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WHO IS TO
BLAME FOR THE
RUSSIA-UKRAINE
WAR?:

*Feminist and postcolonial
perspectives on 'real politics'*

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The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has widely been narrated as having epochal significance with far-reaching implications. For leading historians of Eastern Europe, such as Timothy Snyder (2022) and Serhii Plokhy (2015), what we are seeing is an existential threat to democratic norms.

While discussing phenomena of the political world, drawing on a variety of lenses is advantageous; in the case of the Russian-Ukrainian war it is a necessity. This article engages with a combination of lenses provided by feminist and postcolonial theories to critically reflect on the logic, as articulated by Russia's political elites, behind the invasion of Ukraine. It focuses on the role of gender and racialisation in normalising one's place in the social hierarchy and its 'appropriate' behaviour, excusing occupational, violent and genocidal policies under the abstract term of 'real politics'.

This article attempts to trace the way social structures empower gendered and racialised politics, allowing invasions to be justified. Russia-led wars in Ukraine will be discussed as an example of the consequences of such a structure and ideology. This article will firstly underline a feminist and postcolonial approach that addresses the necessity of social hierarchy analysis to reveal the causes of war. Further sections will focus on unpacking Russia's claims of the legitimacy of its colonial/great-power state project to incorporate Ukraine. I will conclude with a reflection on how the notion of the nation-state, rooted in the ideologies of social hierarchy and colonial domination, can be seen as having fuelled the ongoing war.

Intersection of feminist and postcolonial theories

The intersection of critical approaches to international relations has revealed the gendered and racialised language embedded into the western perspective on the nation-state which glorifies aggressive and violent policies (Enloe, 2014, p.124).

Both feminist and postcolonial lenses provide powerful analytical tools that reveal the overlaps between the realist and imperialist tones explicit in the speeches of Russian leaders (Kuzio, 2022). By identifying the rhetoric that excuses war, critical lenses identify the way in which 'real politics' normalises invasion as one of the justifiable options available to the state. Let's first look at the feminist approach.

Feminist theorists consider gender as a form of social hierarchy, which creates unequal and excluded power redistribution between human sexes and shapes the worldview of global politics (Tickner, 1992; Enloe, 2014). The gendered structure of knowledge production is argued to be rooted in stereotypes and assumptions about males' and females' 'standardised' behaviour, based on their sex categories (Enloe, 2014).

Western phallogocentrism, first theorised by Jacques Derrida (Dely, 2008), values more masculine 'features'. Outlined in Greek philosophical thought, this was based on a socially constructed 'ideal' type of men that who ought to reflect masculine traits (reason) and define themselves in relation to the 'other' – the 'emotional' and 'passionate' female body, which was thought to be less capable of performing characteristics that the male body was privileged to have (Peterson, 2000). Yuval-Davis (1997) argues that theories about the political organisation of society, a state-based order, were drawn from the concept of the 'state of nature' introduced by the 'fathers' of realism, Hobbes and Rousseau. She argues that the Hobbsian perspective of males as aggressive, and Rousseau's view of man as 'capable of reasoning' support the idea of 'human nature' which underpins contemporary international relations.

This is why the archetype of a (masculine or reasonable) man became central for constructing characteristics that facilitated the normative state (Weber, [1949] 2017). Due to gender binaries, it is argued that a state manifests the masculine 'image' of the strong protector, which needs to demonstrate its power through physical and material domination (Hart, 1976; Waltz, 2001). It does this both domestically and externally to deter other actors who, predominantly, will challenge its strength to boost its own military capacities in the "state of war" underpinned by anarchy (Parkin, 2015). Scholars of feminist theory (Tickner, 1997) point to the gendered language and categories that are used by traditional IR scholars to contrast the state's domestic system (order, peace, safety) with the external environment (anarchy, lawlessness, chaos, ego, deceit). Thereby constructing the political agenda of a state, with the focus on a self-defensive politics as its major concern (Walt, 1991). Yuval-Davis (1997, p.97) argued that realism's 'convention fiction' of a "pre-condition natural state" has enabled military forces to constitute the basis of coercive power from which the state claims the right to rule.

The notion of sovereignty is a key theme of international relations (Philpott, 1995). Smith (2011) has elaborated on the western narrative of national sovereignty that is used to excuse colonisation while subordinating colonised people from the decision-making through the ideas of legitimate authority. While Philpott (1995, p.356) defines sovereignty as a supreme legitimate rule over given territory, this concept is manipulated by the imperial state to doubt colonised people's right to independent decision-making (Yuval-Davis, 1997). As Yuval-Davis (1997) notices, the imperial state is trying to pursue the idea of their legitimacy to rule over colonised territory with the help of the hierarchical heteropatriarchal model (Smith, 2011, p.65). The model 'accepts' a state sovereignty only if it

demonstrates its coercive capacities through the military forces (Smith, 2011). From that perspective, the state is responsible for its own 'survival', and if it 'fails' to do so, it is legitimate for other actors to impose its power over it. According to Smith (2011, p.65) gender violence facilitates colonialism: "This is patriarchy that naturalises social hierarchy constructed through domination, violence and control".

