement about the colonial status of the Ukrainian SSR within the Soviet Union appeal to the factors of economic dependence of the official Kharkov (since 1934 – Kyiv) from the Russian Bolshevik center in Moscow (Volobuyev, 1928; Efimenko, 2008). Other researchers (Shapoval, 1925; Hrynevych, 2017, 2019) operate with the political arguments, such as the fact that the leadership of the territory of Ukraine occupied by the Russian Red Army was carried out by the representatives of the Bolshevik Party delegated by the Communist Center in Moscow who implemented the directives of the Kremlin the real goal of which was the establishment of a communist regime in Ukraine based on the Russian model.

In academic discourse, the topic of the colonial status of the Union republics within the USSR is directly related to the question of whether the USSR was an empire. Among the domestic experts on this topic, the prevailing opinion is that the Soviet Ukraine was a colony within the USSR as a continuation of the Russian Empire. Also thanks to the researchers of the Ukrainian diaspora (Motyl, 2009; Shporlyuk, 2000) such concepts as "the internal" and "the external" Soviet empire currently introduced into the scientific circulation. Olexander Motyl attributes the RSFSR as the part of the Soviet Union (Motyl, 2012). According to Roman Shporlyuk "the world system of socialism" created after the Second World War, which, like the union republics of the USSR, "could only be held by force" (Shporlyuk, 2000, p. 8).

Despite these historiographical developments, the study of Russian colonialism remains incomplete, primarily because the majority of Russian historians still maintain that the USSR, if it was an empire at all, was an atypical one - since non-Russian regions not only supplied raw materials to the Russian center but also allegedly developed at its expense. Regarding Ukrainian lands within the Russian Empire, most Russian historians consider them part of the metropole, arguing that Ukrainians, alongside Great Russians, formed the core of Russian society. In other words, Russian historical thought does not even entertain the notion that Ukraine was a colony of either the Tsarist or Soviet empires. Furthermore, contemporary Russian historiography actively promotes the idea that ethnic Ukrainians played a significant role in building the Russian Empire and the USSR, often citing lists of high-ranking officials of Ukrainian origin.

However, these statements of the Russian authors have long ceased to be a convincing argument for the Ukrainian researchers of the Russian Empire, because since the 1920s, the opinion that Ukrainian lands were a colony of the Russian Empire has spread. Among the latest, in particular, are the well-known historians M. Slabchenko, M.Yavorsky and O. Ogloblin, who used the term "colonialism" to define the position of Ukraine in the former tsarist empire (Lysyak-Rudnyts'kyy, 2019, p. 206). This means that the topic of the colonial dependence of the Soviet Ukraine, or rather, the colonial policy of Russia in Ukraine, still awaits a comprehensive study. Therefore, the question of what the Soviet Ukraine really was: a Moscow colony or a Soviet republic in relation to which the Soviet center in Moscow pursued a colonial policy remains open.

**Main results of research.** So, because of the October coup of 1917 in Petrograd, the Russian Bolshevik Party came to power in the capital of the former Russian Empire, which declared its goal to build a communist state that was supposed to unite the proletarians of the whole world. The building of a world communist empire, according to the leader of the Bolsheviks V. Ulyanov - Lenin, should have started with the establishment of the communist power on the territory of the former Russian Empire. Therefore, the first objects of an armed aggression of the Soviet Russia were the independent states formed on the ruins of the empire, such as the Ukrainian People's Republic (UNR).

In order to implement the Bolshevik course to build a world communist state, V.Lenin and his associates in the Soviet government of Russia should have taken a control of the resources of the former outskirts of the Russian Empire, primarily Ukraine. Therefore, already in December 1917 the

Bolsheviks started an undeclared war against the Ukrainian Central Council, which in its III Universal declared the desire of Ukrainians for a federation with democratic Russia.

The determination of Russian Bolsheviks to retain Ukraine within their envisioned communist state is evidenced not only by the series of military campaigns conducted by Soviet Russia against the sovereign UNR in 1917-1919 but also by Moscow's explicit intention to dominate Ukraine's economy. Unsurprisingly, by July 1918, the Ukrainian branch of the Russian Bolshevik Party, created in Moscow, formally transferred control over Ukraine's economy to the Kremlin. In January 1919, Ukraine's economic administration was fully subordinated to the ministries of Soviet Russia through the Supreme Council of the National Economy (VSNKh). Thus, Moscow secured access to Ukrainian resources by first occupying UNR territory and then establishing the puppet Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic (USSR) in Kharkiv.

