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Field Notes: Why Do We Need Eastern Europe?

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These Field Notes map the impact that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has had on research in architectural history. We asked scholars already involved with Eastern Europe and Russia how the conflict has affected their approach to the region and to their work. In five responses to this question, these authors identify the need to dismantle conceptual and geopolitical frameworks that have been inherited from the late Soviet period, critically re-read the historiography of Russian avant-garde and constructivist architecture, and confront the question of postcolonial critique in Eastern Europe from a viewpoint in the Global South. Taken together, these notes from the field offer both immediate reactions from scholars to the terrible war in Ukraine and reflections on possible paths for architectural history writing in the aftermath of this shock.

Keywords: Ukraine; Russia; decolonisation; architectural historiography; Soviet Union; imperialism

Introduction

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In June 2022, the Eastern European Interest Group of the EAHN held a meeting during the Madrid biennial conference to address the impact that the Russian invasion of Ukraine might have on research in architectural history. Still in the early days of the war, we called for personal reactions from scholars already involved with Eastern Europe and Russia, asking how the conflict affected their approach to the region and how it had altered daily aspects of their work. Working within a short timescale, the responses were expected to be spontaneous in character, dealing with the shock of the invasion and the recognition of new conditions for intellectual work. It was clear that the circumstances around studying Russian and Soviet architecture had changed, and we needed to make sense of this change. Put categorically: there was a need to reconsider an entire historiography not only in the larger current geopolitical context, but also in its longue durée.

Appeals for a more just approach in studying the Russian role in the history of the region had already been put forward by scholars in the humanities and the arts a few days after the invasion began. There were demands to break off collaboration with Russian research institutes, universities, and exhibition halls that were funded by the government, and to end co-operation with scholars and artists supporting the regime. There also appeared numerous calls for decolonising research on Russia. This included recognising the privileged role given to Russian culture over other areas in the region, as well as recognition of these instances where scholarly and curatorial works have been appropriated for the promotion of the Russian regime. As researchers of Soviet art and culture know well, Soviet accomplishments have often been seen as solely Russian, to the neglect of the role of the other fourteen republics. As one commentator put it in the web art magazine Hyperallergic, 'In a way, Russian culture has never stopped being imperial, fixated on centres … , and almost never supporting peripheries' (Badior 2022). Countering this tendency is recent research on collaborations between the republics, the Soviet satellites, and the Global South. Questions about the context, meanings, and appropriations of this recent work have enhanced the understanding of the place and role of the region.

Appalled by the Russian invasion and worried by the possibility of, yet again, instrumentalising history, the Eastern Europe Interest Group thought it necessary to react with scholarly work, engaging in both on-the-spot feedback and a prospective exploration of the impact the war could have on the approaches and methodologies in our field. When the group was created in January 2006, the first such EAHN interest group, its scope was explicit: to stimulate an inclusive architectural historiography and contribute to shifting those discourses already in place with new epistemological signifiers and new investigative tools. By 2018, this scope seemed to have been satisfied, rendering the group less relevant. Hence, the roundtable at the EAHN biennial conference in Tallinn in 2018, which asked 'Who (still) needs Eastern Europe?' — a question that resonated rather rhetorically in a context of the apparently 'pacified' architectural history of the region. Less than four years later, this soothing ambiance proved more than illusory, showing how important it is to keep digging into this history and to sharpen our understanding of it and to revise our tools and methods.

Methodologically, the term decolonisation raised its own difficulties. Although it has been circling within global academic circles in art and architectural history for the past decade, it referred primarily to the relationship between the West and its former overseas territories in the Global South; territories in Eastern Europe fell outside these categories. Moreover, decolonisation was often applied retrospectively, and there were no real precedents for dealing with active conflicts where historical distancing — 'dignified objectivity that allows for critical detachment' — was not possible (Leigh 2022). In the Eastern European context, the resurgence of postcolonial theories carried the threat of falling back on the rhetoric of national myth-making, familiar from the 1990s and early 2000s, when the decolonial critical vocabulary was often reversed and manipulated in favor of a nationalist populism.

In spite of these difficulties, talking about decolonisation is essential, as it reveals forgotten — or obscured — historical continuities, like the repeated imperial concern of Russia for the fate of the Orthodox Christianity, justifying numerous interventions (including military, such as the Crimean War, 1853–1856) in neighbouring countries. Considering that such a long-term influence is not a matter of the past helps to shed light on the assiduous work in recent years of furtive political influence — highly mediated art shows and music events, not to mention the conspicuous Russian Orthodox Spiritual and Cultural Center, designed by Wilmotte & Associates in the (almost) heart of Paris in 2016. Moreover, such issues seem to reinforce the new historical theories that imperialism is also significant today for understanding the current geopolitical landscape (Davies 2022).

In what follows are five responses to the call of the Eastern Europe Interest Group in 2022. Three of these responses were presented in Madrid and two others were additionally commissioned. First, Daria Bocharnikova looks back at the moment in 2012 of establishing the Second World Urbanity network that aimed to promote transnational research of the Socialist bloc. Bocharnikova wonders whether this strategy of connectedness of its various actors is still productive in the face of the changed circumstance of the war and whether such a strategy might actually fuel Russian imperialism and expansionism. From there, Oxana Gourinovich's text draws attention to the paradoxical afterlife of the conceptual and geopolitical framework inherited from the late Soviet period that still determines the general understanding of the region's spatial culture. She reveals how Russia is a 'peculiar coloniser', while insisting on a renewed focus on the intersectionality of colonial experiences on the Soviet-Russian territories.