One of the other tools imperial states use to claim their authority as legitimate is through historical manipulation, which is one of the most common features traced in the Russian propaganda (Kuzio, 2022). Doubting the legitimacy of Ukrainian people to define its own political agenda rooted into the 'common origin myth' seen in the concept of 'Russian people' (Shevtsova, 2022). 'One nation' narrative reproduces the idea of ethno-cultural inseparability between the Russian and Ukrainians as a way to impose a Russian-beneficial agenda in Ukraine while denying Ukrainian national independence.

Russian innocence & NATO-blame

Both gender and ethno-centric analysis have been used to critique and delegitimise the notion of Russia's innocence when it comes to the occupation of the Ukrainian territories since 2014. Justification of Russian aggression is explicitly present in the work of the scholar of offensive realism John Mearsheimer (2014), as well as 'Putinwersther' (Putin supporters) Cohen (2019) and Petro (2015). Similarly, such rhetoric is found in the speeches of Russian ultra-nationalist philosopher Alexander Dugin (Newman, 2014) and the Kremlin adviser Sergey Karaganov (Maçães, 2024). The common realism and oriental concepts are explicit in the works of these scholars and political figures, who try to present Russian aggression through the lens of a state's duty to fulfil its political agenda, while normalising



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Ukrainian subordination and passive role as an actor in the international arena (Kuzio, 2022, p.6).

Mearsheimer (2014) justified Russian terror in Ukraine through the prism of 'normative' behaviour of the states: "It's not imperialism; this is great-power politics" (Mearsheimer quoted in Chotiner, 2022). He considers Western invasion into the Russian 'zone of influence', referring to Ukrainian ambition to become a part of NATO, to trigger a Russian response. For Mearsheimer, "the United States and its European allies share most of the responsibility" for the Russian occupation of Crimea (quoted in Chotiner, 2022). From that perspective, annexation of Ukrainian regions by Russia aimed to deter other great-powers from expanding, referring to the US in the form of NATO collective defence pact (Kuzio, 2022). A similar point is made by Russian President Vladimir Putin, according to whom "NATO remains a military alliance, and we are against having a military alliance making itself at home right in our backyard or in our historic territory" (Kremlin.ru, 2014). Equally, Putin's adviser Karaganov (quoted in Mações, 2024) claimed that the reason behind the Russia-led war in Ukraine was "to end Nato's expansion".

The Russian Federation's decision to launch so-called military operations in Ukraine could be explained by the constructed binaries between Russia and Ukraine as active/passive, strong/weak, important/unworthy, based on a femininity-masculinity dichotomy (Kratochvíl & O'Sullivan, 2023). The Maidan Revolution of 2014 was seen as a 'feature' of a weak, 'failed' state that promoted 'anarchical order' in the region (Sysak & Malloy, 2023). This could be seen as a relevant 'symptom' for realists to discard Ukraine as a normative state, due to the state apparatus' inability to perpetuate the hierarchical order and provide 'security' and 'stability' within the state (Smith & Dawson, 2022). During the revolution in 2014, which resulted in the

pro-Russian regime being overthrown, Russian leaders' rhetoric was centred around the 'need' to intervene abroad to ensure peace and security inside and outside Russian borders (Sysak & Malloy, 2023). Feminist criticism of the notion of Ukraine as a failed state would focus on the gender binaries embedded into the realist account of the state that defines sovereignty in relation to violence and dominance, fuelling and normalising warfare (Enloe, 2014).

Feminist scholars such as Tickner (1997) point out the gendered concepts responsible for manifestation of the 'normative' state behaviour (Weber, [1949] 2017). The critique would refer to the naturalised aggressive interactions of a state, based on the idealised masculine image of men as a representative of humankind. Thus, the principles of politics are centred around the idea of 'human nature', which requires a state to demonstrate its military power domestically and externally through domination (Hart, 1976; Waltz, 2001) to deter other actors (inherently aggressive and self-interested) from challenging its military capacities (Parkin, 2015). The logic behind it only makes sense if Russia as a 'normal' state naturally responds to the threat, while Ukraine's freedom to take its own political decision is suppressed because of its subordinate place within the hierarchy (Ryabchuk, 2013). Such a reasoning of 'weak' state subordination is justified by Mearsheimer: "When you're a country like Ukraine and you live next door to a great power like Russia, you have to pay careful attention to what the Russians think, because if you take a stick and you poke them in the eye, they're going to retaliate" (quoted in Chotiner, 2022).

