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What Ukraine Teaches Us about Colonization

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Tulips on the monument to Kherson's Heroes and Patriots who gave their lives for the peace, territorial unity, and independence of Ukraine. In April 2022,

Sociological work on colonization and settler colonialism tends to emphasize the material motivations of empires, invasions, and conquests. It speaks to one of the roots of our discipline, founded in theories of Marxism and resource-based group conflict. But, while colonization unquestionably produces material benefits for the metropole, it starts much earlier. Conquest begins in the mind.

In his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (Esprit 1952), psychoanalyst and social philosopher (and Marxist) Frantz Fanon reminded us that, "Imperialism leaves behind germs of rot which we must clinically detect and remove from our land but from our minds as well." Indeed, many American Indian authors stress that the primary harm of colonization

the monument was destroyed and removed from the Park of Glory to an abandoned Zabalkivske cemetery. Photo credit: Mykola Homaniuk.

is neither discrimination nor resource deprivation, but an iron cage created by colonial processes that tries to force indigenous peoples to forget their values, communities, and selves.

Before empire can begin, colonizers must already possess the mental scaffolding of conquest. They must believe that empire is their right, or at least manifest sufficient support for the idea from elites and the critical masses. This is no easy feat. It requires the complete adoption of several critical beliefs: (1) that a people can and *should* venture forth from their homeland; (2) that the native peoples they encounter are lesser; and thus (3) that these natives have lesser rights to these lands. Together, these beliefs form the foundation of colonization—a narrative that, at its heart, is one of superiority and righteousness. Only after this foundation has been built may colonizers take newly discovered resources for themselves.

This is not to say that the resource wealth gained in colonization is unimportant (and motivated reasoning no doubt aids in justifying invasion). But, long before that wealth materializes, and perhaps even before that wealth is conceptualized, the conquistador must first believe that the world is theirs to claim; to conquer; to tame. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson said in *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Minnesota University Press 2015), “The problem with white people is they think and behave like they own everything.” This is not a statement about wealth, but worldview.



Monument to Soviet-Afghan War soldiers with installed Soviet Banner of Victory. Kherson, May 2022. Photo credit: Mykola Homaniuk.

The Russian Colonial Mind

The mental scaffolding of conquest is on harsh display in the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While there is little doubt that Russia can benefit financially should it successfully occupy and hold Ukraine—wealth which will perhaps help offset the exorbitant expense that was the annexation of Crimea—the invasion did not begin with a quest for riches. It began in the Russian mind.

Propaganda about Ukraine circulated through Russia decades before the invasion, broadcasting ideas such as: Ukraine is not an independent state; Ukraine is not a nation at all; the Ukrainian language is really a dialect of Russian.

In Russian media, Ukraine is often called a “quasi-state” and

Ukrainians are called “Malorossy” (Little Russians).

When Russia occupied Kherson in southeast Ukraine in early March 2022, occupying authorities distributed propaganda materials articulating a colonial surreality—that the inhabitants of the Kherson region are not Ukrainians, but as the Russian press called them, “Russians with Ukrainian passports”. According to Russia, the region is Russian-speaking, but in fact, census data show that 85 percent of Kherson inhabitants speak Ukrainian as their native language. As part of the occupation, Russian press termed the region “Novorossiia” (New Russia) and proclaimed it had been part of Russia for hundreds of years, merely on loan to local Ukrainians.



Billboard with the words 'Russians and Ukrainians are the one people, one single whole.' Kherson, July 2022. Photo credit: Mykola Homaniuk.

Power Sits in Places

Russia entered Ukraine, not only with its army, but also with its map. Before the invasion, Russian authors, from President Putin to provincial journalists, actively promoted a revised vision of Ukraine's geography. It is no coincidence that Sergei Shoigu is both the Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation and the President of the Russian Geographical Society. Revising maps, toponymy, and symbolic space are vital parts of occupation policy.

In sociology, place names are viewed more as symbolic statements than assertions of power. For example, the U.S. Department of the Interior initiative to rename federal lands that contain the word "sq__," announced earlier this year, was seen as largely a movement to modernize and

remove a reminder of a painful past. Yet, Bourdieu's discussion of how the state exercises symbolic power through "legitimate naming" reveals this as more than just a formality. A critical approach to toponymy emphasizes the need to take the language of place seriously, recognizing what Berg and Vuolteenaho call the "always-already power-laden character" of (re)naming places.

