

CLUSTER: TOWARDS A HISTORY OF RUSSIAN COLONIALISM

Colonialism or *kolonizatsiia*? Why the Difference between Ukraine and Central Asia Matters

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Abstract

Since the beginning of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine in 2014, a view that interprets Russian-Ukrainian relations as colonialism has gained ground in historical scholarship. However, based on an analysis of the terms "colonization" and "colonialism" and a comparison between Ukrainian territories and the Governorate-General of Turkestan in late imperial Russia, this article argues for a more cautious use of the term "colonialism" in relation to Ukraine. It shows that contemporaries rarely viewed tsarist rule in Ukraine through the prism of colonialism, while in the case of Central Asia this perspective was pervasive. Moreover, tsarist policy toward Central Asia and its predominantly Muslim population was much more in line with colonial practices than it was in the case of Ukraine. While colonial rule is generally based on the institutionalization of difference, the opposite was the case in Ukraine: Ukraine was appropriated as part of the Russian nation. Therefore, this article argues that Russia's claims on Ukraine, which deny Ukraine's right to national self-determination and statehood, are not an indication of colonial subjugation, but rather of nationalist usurpation.

Keywords: colonialism; colonization; Central Asia; Ukraine; tsarist empire

Kolonizatsiia was a key term in Russian intellectual discourse in the late imperial period. Introduced into the Russian language during the 1820s, it gained widespread currency after the Crimean War and remained at the center of political debates until the collapse of the tsarist empire in 1917.¹ Russian eminent historians Sergei M. Solov'ev and Vasilii O. Kliuchevskii claimed that *kolonizatsiia* was the essence of Russian history, and their expression that Russia's history was the history of a country that colonized itself became proverbial.² This elegant formula has shaped Russia's self-image to this day, even though it obscures the fact that the object of colonization in Russian history was by no means always Russia itself, but predominantly foreign territories that first had to be conquered

¹ See the quantitative analysis of the use of *kolonizatsiia* at Russian National Corpus, <https://ruscorpora.ru/en/explore?req=колонизация> (accessed October 30, 2025). For an overview of late imperial debates on colonization, see Alberto Masoero, "Territorial Colonization in Late Imperial Russia: Stages in the Development of a Concept," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 14, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 59–91.

² Sergei Mikhailovich Solov'ev, *Istoriia Rossii s drevneishikh vremen*, 29 vols. (Moscow, 1857), 4:413; Vasilii O. Kliuchevskii, *Kurs russkoi istorii*, 5 vols. (Moscow, 1908), 1:24–25. For a short history of the notion that Russia colonized itself among late-imperial historians, see Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (Cambridge, Eng., 2011), 61–71.

by force.³ In contrast to the prominence of *kolonizatsiia*, the concept of colonialism plays only a minor role in the Russian self-image. Even in post-Soviet Russian historiography, it is taken for granted that only *kolonizatsiia* is suitable for describing Russia's expansion, while colonialism is considered exclusively an element of west European history.⁴ This understanding connects directly to the discourse of late nineteenth century, as the example of the renowned dictionary *Brockhaus and Efron* shows. Here, west European colonialism was discussed separately from Russia's expansion, even though both entries used the term *kolonizatsiia* in their headings. The entry on Europe's overseas expansion was simply called *kolonizatsiia*, which was defined as "a mass settlement in an uncultured or poorly cultured country of immigrants from any civilized state," resulting in the creation of a colony dependent on the metropolis. This entry mentioned Spanish colonies in Peru and Mexico, French colonies in North Africa, and British rule in India, among others.⁵

The dictionary's other entry, which was specified as *kolonizatsiia Rossii*, referred to the process by which new territories were acquired and settled in Russian history. While the entry devoted to the European version of *kolonizatsiia* emphasized the arbitrary and exploitative characteristics of European rule overseas, the entry on *kolonizatsiia Rossii* struck a completely different note. Its author described *kolonizatsiia Rossii* as an age-old and essentially peaceful process, consisting of the successive "flow" of Russian peasants towards the north, east, and south of the Russian heartland.⁶ The difference between the two forms of *kolonizatsiia* was highlighted even more by the fact that the entry on *kolonizatsiia Rossii* confined itself to the European territories of the empire. Omitting Siberia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, it excluded exactly those regions where contemporaries saw the most pronounced parallels to western colonialism. Thus, the dictionary entry on *kolonizatsiia* was devoted entirely to European imperialism, while the one on *kolonizatsiia Rossii* omitted all imperialistic aspects of Russian colonization.⁷ This discrepancy raises questions about the terminology used in the tsarist empire, but also about the relationship between its expansion and that of western colonialism in general. Imperial and colonial aspects of Russian history have been at the center of research since the collapse of the USSR, and they have gained renewed momentum since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which prompted calls for a decolonization of east European history.⁸

In this context, the term "colonialism" is being used more and more frequently for various aspects of Russia's imperial history. In contrast to the Russian usage, which largely avoids this term for its own history, a narrative is emerging outside of Russia that posits virtually all kinds of hierarchical or forceful encounters between Russians and other groups as colonialism. In a recent popular book, Ukrainian journalist Maksym Eristavi has identified forty-eight "invasions of Russian colonialism" between 1911 and 2023 alone, referring to

³ Willard Sunderland, "Empire without Imperialism? Ambiguities of Colonization in Tsarist Russia," *Ab Imperio*, no. 2 (2003): 101–14.

⁴ See, for example, V. V. Trepavlov, "Tri stoletii territorial'nogo rasshireniia Rossii," *Otechestvennaia istoriia*, no. 2 (2003): 181–85. For a discussion of Russia's anti-colonial self-image, see Alexander Morrison, "Russia's Colonial Allergy," *eurasianet*, December 19, 2016, <https://eurasianet.org/russias-colonial-allergy> (accessed October 31, 2025).

⁵ N. R., "Kolonizatsiia," in F. A. Brokgauz and I. A. Efron, eds., *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar'*, (St. Petersburg, 1895), 15:736–40.

⁶ Pavel N. Miliukov, "Kolonizatsiia Rossii," in F. A. Brokgauz and I. A. Efron, eds., *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar'*, (St. Petersburg, 1895), 15:740–46.

⁷ Here, it is sufficient to define imperialism with Jürgen Osterhammel as "the concept that comprises all forces and activities contributing to the construction and maintenance of transcontinental empires," see Jürgen Osterhammel, *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Princeton, 2010), 21.

⁸ See the contributions of Paolo Sartori, Danielle Ross, Alexander Morrison, Sergey Abashin, and Alima Bissenova to the blog of The Committee for the Study of Islam in Central Eurasia of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, <https://www.oeaw.ac.at/sice/sice-blog> (accessed October 31, 2025).

regions as diverse as East Germany, Syria, and the Arctic.⁹ While it is high time to question Russia's non-colonial self-image, historical research needs clear terminology. This paper argues that while the tsarist empire can indeed be considered a colonial power, the concept of colonialism is not equally appropriate for all its regions and at all times. To that end, this paper first analyzes the terminology of colonization and colonialism from a linguistic perspective, highlighting the difference between these two terms: While "colonialism" describes a relationship of domination between foreign peoples, "colonization" has a much broader meaning, encompassing also processes of migration or the development of agriculture within a given country. This paper then analyzes how references to west European colonialism were used in Russian discourse in relation to two very different regions of the tsarist empire—the territories of Ukraine and Central Asia. It demonstrates that European colonialism was a central point of reference in late imperial discourse on Central Asia, while it was much less frequently mentioned in the case of Ukraine. The second half of the paper deals with the reasons for this discrepancy and shows that, from an analytical perspective, the concept of colonialism is not equally applicable to these two regions and societies. While it arguably fits well to the relations between tsarist administrators and Muslim Central Asians, it is less suited to describe a relationship between peoples with a long history of contact and cultural proximity, such as Russians and Ukrainians. Furthermore, tsarist rule in Ukraine was characterized by attempts at integration and assimilation, rather than colonial differentiation and separation. Even though the Ukrainian steppe was a major arena of *kolonizatsiia*, Ukraine does not fit into the concept of colonialism.