Continuing with a critical approach to Soviet architectural historiography, James Graham addresses the tension between imperial multi-ethnic heritage and the anti-imperialism of the early Bolshevik ideology. He calls architectural historians to investigate the early Constructivist project through the idea of an ethnic ideology of minority nations alongside class consciousness, looking at how this ethnic support was constructed through new institutions.

Łukasz Stanek's intervention confronts the question of postcolonial critique in Eastern Europe from a viewpoint in Africa, explaining the difference in understanding the term 'coloniality' across these two geographies. He argues for an Eastern Europe that is an 'epistemic place', a location that allows us to question and rework the knowledge patterns produced in hegemonic centres. Finally, Markus Lähteenmäki states that the war in Ukraine has drawn attention again to the ways in which architecture in the former Russian provinces has been intertwined with imperial power and has acted as its instrument. He invites the elucidation of these assemblages of power, inscribed into buildings, monuments, and public places.

The Second Time for a Second World Urbanity

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I finished editing this text on day 210 of the Russian-Ukrainian war. More than six months of human and non-human suffering. So many Ukrainian cities and lives are in ruins. This text is part of the debris of war. As a scholar, I can only describe what we tried

to erect in the past years and what is now laying in ruins. I can only speak in my own name and testify to a singular position at the moment when the imagined communities are facing the violence of essentialised divisions. Thinking beyond state borders is impossible when rockets rain across them. I, like many others, will have to imagine and weave new communities during and after the war. Even scholarly communities will need to be reconstituted and repaired, especially those anchored in Lviv and St. Petersburg, Kharkiv and Yekaterinburg, Kyiv and Moscow. New constellations and power relations between different scientific centres and individuals affiliated with diverse institutions have yet to be founded.

I continue to ask myself: is it appropriate to speak up as a scholar, as Russian citizen? Is it an appropriate moment to have a scholarly conversation about our methods? It seems I can only use my voice in the street to shout where the Russian military ship should go. My voice today matters only as amplifier of the Ukrainian struggle. I can only be part of the anti-war choir, a backup singer. It seems to be a wrong moment to take the front stage. Yet I dare to step forward. I am grateful to European colleagues who invited me to join this discussion. I am thankful that my work and my existence is acknowledged, while I as a citizen of the aggressor state am ready to withdraw into silence or to join the collective roar against the aggressor. I am thankful for being able to speak from a more ambiguous place of being both Russian and European, an outraged citizen and a stubborn scholar, a member of the transnational movement that aimed to provincialise Moscow and recognise the impressive diversity of architectural production across the Second World, and an ally of scholarly efforts to develop postnational and postcolonial imaginaries. Today, as never before in this in-between position, I feel the second time has come for second world urbanity studies.

More than a decade ago, at one of the annual conventions of the Association of Slavic, Eastern European and Eurasian Studies, Steven E. Harris, the historian of Soviet mass housing, and I discussed the urgent need to launch a project that would gather together colleagues from different disciplines — architectural historians, historians, anthropologists, geographers — and, working with different national archives, help us all to theorise the specificity of modernisms and urbanisms under state socialism. As a PhD student exploring the history of Soviet modernism of the 1950s and 1960s through a focus on Moscow-based architects, I felt increasingly frustrated with doing my research within the confines of Soviet studies.

In 2012, without being able to completely revisit my own PhD in the making, I together with Steve and other senior colleagues launched the Second World Urbanity network and web platform (www.secondworldurbanity.org). It allowed me, as a junior researcher, to prioritise resistance to methodological nationalism and to place at centre stage the questions of agency. It allowed me to save socialist modernism, along with

the efforts of many modernists, from the trash bin of 'totalitarian art' and to valorise it. Scholars trained after 1989 often 'normalised' socialist modernism as part and parcel of the process of building the modern nation state, a process not simply interrupted by state socialism but rather intertwined with it and ultimately leading to liberation from Soviet empire after 1989. In this way, these new histories of socialist modernism in its many national varieties were built into a larger yet teleological narrative of the triumph of nation-state formation. I feared 'nationalising' (sometimes together with 'Europeanising') this often undervalued heritage came dangerously close to de-politicising it as unquestionably modern, but eventually not so socialist.

At the same time, this important post-1989 corpus of scholarship created an impressive range of empirically rich studies documenting particularities of national varieties of socialist modernisms. These contributed to broadening the scope of national and global canons of modernism. Beyond being trapped by the fiction of the nation state, what did these studies bring to the fore? They testified to the failure of the imperial centre to impose a coherent policy across the vast space of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. In other words, by shedding light on national actors and institutions, they demonstrated the power of professionals to shape state policies, and, ultimately, the state itself. Recognising the agency of these multiple actors and acknowledging the resulting diversity of socialist modernisms were important steps toward what could be called provincialising Moscow and uncovering much more complex power dynamics between the centre and diverse peripheries, as well as between the peripheries beyond the centre. It is this complexity that called for further theorising and more rigorous comparative research. A growing number of publications of recent years by scholars like Łukasz Stanek, Vladimir Kulić, Christina Crawford, and Ákos Moravánszky, to name a few, are attempts to address these complexities in a much more systematic fashion.