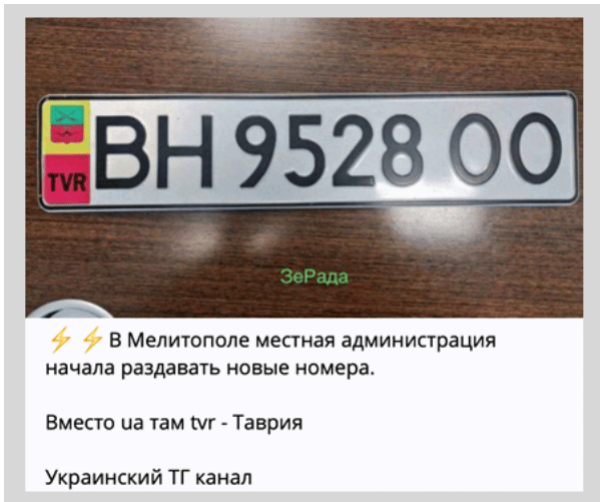
This focus on power and legitimation highlights the importance of "mental regions." As described by Terry Jordan, these are areas that, unlike states or administrative units, are delineated only in the imaginations of the people, carved by culture, history, conflict, and patriotism. Such mental regions, written in the memories of Russians and Ukrainians, are crucial to the Russian version of geography of Ukraine—and the justification for invasion.

One region, Novorossiya in southeast Ukraine, was formed by colonization of the supposedly "uninhabited" Wild Field, after the Russian-Turkish wars in the eighteenth century. The Donbass region was "gifted" to Ukraine by Vladimir Lenin, icon of the newly empowered Soviet state. Similarly, an area of western Ukraine—including Polish, Hungarian, and Romanian lands—was "donated" to Ukraine by Joseph Stalin in the same way Nikita Khrushchev "donated" Crimea. Thus, in the Russian geography, a distinctive Ukraine includes only the territories around Kyiv (Kyiv, Zhytomyr, and Chernihiv regions). In this Russian mental map, Ukraine is an amalgamation of Russian Empirical conquests and powerful Soviet state-making. In the would-be conqueror's mind, the cultural, linguistic, and political history of the people living in these regions is irrelevant to their meaning as places.

Yet, during the last 30 years of Ukrainian sovereignty, a new geography emerged. The legacy of communism was dismantled though geographical renaming and administrative-territorial boundary reform. What arose was a new geography for the Ukrainian people—one built on the cultural, linguistic, and political history and the diversity of people living there—instead of the legacy of Russian conquest. In the southern regions, the names used by Crimean Tatars, indigenous peoples of the region deported in 1944 as part of a genocide ordered by Stalin, began to return to Ukrainian maps. But, in the Russian colonial imagination, this new geography holds no meaning—these places are Russian places, complete with the Russian political right to decide the fates of millions who live there.

Constructing a New Imperial Memory

The Russian geographic narrative is so vital to invasion that the occupying government has been willing to outlay significant resources to preserve this fiction, despite stretched supply lines and flagging manpower. In Kherson, a Ukrainian flag on a war memorial was replaced with the Soviet Banner of Victory—the hammer-and-sickle raised over the Reichstag at the end of World War II. After a local removed the red flag, the occupational government left a full platoon of soldiers, complete with both an armored troop carrier and an armored truck, to guard the flag (and empty park grounds), day and night, for several months. At the same time, monuments to Lenin, removed during the decommunization campaign in 2014–2015, have reappeared in several occupied cities and towns. In the main square of Kherson, invaders have decided to erect a monument to Russian empress Ekaterina the Great.



Screenshot from pro-Russian telegram-channel *Battle_Z_Sailor* with a license plate from the occupied city of Melitopol. Local authorities started to give out new car licenses on which “UA”—for Ukraine—was replaced with “TVR” for Tauride—what the region was called under the Russian Empire. May 2022. Photo credit: Mykola Homaniuk.

Geographical revisionism incorporates more than the brutal destruction of Ukrainian symbols of independence and the return of Soviet tributes. Russian military leaders seem particularly aware of the importance of maintaining this colonial mental toponymy. Immediately after invasion, local occupation administrations began to visualize their presence in the symbolic space. Some Ukrainian places, streets, and settlements were renamed, or pronounced in a Russian manner; road signs were replaced; entrance steles to cities and villages were painted in the colors of the Russian flag; and boundaries (administrative and territorial) were restored to their Soviet arrangement. Recently, Russian media has re-adopted Soviet-era names for many Ukrainian cities (e.g., Dnipro to Dnepropetrovsk, Kropyvnytskyi to Kirovograd, Lyman to Krasnyi Liman, and Bakhmut to Artemovsk).