Terminology

From a linguistic point of view, the term *kolonizatsiia* is part of a word family that exists in a similar form and with largely identical meanings in many European languages. This word family centers on the term *koloniia*, or "colony" in English. In Russian as well as in English and many other languages, *koloniia* has a double meaning: On the one hand, it designates a settlement of a specific group of peoples. These can be migrants from another country, but also professional groups, such as artists, or people under guard, such as prisoners. In its other main meaning, the term *koloniia* relates to the realm of geopolitics and refers to a country that is politically subordinated to a foreign conqueror. This double meaning of *koloniia* extends to some of its derivations, including, most importantly, *kolonizatsiia* or "colonization," which denotes the process of establishing colonies in both senses of that word. Thus, each of the two dictionary entries referred to above builds on one of these meanings, respectively: Europe's *kolonizatsiia* was seen as a geopolitical act, identified with the conquest of foreign countries and the subjugation of alien peoples, while *kolonizatsiia Rossiia* was associated with the establishment of peasant settlements in peripheral regions. These two main meanings of *kolonizatsiia*, however, sometimes overlapped in late imperial discourse on Russia's peripheries. Even when *kolonizatsiia* was used synonymously with "resettlement," the term could convey associations with western colonialism, whether intended or not. *Kolonizatsiia* therefore often blurred the line between the development of internal territories and the appropriation of foreign ones.¹⁰

In contrast to the double meaning of *kolonizatsiia*, the Russian adjective *kolonial'nyi*, like its English counterpart "colonial," refers only to colonies in the sense of dependent countries. The term was initially employed in reference to exotic commodities, designated as

⁹ Maksym Eristavi, *Russian Colonialism 101: How to Occupy a Neighbor and Get Away With It: An Illustrated Guide* (Kharkiv, 2023).

¹⁰ Masoero, "Territorial Colonization," 74, 88–89; Willard Sunderland, "The 'Colonization Question': Visions of Colonization in Late Imperial Russia," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 48 (January 2000): 210–32.

kolonial'nye tovary (from German *Kolonialwaren*). Since the early twentieth century, its scope broadened to encompass all matters pertaining to colonies in the geopolitical sense. The English form “colonial,” in turn, gave birth to the expression “colonialism” in the mid-nineteenth century. This term was later translated in many other languages and came into use in Russian around 1900. After World War II, “colonialism,” like its Russian equivalent *kolonializm*, became a key term for international politics. Describing a power relationship between different peoples, it also has an exclusively geopolitical meaning and has no direct relation to the colony in the sense of a settlement of a specific group anymore. In line with the loss of legitimacy of colonial rule in the course of the twentieth century, this term, in addition to its analytical significance, has become a highly charged political term used to describe a system of rule as illegitimate.

References to Colonialism in the Pontic Steppe and Ukraine

First documented in 1693, the term *koloniia* established itself in Russian during the eighteenth century.¹¹ This was the period during which the educated elite of the tsarist empire increasingly viewed Russia as an empire and developed an explicitly imperial self-confidence.¹² Even though Russia had long been an empire in the sense of a hierarchically organized multiethnic realm, it was only at that time that Russian elites began to compare their country to west European colonial empires.¹³ They did not yet develop any elaborate concepts of colonialism, and they certainly did not employ any distinctive term for it, but they identified certain similarities between the role of the tsarist empire in its peripheries and that of the western European empires in their overseas possessions. Among the first who did so was the renowned geographer Ivan I. Kirilov in the mid-1730s. When he suggested in a memorandum to Empress Anna Ivanovna that Russia should take possession of the Kazakh steppe, he pointed to the example of the Spanish and Portuguese in America and the Dutch in the East Indies, who had spared no efforts to conquer distant lands and were finally richly rewarded.¹⁴ Proposing that Russia should emulate the European powers, Kirilov made clear that colonial ventures were not only a matter of economic consideration but also of prestige for the newly Europeanized empire. Such references to colonialism became more prevalent in the second half of the century, during the reign of Catherine II. Comparisons with Europe's overseas possessions made clear that Russia's educated elite regarded the empire's expansion to the east and the south as an equivalent to Europe's colonial conquests. References to the colonial world were common for Siberia and Russian America, but especially for the steppes north of the Black Sea. The designation of the recently established Governorate of New Russia was an obvious allusion to the colonial expansion of Europe, which at that time had already resulted in the formation of New Spain, New France, and New England.¹⁵

In the course of the nineteenth century, however, references to the Pontic steppe as a colony became rare, and if they occurred, it was often unclear to which meaning of “colony” they related: to the subordinate foreign country, or simply to a space for settlement. As

¹¹ “Koloniia,” in *Slovar' russkogo iazyka XVIII veka*. Vyp. 10: *Kastal'skii-Krepostsa* (St. Petersburg, 1998), 103.

¹² Ricarda Vulpius, *Die Geburt des Russländischen Imperiums: Herrschaftskonzepte und -praktiken im 18. Jahrhundert* (Vienna, 2020).

¹³ Mark Bassin, “Russia between Europe and Asia: The Ideological Construction of Geographical Space,” *Slavic Review* 50, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 1–17.

¹⁴ “Proekt ober-sekretaria Ivana Kirillova ob utverzhenii v russkom poddanstve kirgiz i sposobakh upravleniia imi,” in A.I. Dobrosmyslov, ed., *Materialy po istorii Rossii: Sbornik ukazov i drugikh dokumentov, kasaiushchikhsia upravleniia i ustroistva Orenburgskogo kraia*, vol. 1 of 1734 god (Orenburg, 1900), 1:43, 46–47.

¹⁵ Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (Ithaca, 2004), 69–71.

Willard Sunderland has argued, the European steppe lost its air of a newly conquered colonial possession during this period and was increasingly perceived as a genuine “Russian” territory. The imperial components of Russia’s expansion into the steppe were now largely elided, and it was instead seen as the natural appropriation of hitherto unused land.¹⁶ Late nineteenth-century Russians thus perceived the area north of the Black Sea not as a theater of colonial conquest, but rather as a space of *kolonizatsiia Rossii*.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, a different perspective emerged that referred to colonialism in a strikingly new way. While during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries allusions to European colonialism had been used by imperial officials to express pride in the newly conquered possessions, they were now increasingly employed by critics of imperial rule in the Ukrainian territories. As Stephen Velychenko and Oleksii Yas have shown, Ukrainian intellectuals now criticized the lack of prosperity in the southern territories of the tsarist empire and drew parallels to European overseas colonialism, which was increasingly associated with national oppression and economic exploitation.¹⁷ Among the first who did so was Ukrainian economist Mykola P. Iasnopol’s’kyi in 1890. Arguing that the Russian government extracted considerably more in taxation from Ukrainian provinces than it returned in expenditure, he compared the uneven development of various regions within the Russian empire with the conditions of west European overseas colonies.¹⁸ Even more forthright hints to colonialism in a disparaging sense were published after the 1905 revolution, when censorship was relaxed in the tsarist empire. In 1908, historian Mykhailo Hrushevs’kyi compared the situation of Ukraine to African colonies, and he was echoed the following year by literary critic Serhii Iefremov, who compared “Little Russians” loyal to the tsarist empire with native leaders of West Africa, who collaborated with the colonial rulers.¹⁹ Mykola Stasiuk, a Ukrainian economist and politician, explicitly referred to Ukraine as a colony of Russia and Poland in 1911 in a detailed essay examining the economic relations between the three countries.²⁰ According to Velychenko, this was the first time the term “Russian colonialism” was publicly used in reference to Ukraine.²¹

All in all, however, such comparisons to Europe’s overseas colonialism remained scarce in Russian and Ukrainian discourse until 1917, as Velychenko has shown.²² The colonial paradigm was even rejected by parts of Ukrainian society, as many Ukrainians described themselves as “Little Russians” and thus part of an overarching all-Russian people. They saw no contradiction between a Ukrainian and a Russian identity and could hardly identify with a colonial classification of Ukraine.²³ It was only with the outbreak of the revolution that the colonial paradigm gained greater favor in Ukraine. Numerous Ukrainian politicians on the left now compared Ukraine to the colonized countries of Asia and Africa and presented themselves as part of a global anti-colonial movement. Initially aimed at delegitimizing tsarist rule in Ukraine, this argument quickly took on a thrust that was also directed against the Bolsheviks, who took over the legacy of the tsarist empire. Soon after the establishment

¹⁶ Ibid., 110–11, 158, 208, 226–27.