The project of resisting methodological nationalism and paying closer attention to historical actors had a political promise of uncovering other futures than the inevitable return to the highway of capitalism and reinforcing nation state after 1989. This promise had a new lure in 2022, when the warfare regime redefined the region and its collective imaginaries. I hoped then and I would like to insist now that Second World Urbanity, as a concept and a collective of like-minded scholars, could produce an account that not only de-centres empire but also makes possible a conversation about building vast networks of cooperation and solidarity that have the power to simultaneously cement the political union and question it again. It aspires to theorise 'a *differentiated* and *divided* even if highly *interconnected* world' (Bocharnikova and Harris 2018; italics added for emphasis in 2024) and to study the alterity and in-betweenness of the Second World condition in order to better understand the politics of exchange of knowledge,

technologies, and materials in forging often diverging projects of socialist futures and complex structures of transnational cooperation.

I ask myself, after February 24, 2022: Is it still productive to group together all these diverse actors, from Chile to the Arctic Circle, from Tajikistan and Buryatia to Poland and Ukraine, so that we can imagine alternative futures of global cooperation that contribute to building public infrastructures for equality? Is this project of rediscovering the connectedness of the Second World complicit in fuelling Russian imperialism, revanchism, and expansionism? Especially after 2022, it seems essential to give voice to particular actors and their emancipatory struggles, rather than obscuring their actions by references to shared ideals that were difficult to implement and to entanglements with often coercive regimes not always true to their decolonial rhetoric.

The internationalist and the postnationalist in me resists any radical revision of these research optics. Our collective imaginary, I would argue, needs as never before to avoid being stuck on the image of one dictator based in Moscow, or even on his impressive antagonist based in Kyiv, but rather to be able to see the diversity of actors who make a difference and bring about social change, both past and present. Being able to focus our attention on the histories of those architects and engineers, building collectives and individual citizens who constructed modern yet very different cities across the vast Second World and improved the everyday life of millions of their fellow citizens, valorises professionals and like-minded collectives and their power, past and present. It also pushes us to ask the next questions that are future-oriented rather than solely for research. What visions help these often very different people, anchored in very specific local situations, to work together and produce a global network of solidarity and mutual aid? What institutional landscapes and political and economic frameworks make these collaborations possible and productive? It also reminds us of the power of these people and the networks they founded to overcome their colonial past and the predicament of underdevelopment, even in the context of the violent modernisation of the 20th century. What epistemic violence are they responsible for and what indigenous knowledges do we need to embrace today to construct our analytical tools and to make complexities and hybridity visible and actionable?

As a scholar and cultural worker from in-between Russia and Europe, heir of the violent 20th century, and a shareholder of this broken planet in the 21st century, I continue to support Second World Urbanity studies. Cultivating interdependence and weaving transnational infrastructures of solidarity through our study should remain our strategy. And then there are tactics. We should encourage ourselves, our students and our colleagues to learn Ukrainian, to teach classes on Ukrainian modernism and history, and to advocate for the creation of new chairs of Ukrainian art and history across

the globe, because the shared aspiration of decolonising and humanising our present goes hand in hand with supporting the Ukrainian (but also Belarusian or Kazakh) struggle against the epistemic and military violence of the Russian state. I hope these new chairs, departments, and research collectives could become part of a yet-to-be founded Lesya Ukrainka Network of Interdependence Studies and also organic homes for the second generation of Second World Urbanity students.

The Revenge of the Future

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Since the beginning of the Russian invasion, the trope of a 'conflict of concepts' became one of the most ubiquitous explanations for that invasion: Putin's vision of Ukraine as an intrinsic part of a Russian nation and state is a concept that collides with the Ukrainian presupposition of its own political sovereignty. For me, as a scholar of Soviet architectural history, the trope's omnipresence entails a somewhat shocking realisation that Putin's territorial claims do not contradict the geopolitical concept of the region generally endorsed by my own field of study. Moreover, it appears that the Russian, now totalitarian, ideology and studies of Soviet architecture and planning still share crucial concepts inherited from the Soviet period and employ a reductionist approach to the history of political and cultural domination in the region.