The economic exploitation of Soviet Ukraine by Moscow was so blatant that even critics from within the communist regime acknowledged it. In 1928, economist Mykhailo Volobuiev published an article *"On the Problem of the Ukrainian Economy"* in the journal *Bolshevik of Ukraine* (Volobuyiev, 1928) in which he argued that Tsarist Russia had been a colonial empire and that Ukraine, within its structure, had functioned as a "European-style colony" whose productive forces had been developed for the benefit of the metropole. According to Volobuiev, this situation remained unchanged under Soviet rule. Despite Ukraine's self-sufficiency and its potential to integrate directly into the global economy without Moscow's mediation, it continued to function as an economic colony of Russia (Volobuyiev, 1928).

Volobuiev's conclusions echoed the views of Ukrainian national communists Vasyl Shakhrai and Serhiy Mazlakh. In their 1919 pamphlet *"To the Wave: What Is Happening in and with Ukraine"* they argued that within the Russian Empire, Ukraine had become an advanced Russian colony under conditions of global industrial capitalism, and its inhabitants had evolved into a modern nation (Mazlakh, Shakhrai, 1919). They asserted that Ukraine's economic progress could only be achieved through separation from the empire and the establishment of a socialist Ukraine with an independent communist party, free from Russian Bolshevik control (Mazlakh, Shakhrai, 1919).

The crucial factor in determining Soviet Ukraine's colonial status was its ability (or inability) to utilize its own resources for its own needs rather than for the needs of the global communist state envisioned by the Bolsheviks. To extract Ukrainian resources, the Russian Bolsheviks needed an administration capable of implementing Moscow's policies in Ukraine.

The dilemma of whether Soviet Ukraine's rulers should be native Ukrainians or outsiders was never seriously considered in the Kremlin. The composition of the leadership of the Communist Party of Ukraine (CP(b)U) and the government of the Ukrainian SSR in the first half of the 1920s demonstrates this: ethnic Ukrainians made up an absolute minority in the ruling elite. This fact, supported by statistical data, confirms that Soviet Russia forcibly imposed a communist political regime on Ukraine, with a ruling class handpicked by the Kremlin essentially an occupying administration. This characterization of the ruling elite of the Ukrainian SSR may be uncomfortable for advocates of political correctness, but it is highly accurate. Even a century ago, prominent leaders of the Ukrainian national liberation struggle of 1917-1921, such as Volodymyr Vynnychenko (Vynnychenko, 1980), Isaak Mazepa (Mazepa, 1922) and Mykyta Shapoval (Shapoval, 1925), emphasized the occupying nature of Soviet power in Ukraine. Were they correct?

The statistical data available to researchers convincingly demonstrate the non-Ukrainian nature of the Bolshevik government in Soviet Ukraine (Doroshko, 2008, pp. 66, 67, 77, 78). The given factual data convincingly confirm the non-Ukrainian character of the Bolshevik government and its true intentions towards Ukraine, about which one of the leaders of the Ukrainian National Revolution of 1920 V. Vynnychenko wrote: "No Soviet (soviet) power was established in Ukraine... All power was taken over by... a handful of people from the Russian Communist Party. This power relied on the military force of the Red Army regiments imported from Russia" (Vynnychenko, 1920, p. 315).

V. Vynnychenko also explained the reasons for the hostile attitude of the Ukrainian population towards the Bolshevik government, which, in his opinion, consisted in the fact that the policy of the Communist Party of Ukraine (b) in Ukraine is of a centralist, anti-Ukrainian nature, and the Communist Party of Ukraine (b) is an instrument of its great-power course. Vynnychenko wrote:

"The revolution in Ukraine is carried out mainly by the army and those party forces which are sent from Russia... The entire Ukrainian SSR, as a separate federal state is a fiction," and "the relationship of the socialist Russia to the socialist Ukraine is very similar to the relationship of the imperialist states to their colonies" (Vynnychenko, 1980, p. 449).

The non-acceptance of the Russian occupying power by a significant part of the Ukrainian society required the Central Committee of the RCP(b) to implement a particularly balanced personnel policy in the republic. However, until 1923, when the RCP(b) at its 12th congress proclaimed the policy of "the indigenization", the main source of the formation of the party-the Soviet nomenclature in Ukraine remained the personnel appointments carried out by Moscow or at least coordinated with it.

Given that a significant portion of Ukrainian society rejected Russian communist rule, the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) (RCP(b)) had to adopt a particularly cautious personnel policy in Ukraine. However, until the RCP(b) introduced its policy of "indigenization" (korenizatsiya) in 1923, the main source of appointments to leading positions in the puppet Ukrainian SSR was Moscow's direct control or, at the very least, its approval.