¹⁷ Stephen Velychenko, “The Issue of Russian Colonialism in Ukrainian Thought: Dependency Identity and Development,” *Ab Imperio*, no. 1 (2002): 323–67; Oleksii Yas, “Representation of Ukraine as Colony in Ukrainian and Russian Historiography,” in Stephen Velychenko, Joseph Ruane, and Liudmyla Hrynevych, eds., *Ireland and Ukraine: Studies in Comparative Imperial and National History* (Stuttgart, 2022), 159–76.

¹⁸ Nikolai Petrovich Iasnopol’skii, *O geograficheskoi raspredelenii gosudarstvennykh dokhodov i raskhodov v Rossii* (Moscow, 1890), 13.

¹⁹ See Yas, “Representation of Ukraine,” 161.

²⁰ Mykola Stasiuk, “Ekonomicni vidnosyny Ukraïny do Velykorosii i Polshchi,” *Zapysky Ukraïns’koho naukovo-hov tovaristva v Kyievi* 9 (1911): 116.

²¹ Velychenko, “Issue of Russian Colonialism,” 345–46.

²² Ibid., 347.

²³ Faith Hillis, *Children of Rus’: Right-bank Ukraine and the Invention of a Russian Nation* (Ithaca, 2013); Fabian Baumann, *Dynasty Divided: A Family History of Russian and Ukrainian Nationalism* (Ithaca, 2023).

of the Soviet Union, however, Ukrainian national communists were silenced, and any allusions to western colonialism were only allowed to refer to the tsarist empire.²⁴ From the 1930s, this representation also came under increasing pressure, as historians were expected to emphasize the similarities between Russians and non-Russians rather than the differences between them. The depiction of Ukraine as a colony only lived on in exile, where it was applied to both the tsarist empire and the USSR. This representation did not gain wider recognition outside exiled Ukrainian circles, however.²⁵

This only started to change in the 1990s, when literary scholars looked at Ukrainian culture and literature from a postcolonial perspective and again identified the tsarist empire and the USSR as colonial powers.²⁶ Initially, this approach met with a mixed response from historians. Stephen Velychenko, for example, stated that although Ukraine may well have some similarities with formerly colonized states, this insight does not explain much:

Logically, we could compare Ukraine with any country anywhere that had ever been dependent—practically every country in the world except Sweden, Thailand, and Japan. However, this would mean disregarding not only the differences between foreign rule in different parts of the world, but all the other differences that exist between lands and peoples, and lumping them together into one category of countries with little or nothing in common except their one-time dependency.²⁷

In 2015, Yaroslav Hrytsak also expressed his doubts about the idea that Ukraine could be described as a colony. He argued that Ukraine was economically and ideologically part of the core of the empire in both tsarist and Soviet times and that Ukraine therefore had a dual political role as both a center of power and a center of resistance. He added that as a significant part of the Soviet elite came from Ukraine, the colonial dichotomy of colonizer and colonized was not sufficient to describe Ukraine.²⁸ A similarly sceptic position was taken up by Andreas Kappeler in 2017. Recognizing that postcolonial literary studies make a significant contribution to understanding the relationship between empire and Ukrainian culture, he cautioned that Ukraine was certainly not a “classic colony that was spatially and culturally separated from the motherland and economically exploited.”²⁹

Since 2014, however, when Russia started its war against Ukraine and annexed Crimea in violation of international law, the colonialism paradigm has gained traction among experts of Ukrainian history. In the introduction to a 2014 forum of the journal *Ab Imperio*, Ilya Gerasimov described the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity as the “first postcolonial revolution,” and Mark von Hagen postulated in the same year that the Russian-Ukrainian relationship can be understood and examined as Russian colonial rule over Ukraine.³⁰ In an essay in the *Slavic Review* in 2015, Timothy Snyder proposed overcoming the historiographical division between continental and maritime empires and integrating the history

²⁴ For Ukrainian national communism, see Olena Palko, “Ukrainian National Communism: Challenging History,” *Debate: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 22, no. 1 (2014): 27–48.

²⁵ Yas, “Representation of Ukraine,” 162–67; Velychenko, “Issue of Russian Colonialism,” 351–59; Mark von Hagen, “From Imperial Russia to Colonial Ukraine” and Guido Hausmann, “Maps of the Borderlands: Russia and Ukraine,” in Róisín Healy and Enrico Dal Lago, eds., *The Shadow of Colonialism on Europe’s Modern Past* (London, 2014), 179–90, 194–96.

²⁶ Marko Pavlyshyn, “Post-Colonial Features in Contemporary Ukrainian Culture,” *Australian Slavonic and East European Studies* 6, no. 2 (1992): 41–55; Myroslav Shkandrij, *Russia and Ukraine: Literature and the Discourse of Empire from Napoleonic to Postcolonial Times* (Montreal, 2001).

²⁷ Stephen Velychenko, “Post-Colonialism and Ukrainian History,” *Ab Imperio*, no. 1 (2004): 399.

²⁸ Yaroslav Hrytsak, “The Postcolonial Is Not Enough,” *Slavic Review* 74, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 732–34.

²⁹ Andreas Kappeler, *Ungleiche Brüder: Russen und Ukrainer vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich, 2017), 128–29.

³⁰ Ilya Gerasimov, “Ukraine 2014. The First Postcolonial Revolution. Introduction to the Forum,” *Ab Imperio*, no. 3 (2014): 22–44; von Hagen, “Imperial Russia.”

of Ukraine and east central Europe into the history of colonialism.³¹ Velychenko has also adopted this view in the meantime. In 2020, he argued in detail that the history of tsarist and Soviet Ukraine had numerous parallels to the history of colonized societies. These included the experience of conquest, mass deportations, economic exploitation, selective modernization oriented towards the needs of the metropolis, and the cultural denigration of the indigenous population. Admitting that there were also differences in detail—for example, Ukrainians had the opportunity to make a career in the colonial administration—Velychenko argued that these differences were not sufficient to exclude Ukraine from the concept entirely.³²

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the question of the colonial legacy in Russian-Ukrainian relations has gained even more momentum, as the violence of Russian warfare and the occupation regime recall the experience of colonial wars.³³ This includes, above all, the terror against the civilian population and the attempts to destroy Ukrainian culture in the occupied territories by silencing or murdering its representatives, by Russifying public space and the education system, and by deporting children to Russia. All this has led historians and politicians alike to search for classifications that correspond to the extent of the brutality. Therefore, the perspective on Ukraine as a Russian colony is becoming more and more established.³⁴ A particularly eloquent advocate of a colonial classification continues to be Timothy Snyder, who has described the war as a colonial war and stated that Ukraine is threatened by “national extinction represented by Russian colonialism.”³⁵ Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky also drew parallels to the age of colonialism when he described the war as an assault by “the brutal colonial past” in his speech to the UN General Assembly.³⁶

We can thus identify two different trends how references to European colonialism were used in relation to the Pontic Steppe and Ukraine. In the eighteenth century, the Russian government used the language of colonialism when dealing with the Pontic Steppe in order to emphasize the European and progressive character of the tsarist empire. However, as the steppe became increasingly interpreted as a primeval “Russian” landscape and thus lost its foreignness, the associations with colonialism disappeared. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that the vocabulary of colonialism returned, but now by different actors and with opposing implications. It was taken up now by critics of imperial rule in order to denounce the economic exploitation of Ukrainian territories. This view became more widespread around the time of the revolution but was soon suppressed again by the Bolsheviks. For a long time, colonial comparisons remained limited to Ukrainian

³¹ Timothy Snyder, “Integration and Disintegration: Europe, Ukraine, and the World,” *Slavic Review* 74, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 695–707.