The library shelves in the Grimm Bibliothek, the central library of Humboldt University of Berlin, the city's largest and oldest university, form a mind map of contemporary research in the German capital (**Figure 1**). The shelves labelled, in German, 'Russia – Its Provinces and Places' are part of the larger category of 'Kunst', which also accommodates the literature on architectural disciplines. Here you'll find books on Armenian, Georgian, Moldavian, and Belorussian art and architecture. Filed under 'Russian Art' are volumes on the vernacular architecture of Lithuania; rescuing Armenian *khachkara*; Belorussian and Ukrainian public art exhibitions; Ukrainian art and architectural history; and Uzbek and Kazakh architectural surveys. The shelves in the Grimm Bibliothek place all ex-Soviet republics within the Russian realm. Visitors can request that the order of the shelves' contents be changed, yet, as of December 2023, it remained uncontested. The world order laid out by the library shelves does nothing to contradict the claim of Putin's regime that Russia is a civilisational entity with exclusive rights to exercise control over the lands that once belonged to the Russian Empire.
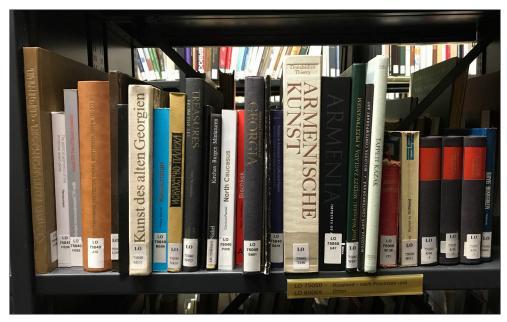
Figure 1: Shelves in the Grimm Bibliothek, the library of the Humboldt University in Berlin, on 15 December 2023. Photograph: Oxana Gourinovitch.

The order of the books on architecture, brought together by currently valid spatial preconceptions, is a worrying testimony: neither the national question nor the issue of coloniality succeeded in having any noticeable impact on Soviet architectural studies. The first warnings about the ongoing dramatic disregard of these issues in Soviet studies in general arose as long ago as the 1990s. Ronald Grigor Suny became one of the first scholars to articulate the dangers arising from 'the revenge of the past' in his eponymous book addressing the 'crisis within the Soviet studies in the West'. He criticised Soviet studies for paying 'far too little attention for far too long to the non-Russian peoples' and for being, instead, '[l]imited by its long-time allegiance to centrist, top-down, Russian-biased political analyses, and seduced by ahistoric models and deductive from ideology and personality' (Suny 1993: 2). As the German library's shelves indicate, architectural historiography is still trapped in this dichotomous picture, 30 years after Suny published his critique. The field of study not only fails to challenge geopolitical concepts, which today have ignited one of the most dangerous conflicts faced by humanity; it also flagrantly asserts the existence of a uniform and centralised Soviet realm, where all parts intrinsically belong together, informing a geopolitical Russia-centred entity.

The ground-breaking geopolitical changes of the 1990s saw states disappearing, appearing, or reappearing (East Germany, Belarus, Lithuania), old geopolitical meta-narratives re-emerge (Polish Kresy, Intermarium, Baltoscandia), and new ones

emerge (the 'Russian World', 'Greater Eurasia'). Space became an ever more powerful actant in the construction and negotiation of national and civilisational identities. Yet the tectonic processes of nation building behind those events — with their irrational, separatist, and regressive connotations — remained far less appealing to scholars than the assertions of socialist universalism and globality. Today, the ramifications of those neglected processes are shaking the foundations of the contemporary world order. For Soviet scholars, they should be reason enough to consider the powerful reality beyond the reductionist dogma of Soviet russocentrism.

The still operative concept of nation that evolved in the Soviet-controlled territories has received far too little critical attention. In a conversation in 2012 with Timothy Snyder, Tony Judt exposed the paradox of the concept: dedicated to the progressive Occidental universalism of its Marxist-Leninist ideology, it was, at the same time, a product of ethnographic sciences in the first place, and used in a way that was synonymous with 'peoples' and 'ethnic' (Judt and Snyder 2012: 239). Even a short acquaintance with the history of the Soviet ethnography reveals the remarkable determination of Soviet social sciences to counter the Western 'constructivist' theories of nation with their own concept of ethno-nationhood (Alymov et al. 2019). This hypertrophied attention to ethnicity was apparently inherited from scholars from the Russian Empire, who early on decided to follow a path of ethnic exceptionalism rather than humanist universalism (see Nadezhdin 1847). The Soviet preoccupation with ethnical distinctiveness eventually climaxed in a 'minor revolution' in the 1970s, whose main concepts retain their validity for post-Soviet successors: invoking etymology as argument, Soviet scholars introduced to the world the term 'ethnos' as a replacement for 'a people' in English, 'das Volk' in German and 'народ' in Russian (Gellner 1977). They thereby declared basic distinctions in the sphere of culture as inherent in 'ethnoses-peoples', claiming to 'have evidence that not only a separate component of culture determines the character of ethnos but the sum of the specific features of culture inherent in it' (Bromley 2011: 17).

This paradox of the Soviet political programme, which combined the promise of proletarian internationalism and the dissolution of nations, on the one side, with the 19th-century ideology of organic ethno-nationhood and national rebirth on the other, shaped the equally contradictory national policies, both affirmative and lethal to non-Russians and Russians alike. While affirmative action today is losing its universalist drive, the durability of post-Soviet ethnographic concepts, advanced in separating social bodies into 'us' and 'them', or invoking 'inherent' cultural differences, remains hugely beneficial for the construction of national narratives. Such concepts prove themselves conveniently adaptable to an ethnocentric notion of a sovereign nation,

which still reigns in the post-Soviet realm — making a closer examination of the Soviet concepts of 'national' an imperative for the scholars.