The communist regime managed to deceive the authorities and the population of the Soviet republics with the apparent proclamation of the most democratic state of workers and peasants much easier than to convince the world community of the voluntary unification of the national outskirts of the former Russian Empire under the supremacy of Moscow. The West quickly understood the essence of the "voluntary" unification of the republics in the USSR and a few days after the proclamation of the USSR on December 30, 1922, the Polish press, in particular, wrote: "Ukraine is now abolished. This is good. Now the Ukrainian parties in Galicia, which were oriented towards Ukraine, will know what friendship with Russia means" (TsDAGO of Ukraine, f. 1, op. 1, file 98, folio 102). In contrast, the West actually reacted to the proclamation of the USSR with a resolution of the Council of Ambassadors of the Entente on the transfer of the Ukrainian lands of Eastern Galicia to Poland.

As for the personnel situation in the Ukrainian SSR, from the point of view of the representation of Ukrainians in it, it was such that it forced one of the leading figures of the Ukrainian SSR, Mykhailo Frunze, admitted: «The Soviet apparatus in Ukraine is composed almost entirely of people who do not speak the Ukrainian language» (TsDAGO of Ukraine, f. 1, op. 1, file 99, folio 62).

A similar conclusion was reached by Mykyta Shapoval, a prominent figure of the Ukrainian Revolution, based on official Soviet statistical data. Analyzing the ethnic composition of the Ukrainian SSR's ruling elite in 1924, he found that Ukraine was governed primarily by a non-Ukrainian minority (Shapoval, 1925, p. 4). Even the indigenization policy of the 1920s did little to change this reality, key positions in the Ukrainian SSR remained largely occupied by non-Ukrainians.

Those Ukrainians who believed in the possibility of building a «free Ukrainian republic of workers and peasants», tempted by slogans of national equality in the future global commune, paid with their lives. Millions of Ukrainians were exterminated through famine and forced deportations orchestrated by the communist Kremlin, clearing the way for new occupiers and settlers.

Would the Ukrainian people have suffered such irreparable losses if Ukraine had remained a sovereign state? This is highly doubtful. The artificial famines of 1921-1923, 1932-1933, and 1946-1947 alone, which claimed the lives of millions of Ukrainians, drastically altered the ethnic composition of Soviet Ukraine. The Ukrainian populations of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia, Dnipropetrovsk, and Kherson regions, decimated by the Holodomor of 1932-1933, were largely replaced by ethnic Russians brought in by the Stalinist regime. Ukraine continues to suffer the consequences of this deliberate demographic engineering. The physical destruction of Ukrainian peasantry, the national intelligentsia, and the overall genetic erosion of the Ukrainian nation during the rule of the Leninist-Stalinist totalitarian communist regime were only possible because Ukraine was an occupied and colonially dependent territory. The Kremlin's leadership was determined to install a non-Ukrainian government and eradicate the Ukrainian people's aspirations for independent statehood.

**Conclusions.** Thus, Russian colonial policy in Ukraine and other former Soviet republics, which was persistently implemented by the rulers of both the Russian and Soviet empires from the 18th to the 20th centuries, had devastating consequences in political, economic, and humanitarian

spheres. The imposition of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, economic experiments, repressive practices, forced population relocations within the imperial framework, and the systematic Russification of subjugated nations, all these were key features of imperial governance. It is therefore not surprising that, unlike previous historical empires, the Russian imperial state collapsed twice, in 1917 and again in 1991. Nor is it surprising that the Russian empire, in a new form, still survives today, thanks to the sustained efforts of the collective West, led by the United States, which continues to pursue a misguided policy of "resetting" relations with Russia.

To counteract this short-sighted Western policy, the oppressed nations of the Russian and Soviet empires offer an alternative approach - one based on the colonial experience of Ukrainians and other subjugated peoples, who have demonstrated their capacity to break free from the grip of the Russian imperial monster. A key instrument for overcoming the colonial legacy in post-Soviet states should be historical policy, aimed at spreading awareness of the truth about the Soviet colonial past. The essence of such a policy extends beyond merely renaming streets and settlements that bear the names of colonizers. It also involves post-Soviet societies confronting "uncomfortable" questions - such as whether the Soviet Union was indeed an empire and whether its national republics were, in fact, colonies. The liberation of the national consciousness of the enslaved peoples of the former USSR from imperial narratives is essential for overcoming the Russian colonial legacy and for the post-Soviet states to establish themselves as independent actors in international affairs.

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