³² Stephen Velychenko, “Fish or Fowl? What Was Russian-Ruled Ukraine?,” *Historians*, October 3, 2020, <https://www.historians.in.ua/index.php/en/doslidzhennya/2805-stephen-velychenko-chair-of-ukrainian-studies-university-of-toronto-fish-or-fowl-what-was-russian-ruled-ukraine> (accessed Nov. 3, 2025). Less definite are the conclusions in Stanislav Kul'chyts'kiĭ, “Chy bula Ukraïna rosiĭs'koïu koloniïeu v tsars'ki i radians'ki chasy?” in Hennadii Boriak, ed., *Academia Terra Historiae. Studii na poshanu Valerii Smolitiā*, 2 vols. (Kyiv, 2020), 2:583–94.

³³ For colonial wars, see Bruce Vandervort, *Wars of Imperial Conquest in Africa, 1830–1914* (London, 1998).

³⁴ Yaroslav Hrytsak, for example, seems to have modified his earlier rejection of the colonialism paradigm. In an article published jointly with Iurii Shapoval in 2023, he spoke of various colonial phases in Ukrainian history. See Yaroslav Hrytsak and Iurii Shapoval, “Chy bula Ukraïna rosiĭs'koïu koloniïeu?” *Ukraïna Moderna*, July 20, 2023, <https://uamoderna.com/history/chy-bula-ukraina-rosiyskoïu-koloniïeu/> (accessed Nov. 3, 2025).

³⁵ Timothy Snyder, “The War in Ukraine Is a Colonial War,” *The New Yorker*, April 28, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/essay/the-war-in-ukraine-is-a-colonial-war> (accessed Nov. 3, 2025).

³⁶ “Ukraïntsi nikoly ne pryĭmut’, shcho Ukraïni mozhe buty nav’iazane kolonial’ne mynule zamist’ spravdlyvogo myru—Zelens’kyĭ,” *Interfax Ukraïna*, September 25, 2024, <https://interfax.com.ua/news/general/1016274.html> (accessed July 12, 2025).

exile circles, but in view of the Russian war of aggression, this interpretation is now gaining ground again.

References to Colonialism in Central Asia

The history of the portrayal of the Pontic Steppe and Ukraine as a Russian colony overlaps somewhat with how the Central Asian territories of the tsarist empire and the USSR were described, though the differences in the representation of the two regions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are more significant. In the case of Ukraine, the depiction as a colony was largely limited to opposition circles, while in the case of Central Asia references to colonialism have a much broader tradition.

Formally, Russia's Central Asian territories, with the Governorate-General of Turkestan at their core, were not designated as colonies. Even though Turkestan was administered by the War Ministry, it was declared an indivisible part of the empire, while the protectorates of Khiva and Bukhara remained formally independent countries. Yet, in view of the direct rivalry between the tsarist empire and the British in the region, the colonial context of the conquests was obvious to contemporaries. References to European colonialism were therefore a standard element of Russian intellectual and political discourse on the subject, and rarely did any review of Russian governance in the region fail to relate it to western colonial rule.

Such comparisons had various functions in Russian discourse and appeared in different ideological framings. For official diplomacy, references to the example of western colonialism served to legitimize Russia's conquests in a region where Russia had no historical claims. In this vein, the famous 1864 circular dispatch by Foreign Minister Aleksandr M. Gorchakov stated that Russia had no other way of securing its borders than by subjugating its raiding neighbors. Being forced to constantly expand its territory, Russia was in the same position as "the United States in America, France in Algeria, Holland in her Colonies, England in India," Gorchakov argued.³⁷

For nationalist publicists, comparisons with Western European colonialism served to assign the territories in Central Asia to a subordinate position within the tsarist empire. Mikhail N. Katkov, for example, argued in 1867 that instead of an ocean, "immeasurable deserts" separated Russia from Central Asia. He continued that "Turkestan cannot be regarded as an integral part of Russia... Turkestan should benefit Russia and not burden it, for example as a dependent and distant dominion, as a colonial territory, or as what England calls its 'dependencies.'"³⁸ Although Katkov's proposals were never officially adopted, they shaped the ideas of Russian intellectuals and administrators about Turkestan. In the last years before the revolution, they also found recognition in the highest government circles.³⁹ Thus, Aleksandr D. Krivoshein, the influential director of the Main Administration for Land Management and Agriculture, called in 1912 for Turkestan to be considered a colony and made more profitable for the empire.⁴⁰

For western-oriented observers, it was a matter of prestige to compare Russia to western colonial powers. Just as it had been the case under Catherine II, drawing colonial

³⁷ A.M. Gorchakov, "Circular Despatch Addressed by Prince Gortchakow to Russian Representatives Abroad," *Parliamentary Papers: Accounts and Papers C-704/Correspondence Regarding Central Asia* 2 (1873): 73.

³⁸ M.N. Katkov, "Nachalo russkoi trgovli v Srednei Azii i Zapadnom Kitae: Sredne-aziatskie oblasti zavoevannnye Rossiei i kharakter, kotoryi v nikh dolzhna priniat' russkaia administratsiia" (Nr. 141)," in *Sobranie peredovykh statei Moskovskikh Vedomostei, 1867 god* (Moscow, 1897), 338–39.

³⁹ Willard Sunderland, "The Ministry of Asiatic Russia: The Colonial Office that Never Was but Might Have Been," *Slavic Review* 69, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 120–50.

⁴⁰ Aleksandr Vasil'evich Krivoshein, *Zapiska Glavnoupravliaiushchego zemleustroistvom i zemledeliem o poezdke v Turkestanskii kraj v 1912 godu. Prilozhenie k vsepoddanneishemu dokladu* (Poltava, 1912), 71–72, 79.

analogies provided a means to emphasize the progressive and European character of the tsarist empire. In this spirit, the journal *Vestnik Evropy* proudly announced in 1868 that England and Russia were “two great European powers” who shared the “great historical task” of spreading European civilization by jointly conquering Central Asia.⁴¹ Thus, Russia’s and England’s rule in Central Asia were presented as closely related phenomena.

Yet, listing Russia together with western colonial powers served not only propaganda purposes. Among tsarist officials, there was general agreement that the Russians in Turkestan were indeed in a similar situation as the British in India or the French in North Africa, and that Russia could learn from British or French experiences.⁴² Therefore, tsarist administrators traveled to India and North Africa to study how the British and French dealt with their colonial possessions, and numerous publications sought to draw lessons for Central Asia from European colonial rule.⁴³ Military orientalist Mikhail A. Terent’ev openly summarized the purpose of these efforts in 1875: Russia could make use of England’s failures in India by “using their final conclusions without having to repeat the unpleasant experience.”⁴⁴

By emphasizing the similarities between the tsarist empire and western colonial powers and attempting to learn from their experiences, tsarist officials and intellectuals indicated that for them the relationship between Russia and Central Asia resembled colonialism. However, Russia’s relationship with Europe was too contradictory for the tsarist empire to be classified as a European colonial power without qualification.⁴⁵ In public discourse, European colonialism was often associated with the exploitation and oppression of foreign peoples and, moreover, with secessionist movements aimed at separating the colony from the motherland. To rule out the possibility of independence for Russia’s borderlands, tsarist officials maintained that the empire’s Asian territories were an inseparable part of Russia itself. Thus, in 1914, when the Main Administration for Land Management and Agriculture published its pompous volume on “Asiatic Russia,” it called Russia’s Asian regions not only “our sole colony,” but also “an integral and indivisible part” of Russia.⁴⁶

Other ideologues of Russian expansion went even further and claimed that the tsarist empire was fundamentally different from the western colonial powers. Instead of highlighting the contemporary colonial context of Russia’s rule in Central Asia, they pointed to its historical roots, which they located in Russia’s defense against the Mongols. They presented the conquest of Central Asia as part of *kolonizatsiia Rossii*, the gradual and seemingly non-violent expansion of Russia, and rebuffed all equations with European colonialism. For example, the publicist and government critic Dmitrii I. Zavalishin spoke in 1865 of a “fundamental difference” between the expansion of the Europeans and that of the Russians. While

⁴¹ Leonid Aleksandrovich Polonskii, “Nashi dela v Turkestanskome krae,” *Vestnik Evropy* 3, no. 6 (June 1868): 769.