However hyper-inflated the term (post)coloniality might appear at the moment, addressing it is unavoidable for at least two reasons, as I see them. For one, the systematic examination of the issue of Russian-Soviet colonialism is generally long overdue, and for another, the explosive and sometimes hate- or guilt-driven nature of the emerging interest fosters a reductionist approach to this highly complex topic. Any investigation of the postcoloniality of the post-Soviet sphere should recognise the highly nuanced diversity of its colonial relations. The 'intersectionality' of colonial experiences within the former USSR's territories deserves examination; (Soviet) Russians were eventually the last group of people standing in a centuries-long contest between various European and Asian powers — from the German Reich, Sweden, and the Habsburgs to Rzeczpospolita Polska, the Ottoman Empire, and the Golden Horde.

Of particular importance is Russia's own history of self-colonisation, which strongly affected its action as a coloniser. The perception of its own cultural inferiority — which Russia barely overcame, even if seldom admitted — made it a peculiar coloniser. Its westward expansion reversed the standard Western colonisation protocol, whereby the coloniser considered the colonised as passive, ahistorical, or barbaric. To address this idiosyncrasy of Russian colonialism, David C. Moore proposed to expand the three-part taxonomy of the standard occidentocentric accounts of colonisation ('classic' oversea-colonialism, the settler-colonialism, and the 'dynastic' colonialism towards the neighbouring territories, which results in disappearance of those peoples as such) with a fourth type: the 'reverse-cultural colonization' (Moore 2001).

Over 20 years ago, Moore also made a case for the creation of a global postcolonial theory. He pointed to an epistemic difficulty of such an endeavour, which was owed both to the privileging of Western European colonisation as the standard employed by the postcolonial scholarship and to scholarship's struggles with the necessity to use the Western episteme to deconstruct this colonisation (Mbembe 1992). As we register now, several decades later, the major hazard for developing such a global theory was not of a methodological or epistemological nature. I'd argue that it was rather a lack of motivation by scholars to commit to the issue at all, at least in the field of spatial disciplines. The paradoxical 'double signature' of the socialist world-making, both universalist and ethno-nationalist at the same time, permitted approaches to its phenomena from radically different standpoints. The vantage point on the side of progressivist universalism has offered a far more appealing view on the socialist environments than having to deal with the subaltern, subjugated, subconscious, excluding, othering, and generally in- and backward-looking subjects of national

construction. The trauma of the ongoing war, which surely affects every researcher of the Soviet domain, might curb the progressivist enthusiasm and provide opportunities for a change of motives. The 1990s' threat of a 'revenge of the past' failed to shift the field towards a consideration of the geopolitical tectonics in the region. Maybe the intimidating prospect of the near future will prove itself a more convincing argument, and eventually lead – who knows! – towards a globality of postcolonial thinking first envisioned 30 years ago.

A Bridle of Wires: Constructivism and the Nationalities Policy in the Early USSR

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At its peak, the USSR famously occupied 'one-sixth of the world', in territorial terms. But as the Soviet Census of 1926 found, nearly a half of that territory's population was non-Russian, with a list of recognised nationalities that ran into the hundreds. This ethnic complexity was the result of centuries of expansionary colonisation, confronting the early USSR with something of a paradox — how to reconcile Russia's imperial territory with the stated anti-imperialism of the Bolshevik Revolution. For some, and particularly for national elites, this supposedly post-empire Internationalism offered an escape from the long shadow of assimilation. (The 'Ukrainisation' of the 1920s, for example, saw the widespread growth of Ukrainian-language education and institutions, before its 1930s reversal.) But for many, as the history of the 1920s and the 1930s makes plain, the early decades of the USSR were experienced as a coloniality of a different stripe.

Why is it, then, that the field of architectural history has been slow to acknowledge the importance of non-Russian nationality in the scholarship around Constructivism and other movements, beyond occasionally naming the national origins of various metropolitan protagonists? There are localised exceptions to this, certainly, and an increasing breadth of scholarship that expands the geographies of the avant-garde and the USSR's architectural bureaucracies alike, for example Christina Crawford's excellent *Spatial Revolutions* (2022). But the USSR was (and Russia remains) an expansive terrain of ethnic, climatic, and cultural difference — and one of the projects of the artistic and architectural avant-gardes in the early Soviet Union was to make that reality legible, to take stock of this immense variability while attempting to unify it. The Constructivist project was not simply a metropolitan Russian phenomenon imagining an urban architecture of the worker — it was an active participant in the remaking of the larger

landscape of Soviet influence, replacing the imperialism of the Russian tsars with the managerial logics of the plan.

The Soviet discourse around territorial development was inextricably related to the idea of *korenizatsiia*, or nativisation — an embrace of national minority languages and identities as well as an ostensible guarantee to the right of self-determination on the part of USSR's many national republics. The Bolshevik attitude toward the 'national question', as it was often known, was theorised in 1913 by none other than the young Georgian Josef Stalin, who would later become the USSR's first Commissar of Nationalities (Stalin 1947 [1913]). Cultivating ethnic identity alongside class consciousness, the Bolsheviks reasoned, offered two distinct benefits. In regions that had been previously colonised by tsarist Russia, an identification with national belonging might help to supplant generations of resentment against Russian chauvinism — particularly crucial to keeping Ukraine within the Soviet ambit (Velychenko 2015). And if the USSR was to be imagined at the centre of an ongoing world revolution, radiating outwards from Moscow, national movements elsewhere would be similarly instrumental in Communism's expansion. Thus, the challenge of development under the idea of *korenizatsiia* was to produce identification with the Soviet project by *cultivating* nationality rather than negating it, creating self-consciously 'national' subjects — through championing non-Russian-language newspapers and education as well as a host of new cultural institutions.