The State Duma of the Russian Federal Assembly even proposed renaming the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions to “Taurida,” the name it had prior to 1921 after the collapse of the Russian Empire. Although not officially adopted by the assembly, versions of “Taurida” began to appear: occupied authorities started to call the region “Tavria (Tauride);” the new local television company was renamed to Tavria; and the abbreviation TVR (Tavria) began appearing on car license plates.

This revisionist geography is more than a symbol to inspire patriotism or instill hopelessness. Rather, it is an active and crucial part of colonization. It is the construction of a new imperial memory. Without it, Russia would be unable to justify the economic, human, or moral costs of invasion; these geographical myths are what give Russia the right, even moral duty, to kill thousands in a quest to launch a new colonial era. Invasion begins in the mind.

Putin’s unapologetic imperial aims, expressed vividly in his 5,000-word lament over the fall of the Russian Empire, justifies the invasion as an act of “historical unity” aimed to unite “one people.” Putin says, “I am confident that true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia. For we are one people.” His tone is an updated version of the same world-building espoused in the Papal bull issued by Pope Alexander VI in 1493, better known as the Doctrine of Discovery: “[T]he Catholic faith and the Christian religion be exalted and be everywhere increased and spread, that the health of souls be cared

for and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself.” These ideas, incorporated into American law by Chief Justice John Marshall in 1823, are also the foundation for the modern treatment of tribal sovereignty (e.g., *Oklahoma v. Castro-Huerta* 2022).

Neither declaration is about resources, or even a place. They are about a people. To the world, Russian aggression looks like invasion—the launching of a new and dangerous period of European conflict. But from inside the colonial mind, Russian action is not so dramatic. Rather, it is seen as a natural extension of the meaning of people—us and them; civilized and savage; Russian and Ukrainian. In the Russian imagination, they are taming the wilds and bringing civilization to the frontier, the same way a gardener trims a hedge.

However, before the colonial mind can conclude that the wilds are a place that can and should be tamed, it must first view itself as the gardener. Putin justifies his actions, just like Alexander and Marshall, by first knowing, in his heart of hearts, that his rightful, legitimate, and even God-given place is that of cultivator. This was the view shared throughout Christendom in fifteenth-century Europe, and one that was surprisingly prominent across Russia. An April 2022 survey, conducted by Russian Field Research Group, found that 71 percent of Russians believed that Russian and Ukrainians are one nation.

Refusing a New Colonial Age

Russian mental geography has unquestionable consequences for what it means to be Russian in the modern era, but it also changed what it means to be Ukrainian in a way the invaders could not have expected. Traditionally a nation based on an ethnic understanding of itself, Ukraine has seen the budding of a new identity, one founded on a political unity of sovereignty, resistance, and resilience. Ukrainian civil identity and belonging has substantially increased since the start of invasion. In attempting to resurrect their extinct empire, Russia remade the Ukrainian meaning of sovereignty and independence. The world was shocked by the depth of that independence—and the fierce resistance it engendered. This proved Russia’s greatest misstep because, as much as colonization begins in the mind, it also requires an unflinching sense of righteousness to sustain.

It is fashionable, both in sociology and more broadly, to talk of decolonizing, or to say we live in a post-colonial world. *American* Indians tend to scoff at such statements. After all, as Elizabeth Cook-Lynn said, “[t]oday colonizing, unlike slavery, is not a crime anywhere in the world.” At the same time, an ocean away, the invasion of Ukraine is testing the morality of the world. We will only pass if we truly can declare colonization a crime against a people—Native or Ukrainian—and refuse the rise of a new colonial age.

The Northwestern campus sits on the traditional homelands of the people of the Council of Three Fires, the Ojibwe, Potawatomi, and Odawa as well as the Anishinaabe, Ho-Chunk, Kaskaskia, Kickapoo, Mascouten, Menominee, Miami, Myaamia, Peoria, Sac and Fox, and Wea Nations. Today it is the home to a vibrant and thriving Native community.

The Kherson oblast (region) sits on the traditional homelands of the Nogay people (subethnic group of Crimean Tatars) of the former Jamboiluk, Yedichkul, and Yedisan hordes (clan, tribe).

Any opinions expressed in the articles in this publication are those of the authors and not the American Sociological Association. The authors wish to thank the Buffett Institute for Global Affairs and Northwestern’s REEES Research Program for facilitating their collaboration.

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