⁴² Alexander S. Morrison, “Russian Rule in Turkestan and the Example of British India, 1860–1917,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 84, no. 4 (October 2006): 666–707.

⁴³ See for example Mikhail Afrikanovich Terent’ev, *Rossii i Angliia v Srednei Azii* (St. Petersburg, 1875); Fedor Fedorovich Martens, *Rossii i Angliia v Srednei Azii* (St. Petersburg, 1880); Andrei Evgen’evich Snesarev, *Indiia kak glavnyi faktor v sredne-aziatskom voprose: Vzgliad tuzemtsev Indii na anglichan i ikh upravlenie* (St. Petersburg, 1906); Aleksei Nikolaevich Kuropatkin, *Alzhiriia* (St. Petersburg, 1877); Mikhail Ivanovich Veniukov, “Sovremennaia Tunisiia,” *Russkaia mysl’* 5 (1893): 1–10; Nikolai Petrovich Ostroumov, “Mery Alzhirskoi administratsii v borbe s musul’manskim fanatizmom,” *Turkestanskii vedomosti* (1911): 163–64.

⁴⁴ Terent’ev, *Rossii i Angliia*, 346. Similarly: Nikolai Aleksandrovich Maev, “Nashe polozhenie v Srednei Azii,” *Materialy dlia statistiki Turkestanskogo kraia* (St. Petersburg, 1874): 3:435.

⁴⁵ Vera Tolz, *Russia: Inventing the Nation* (London, 2001), 132–51; Mark Bassin, “Geographies of Imperial Identity,” in Dominic Lieven, ed., *The Cambridge History of Russia*, vol. 2: *Imperial Russia, 1689–1917* (Cambridge, Eng., 2006), 2:45–63.

⁴⁶ *Aziatskaia Rossiia: Izdanie pereselencheskogo upravleniia Glavnogo Upravleniia zemleuстроitstva i zemledeliia, tom 1, Liudi i poriadki za uralom* (St. Petersburg, 1914), viii.

Europe's colonial conquests were "completely arbitrary" and driven by "a mixture of religious fanaticism and greed for glory and profit," Russia's rule in Central Asia was "morally justified," as it was a consequence of the defense against the Mongols and the only possible way to secure the borders of the empire.⁴⁷ For other observers, the primary distinction between the European colonial powers and the Russians was the former's perceived distance from the colonized populations and a lesser inclination to interact with them on a personal level. Publicist Mikhail I. Veniukov thus distinguished the allegedly "friendly" practice of Russian rule from that of the British:

We are not Englishmen who in India do their utmost to avoid mingling with the natives, and who moreover, sooner or later, may pay for it by the loss of that country, where they have no ties of race. Our strength on the contrary lies in the fact that up to the present time we have assimilated subject races, mingling affably with them.⁴⁸

Claiming Russians' special affinity for Asia, Veniukov and other authors crafted the notion of a Russian "Sonderweg" among the European Great Powers. Yet despite their ostentatious rejection of the European colonial model, their arguments implicitly acknowledged the similarity between Russia's position and that of western powers. Even when Veniukov and Zavalishin emphasized the difference between Russia and the colonial powers, they regarded them as the closest relatives of the tsarist empire and as its natural yardstick. By contrast, Russian politicians and intellectuals hardly ever referred to the contemporary continental empires when discussing Russian rule in Central Asia. Neither the Habsburg or Ottoman empires, Persia, nor China were more than sporadically mentioned in Russian discourse.⁴⁹ Western colonialism, however, was an obvious and regular reference for most observers of Russian rule in Central Asia. This distinguishes Russian discourse on Central Asia from that on Ukraine, where allusions to colonialism were rare and mostly driven by political considerations. In relation to Central Asia, both representatives of the tsarist regime and its critics constantly sought the comparison with western colonialism, and even for those authors who highlighted alleged Russian peculiarities in ruling Central Asia, western colonialism was the natural object of comparison.

This was also true for Muslim Central Asian activists and intellectuals until 1917. The vocabulary of colonialism did not play an important role in their writings, but typically they regarded Russia as one of several European powers that had brought a large part of the Islamic world under their control.⁵⁰ Yet unlike Ukrainian government critics, Central Asians did not invoke western colonialism to criticize tsarist rule or to portray it as illegitimate.⁵¹

The situation changed only with the revolutions of 1917. After the Bolsheviks took power, intellectual and political discourse on Central Asia converged with that on Ukraine. In the 1920s, both Russians and Central Asians used the vocabulary of colonialism to accuse the

⁴⁷ Dmitrii Irinarkhovich Zavalishin, "Po povodu zaniatiia Tashkenta," *Sovremennaia letopis'* 37, (1865): 5–6.

⁴⁸ Mikhail Ivanovich Veniukov, "Postupatel'noe dvizhenie Rossii v Srednei Azii," in Vladimir Bezobrazov, ed., *Sbornik gosudarstvennykh znani* (St. Petersburg, 1877), 3:61.

⁴⁹ Ulrich Hofmeister, "Zwischen Kontinentalimperium und Kolonialmacht: Repräsentationen der russischen Herrschaft in Turkestan, 1865–1917," in Martin Aust and Julia Obertreis, eds., *Osteuropäische Geschichte und Globalgeschichte* (Stuttgart, 2014), 27–47.

⁵⁰ Adeb Khalid, "Visions of India in Central Asian Modernism: The Work of Abd Ar-Rauf Fitrat," in Hans Harder and Beate Eschment, eds., *Looking at the Coloniser: Cross-Cultural Perceptions in Central Asia and the Caucasus, Bengal, and Related Areas* (Würzburg, Germany, 2004), 253–74.

⁵¹ Most Muslim intellectuals in Central Asia didn't regard Russian rule as illegitimate, see Bakhtiar Babadzhanov, "Russian Colonial Power in Central Asia as Seen by Local Muslim Intellectuals," in Harder and Eschment, eds., *Looking at the Coloniser*, 75–90; Komatsu Hisao, "Dār Al-Islām under Russian Rule as Understood by Turkestan Muslim Intellectuals," in Tomohiko Uyama, ed., *Empire, Islam, and Politics in Central Eurasia* (Sapporo, 2007), 3–21.

tsarist empire of exploiting and oppressing the indigenous population of Central Asia.⁵² As in the case of Ukraine, however, this narrative was pushed into the background from the 1930s onwards, as the positive consequences of Russian influence were now emphasized, which became dogma after the Second World War.⁵³ In western historiography, the colonialism paradigm continued to be applied by historians, but only since the collapse of the USSR has it become widely accepted in western historiography that the tsarist empire acted as a colonial power in the region. Tsarist Central Asia is now studied predominantly from the perspective of colonialism.⁵⁴

The paradigm of colonialism was and is much more widespread in relation to Central Asia than it is to Ukraine. To a certain extent, the reluctance of most observers and politicians in tsarist times to refer to colonial examples when discussing Ukraine can be explained by political circumstances. For a long time, censorship suppressed critical public discussion of the situation in Ukraine, and it was only after 1905 that it became possible to address economic exploitation using the vocabulary of anti-colonial critique. However, the example of Central Asia shows that references to colonialism were not necessarily linked to criticism but could be made in a wide variety of contexts, including affirmative ones, to highlight the benevolent character of tsarist rule. In Russian discourse on Ukraine, however, neither positive nor negative references to western colonialism played a significant role. Not just in official portrayals, but also in the perception of most contemporaries, Ukraine was not a colonial territory but rather a central part of the empire.