And as Brigid O'Keeffe argues in her recent *The Multiethnic Soviet Union and Its Demise*, this strategic cultivation of nationality was not just an attempt at political representation — it was a building project, one that involved monuments, schools, theaters, housing, and institutions of all kinds (O'Keeffe 2022). The often-used term 'socialist construction' was certainly meant in the sense of designing and materialising the 'new world' of the Bolsheviks, but also in the sense of producing socialist subjects — not just the Soviet 'new man' of the workers club and the collective farm but Soviets who also identified with national belonging, insofar as national consciousness would help transcend what was generally taken by the urban Russian elite to be historical 'backwardness'.

For architects, this meant pursuing forms of architecture that straddled the gap between the larger USSR and the particularities of climate, land and culture in a given republic or region, whether through ornamental, infrastructural, or climatic techniques — a genre of architecture that we might think of as Settler Constructivism. (*Poselenie*, or 'settlement', was a favoured term of Constructivist urbanists, carrying some of the same colonial implications as 'settlement' in English.) I've always struggled with Boris Groys' critique of the 'myth of the innocent avant-garde', or the argument

that the Constructivists in fact modelled an aesthetic will to power in which the total design of life was a precursor to Stalinist totalitarianism (Groys 1992, 8). Perhaps the complicity of the avant-garde isn't found so much in its urge to control the minutiae of everyday life, as Groys suggests, but rather in its willing participation in constructing these simultaneously 'Soviet' and 'national' landscapes. Sometimes this took shape by exhibiting the fruits of the USSR's nationalities in Moscow (in the pavilions of the VDNKh fairgrounds, evoking something like a Communist world's fair, or in the pages of journals like *USSR in Construction*). But it also took the form of new institutions — schools, collective farms, Houses of the Soviets, textile plants, horticultural and soil laboratories and above all housing — intended to produce that sense of Sovietness across national and ethnic lines (**Figure 2**).

Figure 2: The 'Steppe City' of Elista, Russia, as illustrated in *USSR in Construction*, 1 (1930). Across the 1920s, the nomadism of the Kalmyk people was transformed through the construction of a new Soviet administrative centre. This image shows a teachers college in Elista.

These practices largely ended after 1932 and the consolidation of Stalin's dictatorship. While architectural historians typically note 1932 as the year of the decree of Socialist Realism and thus the de facto demise of Constructivism, it seems fair to suggest that the end of *korenizatsiia* and the return of Russification might be the more consequential turn of the early 1930s, as it re-congealed the essentially colonial hierarchies of the pre-Revolutionary empire that resonate through to the present. As if to drive the point

home, as I'm writing in December 2022, recruitment ads have appeared in Moscow's buses, written in Uzbek, Tajik, and Kyrgyz, offering expedited Russian citizenship in exchange for military service. This 'offer' mirrors Russia's earlier mobilisation that primarily targeted ethnic minorities, just as it mirrors the failures of genuine national self-determination under the Soviet Union.

Vladimir Mayakovsky, writing in 1926, vividly described the 'bridle of wires' that tamed Ukraine's Dniepr River and tethered it to the expanding networks of the USSR — an image that speaks to the territorialising nature of the Soviet project, a landscape inscribed by lines that channelled electricity and water alongside wheat, money, language, and, yes, architecture. While the breakup of the USSR implied national independence, that bridle in many ways remained, as today's pipeline geopolitics can attest. Architectural history can do more to take stock of how the buildings we study sit within these territorial networks, and can do more to write the history of nationality and *korenizatsiia* into what we too often think of as 'Russian' Constructivism.

Rereading Colonialism from Eastern Europe and Western Africa, or, What Architectural Historians Can Learn from Ghanaian Responses to the War in Ukraine

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Reflecting on the Russian invasion on Ukraine, Andres Kurg and Carmen Popescu asked if architectural historians once again 'need Eastern Europe'. Giving reasons for why that might be the case, they positioned the region among places where 'colonialism seems to strike back' and noticed a renewed interest in a postcolonial rereading of architectural history of and in Eastern Europe.

Such rereading promises to recognise a broader historical relevance of a region which, since the end of the Cold War, has been rarely considered to have one. But how convincing is a postcolonial positioning of Eastern Europe when considered from beyond the region? Does it hold up when confronted with the views on the war in Ukraine from various parts of the African continent, a landmass profoundly shaped by colonial violence?

I have experienced the first months of the Russian invasion on Ukraine while staying in Ghana, where I was a visiting scholar during the spring semester of 2022. I had many conversations with Ghanaians about the war: with parents anxious about their children who were studying in Ukraine and struggled to get out, with friends concerned

about the rising prices of fuel and food, and with colleagues worried about the longer consequences of the war for West Africa.