Sabotage of 'pan-Russian unity'

While for Mearsheimer (2014) the Russian war was instigated to counter the threat of possible western expansion in form of military pack, for oriental scholars Russia's actions seemed to be legitimate as

a protector of 'pan-Russian unity' and 'Russia's moral authority' (Newman, 2014) against western intervention (Kuzio, 2022, p.7). While Russia claims hegemony over Ukrainian national identity and denies Ukrainian sovereignty, it considers differences from Russia-promoted political arrangements to be a consequence of outside (so-called "collective West") influence (German and Karagiannis, 2017). It was this, Putin said, "that prepared the Kiev regime, which they controlled, and Ukraine which they had enslaved for a large-scale war [...] they were the ones who started this war, while we used force and are using it to stop the war [...] This is nothing other than preparation for hostilities against our country, Russia" (Kremlin.ru, 2023). The realist's language that legitimate expansion through the notion of the superpowers' battle over the 'possessions' choices is undeniable in such a claim, as well as the imperial narrative that rejects the political and cultural subjectivity of its colonial 'property' (Yuval-Davis, 1997).

The discussion of diminished Ukrainian subjectivity is continued in the account of Russia-Ukrainian relationships when it comes to the discourses on Ukrainian nationalism (Kuzio, 2022). Cohen (2019) argues that Russia was forced to 'intervene' in anti-Russian nationalistic movements sponsored by the West in Ukraine. As the leader of the Russian Federation put it, "all the subterfuges associated with the anti-Russia project are clear to us. And we will never allow our historical territories and people close to us living there to be used against Russia" (Kremlin.ru, 2021a). From the so-called western orientalist perspective, and according to the President of Russia Federation (Kremlin.ru, 2014), Ukrainian nationalism is essentially fake, because Ukraine is not a real nation-state, which must be seen only in the context of "pan-Russian nations" (Petro, 2015). As Putin put it, "We (Ukraine and Russia) are not simply close neighbours but, as I have said many times already, we are one people [...]"

we cannot live without each other" (Kremlin.ru, 2014).

The social hierarchies as a basis of relationship between settlers and colonies is justified by the idea of what is considered to be a sovereign nation (Riabczuk, 2013). By rejecting Ukrainian national independence under the notion of 'inseparability', Russia has portrayed Ukrainian intellectual decolonization as something hostile; as an "act of provocation, disobedience and separation" (Shevtsova, 2022, p.137). Post-colonial lenses underline the imposition and reproduction of the Russian narrative about "one nation" which aims to naturalise and legitimate Russian agenda-setting in Ukraine. For Shevtsova (2022, p.114), the historical manipulations and selectivity of the Russian account of its relations with Ukraine that stresses the closeness of both nations, intended to naturalise Russia's "ownership" of Ukrainian territories and people. Riabczuk argues (2013) that the notion of settlers' superiority over the colonised people's culture and language is used to legitimise imperial domination. Such a claim matches the history of Russian-Ukrainian relations where Ukrainian national identity and legacy has been "seen as peripheral, inferior or non-existent" (Shevtsova, 2022, p.136).

Neo-traditional ideology and militarised-patriotism were considered to be a milestone of Russian national identity (Kratochvíl and Shakhanova, 2021). That is why protecting 'traditional' values played an important role in military mass mobilisation in Russia. According to Romanets (2017), "re-masculinisation" contributed to breeding Russian identity as an opposition to "Gayropa" values (Edenborg, 2017, p.159). Russia-Europe values contraction is rooted into Orthodox Christian fundamentalism as a part of Russian unistate-sanctioned homophobia (Romanets, 2017). That is why Ukrainian ideological Europeanisation

was perceived as a threat to Russian “spiritual” sovereignty and “traditional family values” which constructs Russian gendered identity around masculinity/femininity dichotomies (Edenborg, 2021). According to Kratochvíl and O'Sullivan (2023, p.360), “it is this hypermasculine construction that enabled the invasion”. As the leader of the Russian republic of Chechnya Ramzan Kadyrov put it, “Same-sex marriages are a normal thing for them (Europeans). [. . .] [I want] that our peoples restore their culture, customs, traditions. This is the basis for a strong Russia” (quoted in Morozov, 2015, p.120).

Russia's claim to the right to impose its agenda over Ukraine is linked to the denial of Ukrainian ethno-cultural subjectivity, vital for recognition of sovereignty (Yurchuk, 2017). Since Russia perceives Ukrainian territories and people as subordinated, Ukrainian decolonization and democratisation were portrayed as a deviation and external attack on “pan-Russian” unity and values.