Colonialism as Rule of Difference

When we ask why contemporaries and historians alike have come to such different conclusions about colonialism in Ukraine and Central Asia, we are led to the problem of what we understand by the term “colonialism.” There are many different concepts of colonial rule, and many of them take a political or moral stand. In a famous resolution of 1960, the United Nations identified colonialism as “the subjection of peoples to alien subjugation, domination and exploitation” and called for a “speedy and unconditional end” to it.⁵⁵ Historians, on the other hand, have proposed analytical concepts that aim to describe colonial rule as a historical phenomenon. In recent decades, a definition by Jürgen Osterhammel has become widely accepted:

Colonialism is a relationship of domination between an indigenous (or forcibly imported) majority and a minority of foreign invaders. The fundamental decisions affecting the lives of the colonized people are made and implemented by the colonial rulers in pursuit of interests that are often defined in a distant metropolis. Rejecting

⁵² See, for example, Turar Ryskulov, Fayzulla Khodzhaev, and Ahmet Baitursunov, “Dobavleniia k tezisam tov. V.I. Lenina po natsional’nomu i kolonial’nomu voprosam,” in *Turar Ryskulov: Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh*, 3 vols. (Almaty, 1998), 3:182–87; Petr Grigor’evich Galuzo, *Turkestan—koloniia: Ocherk istorii Turkestana ot zavoevaniia russkimi do revoliutsii 1917 goda* (Moscow, 1929).

⁵³ Characteristic for this representation is Soli Ashurkhodzhaevich Radzhabov, *Druzhba naveki: O progressivnom znachenii prisoedineniia Srednei Azii k Rossii* (Moscow, 1960).

⁵⁴ To name just the most influential books on tsarist Central Asia based on this premise: Richard Pierce, *Russian Central Asia 1867–1917: A Study in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley, 1960); Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley, 1998); Daniel R. Brower, *Turkestan and the Fate of the Russian Empire* (London, 2003); Jeff Sahadeo, *Russian Colonial Society in Tashkent, 1865–1923* (Bloomington, IN, 2007); Alexander Morrison, *Russian Rule in Samarkand, 1868–1910: A Comparison with British India* (Oxford, 2008); Alexander Morrison, *The Russian Conquest of Central Asia: A Study in Imperial Expansion, 1814–1914* (Cambridge, Eng., 2021).

⁵⁵ United Nations, General Assembly Resolution 1514 (XV), Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples (December 14, 1960), [https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/1514\(XV\)](https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/1514(XV)) (accessed Nov. 6, 2025).

cultural compromises with the colonized population, the colonizers are convinced of their own superiority and of their ordained mandate to rule.⁵⁶

Even though this definition strives for universal validity, it is based on modern European colonialism, especially as it existed before 1914, when European colonial expansion reached its peak. A crucial point in this definition is the aspect of foreignness. This criterion, which is also mentioned in the 1960 UN Declaration ("alien subjugation"), is part of all common understandings of colonialism. Postcolonial theorist Partha Chatterjee even identified foreignness as the decisive element of colonialism. Based on examples from nineteenth-century British India, Chatterjee characterized colonialism as "rule of difference," showing that this difference has been described in various ways, with religious, civilizational, linguistic, or physiological differences being alternately brought to the fore.⁵⁷ Osterhammel also elaborated on his understanding of foreignness by giving an example of the limits of this term. According to him, Ottoman rule over Egypt between 1517 and 1798 cannot be considered colonialism because the two societies shared a commitment to Islam and thus a common understanding of legitimate rule, while colonialism, on the other hand, does not have such a common cultural basis.⁵⁸

At the same time, historians of colonialism have argued that the meanings of "difference" were contested and unstable and that they had to be persistently renegotiated within discourses and institutions. Focusing on administrative procedures in the Netherlands East Indies, Ann Laura Stoler has demonstrated how difficult it was to define and maintain clear boundaries between rulers and ruled in practice, as the criteria for European identity were often inconsistent and subject to change.⁵⁹ Frederick Cooper has therefore modified Chatterjee's formula from "rule of difference" to "politics of difference."⁶⁰ Moreover, in addition to "rule of difference," most colonial societies were also characterized by an opposing trend, namely the enforcement of uniformity. Saliha Belmessous has shown that assimilationist ideas were a constant feature of colonial history for more than four hundred years. At times, the notion that indigenous peoples should undergo a radical transformation of their identity became a decisive force in colonial power relations. In seventeenth-century New France and other colonies, various means were employed to this end, including schooling, baptism, and intermarriage.⁶¹ Nevertheless, even when the colonial state pursued such assimilation policies, the essence of colonialism remained "rule of difference." The official focus on what it took to become an acceptable member of the metropolitan society usually emphasized the cultural gap between colonizers and the colonized even more. In addition, inclusive approaches were generally not sustained for long.⁶² Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, social segregation became prevalent in all colonies, with the result that mixed marriages gradually emerged as illegitimate.⁶³ When the French Third Republic officially declared the assimilation of the indigenous population the goal of its colonial policy,

⁵⁶ Osterhammel, *Colonialism*, 16–17.

⁵⁷ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, 1993), 16–27.

⁵⁸ Osterhammel, *Colonialism*, 15.

⁵⁹ Ann Laura Stoler, "Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31, no. 1 (January 1989): 134–61.

⁶⁰ Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, 2005), 23, 172–73.

⁶¹ Saliha Belmessous, "Assimilation and Racialism in Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century French Colonial Policy," *The American Historical Review* 110, no. 2 (April 2005): 322–49; Saliha Belmessous, *Assimilation and Empire: Uniformity in French and British Colonies, 1541–1954* (Oxford, 2013).

⁶² Belmessous, "Assimilation and Racialism," 334–37.

⁶³ Osterhammel, *Colonialism*, 84–88.

this was more lip service than actual policy, and assimilation was soon replaced by the more conservative approach of association.⁶⁴

Since “rule of difference” is a defining element of colonial rule, it is clear that not all forms of foreign rule can be summarized under the term colonialism. It describes but one very specific variety of foreign domination, one that is essentially based on the notion of difference. Moreover, it is important to note that colonial rule is not identical with oppression and exploitation. Even clearly repressive and exploitative forms of foreign rule do not qualify as colonial rule if they are not based on a notion of difference.

If we look at tsarist Central Asia, difference was a central feature of the political, economic, and social system. It was based on the confrontation of the so-called Russians, which in fact included Germans, Ashkenazi Jews, Poles, Ukrainians, and many other Europeans, with the “natives,” defined either by their Central Asian origin or by their Islamic faith. Most “Russians” perceived the native population as the typically colonial “other”: They described the nomads as backward and primitive and denounced the settled native population as Muslim fanatics. The differentiation between “Russians” and “natives” was the main organizing principle of tsarist rule in Central Asia: Central Asians were not included in the general system of estates, but rather subsumed under the new category of *tuzemtsy*, meaning that they had special rights and duties, distinct from all other subjects of the tsar. They were subject to a special administration and specific judicial systems, and during elections they were included into separate curia with less representatives. Segregation also prevailed in daily life: There were virtually no intermarriages between these groups, and in the towns and cities, there were distinct quarters for “Russians” and “natives.” “Rule of difference” between Europeans and natives was thus a central feature of tsarist rule in Central Asia. True, segregation was never completely enforced, and, as in all colonial empires, there were numerous exceptions and intermediate groups that could not be clearly identified as either colonizers or colonized.⁶⁵ Moreover, as in most other peripheral regions of the tsarist empire, there were also unifying tendencies in Turkestan. Especially during the 1880s and 90s, leading colonial officials promoted the long-term cultural, linguistic, and religious Russification of Central Asia’s Muslim population.⁶⁶ However, since the legal integration of Central Asians would have meant that the “Russians” would have had to relinquish their privileged political position, colonial differentiation prevailed until 1917.⁶⁷ Thus, the main organizing principle in tsarist Central Asia remained the segregation between “Russians” and “natives,” which made tsarist rule closely resemble west European colonialism.