Many — but certainly not all — of my Ghanaian interlocutors were reluctant to express support for Ukraine. That was a common sentiment circulating in West African media, which often opined that Russia was provoked by NATO's enlargement in Eastern Europe in the aftermath of the Cold War.

This point of view baffled Eastern European commentators, who expected Africans from across the continent to be natural allies. That expectation was based on assumed historical similarities between Western European colonial occupation of the African continent and the occupation of Eastern Europe by neighboring empires. Many pointed at the continuities between tsarist colonialism in Eurasia and Soviet conquests, including that of Ukraine. Others reminded their readers that both Eastern Europeans and Africans were subjected to the Western European distinction between a 'good' type of nationalism of 'respectable' nations such as Britain and France, and a 'bad' type of nationalism of 'small peoples [who] have small understanding,' to quote Wisława Szymborska (1981: 117).

These debates were hardly registered by media in Western Africa. Yet the responses of commentators on the continent to Western European and North American journalists may be read as rebuttals of the historical analogies proposed by some Eastern European media.

For example, the Kenyan writer Patrick Gathara questioned 'why Africa does not appear to be "standing with Ukraine"' (Gathara 2022). He argued that while most Africans would agree to support Ukraine from a humanitarian point of view, they would refuse to accept the political consequences of this statement as proposed by Western media and institutions. As Gathara pointed out, this refusal reflected experiences across Africa of encounters with Europe and the United States. They include both the long history of Western European colonialism and the more recent military interventions by Americans and Europeans, among them the new member-states of NATO.

The difference between Europe's response to these interventions and its response to the Russian invasion on Ukraine shaped the perception of the invasion among West Africans. Writing on social media, many pointed out the contrast between the welcome received by Ukrainian refugees in Poland and the pushbacks of North Africans, Central Asians, and Middle Easterners at the Polish-Belarussian border since winter 2021.

Several among my Ghanaian acquaintances have concluded that the reception of refugees at the Polish border depended on their race. They saw this view confirmed by several incidents during the first weeks of the Russian invasion, when groups of African

students were hindered from boarding trains and crossing borders to Poland and other EU countries. By contrast, many Eastern Europeans would argue that their solidarity with Ukrainians was not about race but about a shared history and a common threat posed by a rogue neighbor.

In other words: when Eastern Europeans see the war in Ukraine through the legacy of colonialism, many of my Ghanaian interlocutors would agree. But that would only highlight the differences in the understanding of this term across these two geographies. When Eastern Europeans see the war in Ukraine in continuity with the history of Russian colonialism, they understand it along the lines of military domination, economic extraction, ethnic displacement and cultural subjugation. But many Ghanaians questioned the role of the colour line in these dynamics or, in the words of W. E. B. Du Bois, 'the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea' (Du Bois 2007 [1905]: 15).

For a long time, historians, among them Kathryn Ciancia (2021), Lenny A. Ureña Valerio (2019), Sofia Dyak (2020), and Itohan Osayimwese (2017), have been studying the ways in which racial and ethnic categories were central to Prussian, German, Austrian, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman imperialisms, and to Poland's 'internal colonisation' between the two world wars.

What the view from West Africa adds to these complex histories of racialisation and their ongoing consequences is a reminder that while Eastern Europeans oscillated across the colour line, their amplitudes were not symmetrical. While their claim to whiteness has been often qualified in Western Europe, it has rarely been categorically denied. In particular, in the aftermath of the Cold War, citizens of several Eastern European countries have increasingly become beneficiaries of whiteness as these countries have been absorbed into Western political, economic, and military structures, however unequally and unevenly.

What does this disputed positionality of the European East mean for the question posed by Kurg and Popescu? In my work, I have argued that the Eastern Europe that architectural historians may 'need' is an epistemic place. This argument was building upon the work of scholars such as Ákos Moravánszky (2017) and Manuela Boatcă (2003), who understood Hungary and Romania as locations 'off centre' from which established knowledge production may be questioned and modified. In my study of Cold War architectural exchanges, I show how architects and planners from Eastern Europe and West Africa speculated about sharing such a common positionality 'off centre' in order to adapt and appropriate architectural concepts and planning methods across these geographies (Stanek 2020; 2021) (**Figure 3**).

Figure 3: The 'Russian bungalows' on Third Russian Street in Tamale, Ghana. These were built in the 1960s as housing for Soviet specialists. Photograph by Łukasz Stanek, 2022.

Just as that speculation was embedded in the rereading of Eastern European and West African histories in the context of the Cold War and administrative decolonisation, so is the war in Ukraine a new moment of historical repositioning. While in 2022 most of Eastern Europe and large parts of the African continent continue to be 'off centre' of global academic production, the perspective from the continent on the war in Ukraine revealed the differences between their positionalities.

Consequently, when read from across Eastern Europe and Western Africa, fundamental concepts of historical enquiry such as 'modernity', 'development', 'the global', 'colonialism', or 'race' not only diverge from their hegemonic readings but also differ across these 'off centre' locations. Debating such differences challenges the concepts, methods, experiences, and archives of the colonial centres as sole authoritative sources of knowledge about colonialism. Such debates help us to foreground the differing perspectives on colonialism from across various geographies, while at the same time undermining the epistemic authority of the former colonial metropoles.