Nazis & Russian saviours

The Russian mechanism of achieving legitimacy to invade Ukraine was also based on the constructed identity of Russia as a ‘liberator’, as a ‘watchdog’ of ‘Ruskey mir’ (“Russian World”) and its cultural and linguistic pre-eminence (Svetsova, 2023). As a continuum of the notion of the artificiality of Ukrainian sovereignty, Ukrainianization (Ukrainian as an official state language) has, since the start of the ‘Euromaidan’ protests in November 2013, generally been presented in Russian public discourse as an mechanism of repression against “those who did not see themselves as Ukrainians”, and whose interests should be ensured by Russia (Kuzio, 2022). Once nationalism in Ukraine was perceived as an inherently anti-Russian project, the ‘responsibility to protect’ principle was used to justify invasion (Shevtsova, 2022, p.115). The 2014 Russia occupation of the Crimean Peninsula was rationalised as the

aggressor-state’s ‘duty’ to protect ‘the people’: “Those who opposed the coup [the Maidan Revolution] were immediately threatened with repression. Naturally, the first in line here was Crimea, the Russian-speaking Crimea. In view of this, the residents of Crimea and Sevastopol turned to Russia for help in defending their rights and lives” (Kremlin.ru, 2014).

What is more, the narrative of the Soviet people’s heroic ‘liberation’ of Europe from Nazism played an important role in justifying the fight against ‘Ukrainian Nazis’. Bringing back the political memory of the Great Patriotic War was a clear reference to the Second World War with a glorification of the Russian victory (Shevtsova, 2022). To elucidate, the Putin’s speech at the Victory Day 2021 (Kremlin.ru, 2021b) continued this narrative, while glorifying the liberation from fascism that afterwards resulted in Soviet occupation of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania (Svetsova, 2023). Similarly, the annexation of South Ossetia in 2008 was presented as Russian support for the region’s ‘independence’ (Kuzio, 2022). Equally, the separatist military conflict in the Donetsk region was justified by Russian-speakers’ and Russians’ ‘concerns’ about a ‘radical revolution’: “Since 2014, Donbass has been fighting for the right to live in their land and to speak their native tongue” (Kremlin.ru, 2023). In line with this, the February 2022 Russian “special military operation” was explained by the logic of Russia’s “duty” to “deNazify” Ukraine from radical nationalists that oppressed the Russian-speaking minority (Shevtsova, 2022). Opposingly, Russia used to engage with the politics of ‘self-determination’. For instance, the Russian President recognised Eastern Ukrainian territories as a ‘sovereign’ while denying Kosovo independence and supporting Serbia’s national sovereignty (McGlynn, 2022). That demonstrates a hypocritical account of the Russian understanding of “responsibility to protect” and the notion of state sovereignty.

Denetdale (2016) believes that the notion of “tradition” is weaponized by the settler-state to legitimise imposing its agenda on colonised societies. That is evident in the Russian attempts to contrast the ‘natural’ presence of Russian language in Ukraine to ‘artificial’ Ukrainian (Shevtsova, 2022, p.144). While the circumstances of the wide-spread use of the Russian language in Ukraine are left unattended, if not fabricated, by Russian authorities, the reasons were rooted in “ethnic cleansing, resettling of people and language policies” in some parts of Ukraine (Shevtsova, 2022, p.114). According to Spivak ([1988] 2010), the colonised people are denied self-representation in political and cultural domains, while considered to be ‘subaltern’ (of lower status) to the settler nation. That is why Russia presents itself as a saviour of “Russian people” against Nazis, whilst defining Ukrainian culture and language as inferior and less ‘real’ (Kuzio, 2022).

Conclusion

In this article, I have looked at how the combination of feminist and postcolonial lenses can be profitably used as a tool for examining the reasoning behind Russian Federation’s justifications of its aggression towards Ukraine. The essay aimed to contextualise the way Russia claims its legitimacy to influence Ukrainian decision-making while justifying the invasion. Postcolonial lenses underlined how historical manipulations normalised the rejection of Ukrainian sovereignty. Similarly, gender-focused critics tried to demonstrate how the denial of Ukrainian subjectivity and its ‘rights’ to set the separate from Russia agenda fueled the imperial logic of the legitimization of the power over its colonial ‘possessions’. An amalgamation of critical lenses to international relations enables us to highlight the loaded language of the realists and orientalist in Russian public discourses. Tracing the gendered and racialized logic on what counts as a sovereign state and who has a ‘right’ to introduce a

political agenda on behalf of a nation, helps to underline the efforts made by Russia to make the war more acceptable to the international community. The case of Russia’s political stance toward its neighbouring states shows how social hierarchy is reproduced and normalised through the narratives of ‘the great powers game’ and ‘rational state behaviour’. While Russia-led wars demonstrate how imperial ideas are camouflaged and tolerated, the same logic might inevitably lead to the forging of a new political order that goes against the principles of democracy and just social interactions.

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