To be sure, there were also elements that set the tsarist empire apart from its west European counterparts. Continental empires like Russia do not have a clear boundary between metropolis and colony, but rather geographical and cultural transition areas. In the tsarist empire, this transition zone was inhabited by Turkic-speaking groups such as the Tatars and Bashkirs, who had long been Russian subjects but were closer to Central Asians in language and religion. As with many other non-Russian peoples of the empire,

⁶⁴ Raymond F. Betts, *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory, 1890–1914* (New York, 1961), 21–22.

⁶⁵ Robert D. Crews, “Civilization in the City: Architecture, Urbanism, and the Colonization of Tashkent,” in James Cracraft and Daniel Rowland, eds., *Architectures of Russian Identity, 1500 to the Present* (Ithaca, 2003), 131.

⁶⁶ Ulrich Hofmeister, “Civilization and Russification in Tsarist Central Asia, 1860–1917,” *Journal of World History* 27, no. 3 (September 2016): 411–42. For tsarist politics of assimilation in other regions see Yuri Slezkine, “Naturalists Versus Nations: Eighteenth-Century Russian Scholars Confront Ethnic Diversity,” in Daniel R. Brower and Edward J. Lazzerini, eds., *Russia’s Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples 1700–1917* (Bloomington, IN, 1997), 15–40; Willard Sunderland, “Russians into Yakuts? ‘Going Native’ and Problems of Russian National Identity in the Siberian North, 1870s–1914,” *Slavic Review* 55, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 806–25; Vulpius, *Die Geburt des Russländischen Imperiums*, 171–90.

⁶⁷ Ulrich Hofmeister, *Die Bürde des Weißen Zaren: Russische Vorstellungen einer imperialen Zivilisierungsmission in Zentralasien* (Stuttgart, 2019), 259–300.

it was difficult to determine whether these groups belonged in the category of national minority or colonial subject. They thus formed a middle group that did not exist in this form in other colonial empires.⁶⁸ Furthermore, there are additional factors that distinguish the tsarist empire from other colonial powers: Russians had a long shared history with the steppe nomads, and under the Mongols they were even united under a common system of rule. Nevertheless, the cultural difference between “Russians” and “natives” in Turkestan was pronounced enough to classify tsarist rule as colonialism.

Colonialism in Ukraine

While tsarist rule in Central Asia largely resembled west European colonial practices, in the case of Ukraine a different picture emerges. First, the concept of colonialism does not apply to people who share a close cultural affiliation, such as Russians and Ukrainians, and secondly, there was no “rule of difference” as the main organizing principle of society.

The cultural affinity between Russians and Ukrainians is an issue that is heavily distorted by Russian propaganda, which unduly emphasizes the similarities between the two groups. In his manifesto “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” Russian President Vladimir Putin cast the social and cultural proximity between Russians and Ukrainians back into past centuries.⁶⁹ However, this proximity is to a certain extent the product of imperial rule and the Russification measures it promoted. It is therefore not without a certain cynicism that Putin anachronistically projected the results of the imperial coercive measures back to the pre-imperial era in order to disguise the coercion and retrospectively give Russian rule the appearance of greater legitimacy. When Putin claims that the Ukrainian nation has no deeper historical roots and was only invented by the USSR, he is obviously wrong. The Treaty of Pereiaslav of 1654, which saw the Cossacks under Hetman Bohdan Khmel’nyts’kyi swear an oath of allegiance to the Tsar of Muscovy, was by no means the “reunification” of two peoples which belonged together, as Soviet historiography claimed.⁷⁰ The two contracting parties were representatives of different entities with no sense of political affinity. The idea that the so-called Great Russians and Little Russians belonged to the same political family was only later put forward by imperial propagandists. How alien Muscovites and Ukrainians were to each other is shown by the fact that Moscow demanded that Ukrainians from Poland-Lithuania be baptized again and that negotiations in the run-up to the Treaty of Pereiaslav had to be conducted with the help of translators.

Despite all the foreignness, however, the difference between Russians and Ukrainians was not nearly as pronounced as that between the British or French and the natives of their overseas colonies. Ukrainians and Russians were surely not just two branches of one common people, but they were also not exotic strangers to each other. Rather, they were something like old acquaintances. Although there existed separate ecclesiastical hierarchies in Kyiv and Moscow, Khmel’nyts’kyi was able to refer to the common Orthodox faith in his letter to the tsar, as Cossack delegations had done before him.⁷¹ The languages they spoke had developed differently during the preceding centuries, but both originated

⁶⁸ Alexander Morrison, “Metropole, Colony, and Imperial Citizenship in the Russian Empire,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 13, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 345; Paul Werth, *At the Margins of Orthodoxy: Mission, Governance, and Confessional Politics in Russia’s Volga-Kama Region, 1827–1905* (Ithaca, 2002), 140.

⁶⁹ Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” July 12, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181> (last accessed Nov. 6, 2025).

⁷⁰ Brian L. Davies, “The Road to Pereiaslav: Ukrainian and Muscovite Understandings of Protectorate, 1620–1654,” *Cahiers du monde russe* 50, no. 2–3 (2009): 465–94; Serhii Plokhyy, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations: Premodern Identities in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus* (Cambridge, Eng., 2006), 241–46.

⁷¹ Serhii Plokhyy, *The Cossacks and Religion in Early Modern Ukraine* (New York, 2001).

from Old East Slavic.⁷² When Russians and Ukrainians developed competing national histories in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they referred to common political roots: Both Hrushevs'kyi and Solov'ev traced their nations back to Kievan Rus.⁷³ Ukrainians and Russians have such close linguistic, religious, and cultural ties that Andreas Kappeler famously referred to them as "unequal brothers."⁷⁴ Anna Veronika Wendland has criticized this characterization, arguing that Russia should be rather compared to a violent ex-husband who stalks and terrorizes his former wife.⁷⁵ But whether we speak of a pair of brothers or a divorced couple: Ukrainians and Russians share a common past untypical for colonialism.

The second argument against classifying Ukraine as a Russian colony is that the ethno-cultural difference between Ukrainians and Russians was generally not decisive for political and social practice in the tsarist empire. While the policy of the western colonial powers since the mid-nineteenth century largely relied on "rule of difference," segregation never became the guiding principle of tsarist policy in Ukraine. In contrast to the Governorate-General of Turkestan and the *tuzemtsy*, neither the territory of late-imperial Ukraine nor its population were subject to their own legal regimes.⁷⁶ The tsarist government even aimed to level the differences. The Hetmanate's autonomy was more and more restricted over the course of the eighteenth century, and the forceful liquidation of the Zaporozhian Sich by the troops of Catherine II led to the full administrative integration of the Cossacks' territories into the empire.⁷⁷ These measures deprived Ukrainians of their traditional self-determination but did not follow a colonial logic of segregation. While they reduced most Ukrainians to the same powerless status as the ordinary Russian population, they nevertheless promoted integration. It was autocracy, not colonialism, that took away the freedom of Ukrainians.

The same holds true for the individual level. Ukrainians were regarded as a sub-group of the overarching all-Russian people, and they did not have to convert or otherwise renounce their previous identity to be accepted as members of the ruling nation. If they spoke Russian, they could make careers in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and in some phases, Ukrainians were even able to exert decisive influence on government policies in a way unthinkable in west European colonialism. There were also no efforts to segregate Russians and Ukrainians in daily life. Generally, the cities were not divided into Ukrainian and Russian parts. More important than nationality in everyday life were other identity markers such as estate, gender, or age, and marriages between Ukrainians and Russians remained common throughout the imperial era. Certainly, the rulers in Moscow and St. Petersburg assigned Ukraine a subordinate position within the empire, and Ukrainian culture was never recognized as of equal value by Russia. Ukrainian peasants were derided as harmless *khokhly* and Cossacks were exoticized in a way reminiscent of colonial discourses. Still, the cultural devaluation of Ukrainians was not accompanied by general political and

⁷² George Y. Shevelov, *A Historical Phonology of the Ukrainian Language* (Heidelberg, 1979).