On Architecture and Empire in East Europe and North Eurasia

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The ongoing war in Ukraine has made it clear that there is a need to re-evaluate and retune ourselves towards the practices of colonialism, empire-building, the dynamics of centre-periphery relations, and the persistent cultures of violence and aggression embedded in Russian culture. The war waged in Ukraine has laid excruciatingly bare the belief in entitlement and power over others that runs deep within Russian state and culture. It seems evident that architecture, in multiple ways, is implicated by these forces, and more than that, has acted and acts as an instrument of them.

The current condition requires a rethinking and reframing of the scholarship on Russia, the Soviet Union, and all areas in direct connection with them. Architectural history needs to elucidate the spatial and formal strategies triggered by the politics and aesthetics of empire, its iconographies, styles, traditions, and epistemic breaks in relation to nation- or empire-building, wars and revolutions.

I believe that this means the reconsideration of the entire history of architecture under the spheres of influence of Russian and Soviet states, both in the centre and in the peripheries. Rather than a marginal aspect, architecture, even at the most superficial of glances, seems to play a central role in such dynamics and in communicating them throughout history of Russia and other formations around it. From the wars of hegemony between the cities and neighbouring peoples of the ancient Rus to the formation of Russia under Muscovy, architectures as well as architects and draftsmen moved with victory to mark conquests. From Peter I's epoch and the building of his eponymous new capital — perhaps the greatest of all architectural gestures of conquest in modern Europe — to Catherine II's replanning of cities across the empire and performances of conquest through architectural edifices (the so-called Potemkin villages), architecture can be seen as a key instrument in expressing the expansion and consolidation of power of Russian empire. The employment by Alexander I and Nicholas I of strict Neo-Classicism as an architectural uniform in the centre as much as in the periphery continued the marking of territory with architecture. St. Petersburg was re-monumentalised with huge projects often related to military and state administration, such as the General Staff Building reframing the Palace Square. Meanwhile, newly annexed territories were marked with large-scale building projects in the same style, such as the reconstruction of Helsinki as the new centre for the

administration of Finland. Since the mid-19th century, ecclesiastical and cultural buildings, such as theatres and exhibition pavilions built in the highly ornate Russian Revival style, merged the empire's spatial and temporal expanses into one, acting as signposts of cultural imperialism across the empire and beyond its boundaries. In St. Petersburg and Moscow, this new national style collaged together the different national identities that were governed by the centre, while further afield, it was the preferred style for churches of minority Orthodox Christian communities as well as for exhibiting the empire abroad, like the Russian Pavilion at Venice Biennale. The same dynamic can be seen mutating in the 20th and 21st centuries: from the attempts of the revolutionary movement to undo the forms and meanings of empire to its new Soviet mutations that followed, all the way to the post-Soviet attempts to dismantle or reconstruct Soviet structures of power through architecture and infrastructure, be it symbolic projects such as the Zaryadye park in central Moscow or the Crimean Bridge acting as a transport-link to contested territories.

Besides elucidating the entanglement of practices from within the centre and its perspective, it is important to do so from the periphery, too, beginning from the polities, nations, and peoples that were not empires but were defined under or in relation to them. It is important to trace the attempts of translation and adaptation, resistance or amplification of practices and tendencies related to the many smaller actors and networks working within the centre's sphere of influence. The dynamics between urban planning efforts and new towns in building national or imperial identities didn't always work in a similar way even at the same moment, and even less so across different temporalities. Raising new monumental buildings in Poland under Alexander I or in Finland did not necessarily fit into the same vision, just as the nuances of translation and adaptations between central power and local effort were different in the building of Kharkiv or Tashkent in the 1920s or a decade later when the dynamics would have once again radically changed. There is a need to dig deep into the processes of design and construction and to ask questions of the structures of power and the tendencies implicated in them of expansion, extraction, and exploitation. Only the ability to look at them across time and space comparatively and through the same questions of nation- and empire-building might allow us to understand the underlying tendencies, prevalence, and mutations of such practices over time.

Re-evaluating the histories of architecture of border areas and the nuances of the ways in which they adopted and replicated the colonial power of the centre, resisted it, or were crushed by it is also a key for understanding the centre, the mutations and path-dependencies of imperial and colonial thought and practice. This calls for locating and analysing the architectures and urbanisms in the 'states in between', from Finland to

Poland and Ukraine, Georgia to Kazakhstan and Mongolia, from the lands of the Sami to those of Buryats and many other territories, peoples, identities, and nations.

As the violent and imperialist tendencies of Russia show no sign of going away, it is the task of scholars in the humanities to provide a basis for and a way of imagining another future. As scholars of culture, we need to provide the frame of reference and historical understanding of the ways in which the powers and identities of empire and locality were replicated and amplified as well as deconstructed and fought against. Architecture played a key role in this and can thus act as a prism by which to understand the broader dynamics at play. Laying bare the changing dynamics of such relations is not only necessary to explain how we got where we are, but it is also important for creating a base of reference for discussion on how to go forward.[1]

Note

Competing Interests

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