⁷³ Serhii Plokhy, *Unmaking Imperial Russia: Mykhailo Hrushevsky and the Writing of Ukrainian History* (Toronto, 2005); Carl W. Reddel, "S. M. Solov'ev and Multi-National History," *Russian History* 13, no. 4 (Winter 1986): 355–66.

⁷⁴ Kappeler, *Ungleiche Brüder*, 17–22.

⁷⁵ Anna Veronika Wendland (paper presented at the conference "Die Spätlese: Ein Fest für Andreas Kappeler," University of Vienna, September 29, 2023).

⁷⁶ It is true that the *Zemstvos* were not introduced in right-bank Ukraine until 1911, which means that this area remained excluded from the "core" of the empire, as Alexander Morrison has argued. However, this measure was primarily directed against the Polish nobility of the region, while the Ukrainian population was considered Russian anyway. See Morrison, "Metropole, Colony, and Imperial Citizenship," 341–42.

⁷⁷ The dissolution of the Hetmanate belongs to the episodes in Ukrainian history most often associated with colonial politics, as it was here that Russia's sense of superiority over Ukrainian Cossack culture came to the fore most strongly. See Hrytsak and Shapoval, "Chy bula Ukraïna rosiï's'koïu koloniieiu?"

economic exclusion.⁷⁸ Moreover, it has been convincingly argued that the Russian peasantry was subjected to orientalist stereotypes by educated Russians in much the same way. Alexander Etkind's concept of "internal colonization" risks obscuring the imperialist aspects of Russian expansion by retroactively labeling conquered territories as "internal," but it is correct in pointing out the enormous cultural gap between elites and peasants even in core Russia.⁷⁹ There is no doubt that the relationship between Russians and Ukrainians was imperial, in the sense that Ukrainians were ascribed a lower hierarchical level in the multi-ethnic empire. Nevertheless, when viewed in its entirety, tsarist rule in Ukraine was not colonial because it was not predominantly shaped by the notion of difference.⁸⁰

Rather than by colonial differentiation, tsarist politics toward Ukraine were shaped by the nationalist appropriation of Ukraine by Russia. The imperial state did not recognize Ukrainians as a distinct national group; instead, they were classified as "Russians," and any expressions of a separate Ukrainian identity were silenced. A telling example is the famous 1863 circular by Interior Minister Petr A. Valuev, which bluntly denied the existence of a separate Ukrainian language: "A separate Little Russian language has never existed, does not exist and cannot exist, and their dialect, used by commoners, is just the Russian Language, only corrupted by the influence of Poland."⁸¹ This demonstrates that the justification for Russian rule over Ukraine was not an alleged religious, civilizational, or racial otherness of its inhabitants but, on the contrary, their cultural kinship with the Russians. Ukrainians were not exposed to the colonial policy of "othering" but rather seen as one more variety of the all-Russian nation. Instead of "rule of difference," there was a "denial of difference."

The binary scheme of colonizer and colonized does not fully fit Ukraine in other respects, either, for Ukrainians would have to be considered colonized as well as colonizers. By pushing the boundaries of Eastern Slavic settlement farther south and east, Cossacks and Ukrainian peasants helped establish a form of imperial rule in the steppe that resembled European settler colonialism. Many Ukrainians were agents of *kolonizatsiia Rossii*, the only apparently non-imperialist appropriation of foreign lands. Much of present-day Ukraine became part of Ukraine only through imperial conquest, at the expense of the region's earlier inhabitants, who did not speak an Eastern Slavic language and did not adhere to Christianity. Crimean Tatars and Nogays suffered the most from devaluation and exclusion under tsarist rule. They were subjected to marginalization and expulsion, and thus correspond much more to the archetype of a colonized population than the sedentary, Orthodox, and East Slavic Ukrainians, who in this respect were more likely to be assigned the role of colonial masters.⁸²

Furthermore, the sense of superiority typical of any form of colonialism does not fully come into play in the relationship between Russians and Ukrainians. In Central Asia, Russians always presented themselves as Europeans, but this was far less obvious in relation to Ukrainians. After all, Ukrainians could point to closer historical ties to Europe than Russians, who always had an ambivalent relationship with Europe and were themselves subject to accusations of backwardness.

⁷⁸ Andreas Kappeler, "Mazepintsy, Malorossy, Khokhly: Ukrainians in the Ethnic Hierarchy of the Russian Empire," in Andreas Kappeler, Zenon E. Kohut, Frank E. Sysyn, and Mark von Hagen, eds., *Culture, Nation, and Identity: The Ukrainian-Russian Encounter, 1600–1945* (Edmonton, 2003), 162–81.

⁷⁹ Etkind, *Internal Colonization*.

⁸⁰ For a thoughtful distinction between imperial and colonial strategies of domination in eastern Europe, see Joseph Grim Feinberg, "Coloniality or Imperiality (in Eastern Europe, for Example)," *dVERSIYA*, March 4, 2024, <https://dversia.net/7940/coloniality-imperiality-eng/> (accessed Nov. 6, 2025).

⁸¹ Paul R. Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples* (Seattle, 1996), 369–70.

⁸² Alan W. Fisher, *The Crimean Tatars* (Stanford, 1978); Bi-Arslan Balbekovich Kochekaev, *Nogaisko-russkie otnosheniia v XV-XVIII vv* (Alma-Ata, 1988).

Above all, however, it is the “denial of difference” that speaks against the idea of defining the relationship between Russia and Ukraine in terms of a colonial dichotomy. The history of European colonialism knows of no (other) case in which colonizer and colonized were so culturally and linguistically close that the colonizers could simply deny the difference.⁸³ To a much greater extent, Russia’s policy of forced cultural homogenization is characteristic of European nation-building projects. The ban on Ukrainian publications is reminiscent of similar measures in France, Italy, and Spain against subordinate Romance languages from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. Former written languages such as Occitan, Sardinian, and Catalan were thus marginalized and sometimes banned. In all these cases, the suppressed language was treated like a mere dialect of the dominant language, or as proof of excessive influence of neighboring languages. Like Ukrainians, the speakers of these languages were expected to learn the language of the metropolis in order to correct “historical wrongs.”⁸⁴ The suppression of the Ukrainian language in the tsarist empire, therefore, more resembles the politics of a national state, aiming to homogenize its population, than that of a colonial empire.

It is important to note that the denial of difference is not necessarily less painful for the affected population than colonial rule. A telling example of this is Greenland, which experienced both periods of colonial differentiation and civic integration. Here, the most painful interventions of the metropolis took place after 1953, when the country had been formally decolonized and declared an integral part of Denmark. The new policy of modernization demanded much greater sacrifices from the indigenous population than the former policy of colonial difference.⁸⁵ Historically, there are cases where colonial rule involved comparatively little interference in the daily lives of the colonized, while the homogenizing policies of a nascent nation-state entailed violent assimilation campaigns. This is exemplified by the transformation of the Ottoman empire into the Turkish nation-state with its dramatic consequences, as Armenians, Greeks, Kurds and others were subjected to forced assimilation, deportation, and physical destruction.⁸⁶

Instead of considering independent Ukraine as a former colony, it has been suggested to compare it to other post-imperial European states such as Greece or Ireland, which also remain in the shadow of their more powerful neighbors. In these countries, too, the respective elites had had the opportunity to integrate into the imperial structures but opted for independence. Under colonialism, by contrast, indigenous elites had no comparable opportunities to help shape the politics of the metropole.⁸⁷ Comparing Ukraine with Ireland in

⁸³ Some similarities, however, can be found in Japan’s colonial policy in Korea, where the administration also emphasized a supposed common cultural heritage and pursued a strict policy of assimilation (*dōka*) toward the colonized population. Nevertheless, the case of Korea differs significantly from that of Ukraine. The cultural differences between Koreans and Japanese are more pronounced than those between Ukrainians and Russians, and it is controversial whether the Korean and Japanese languages are genetically related at all. As a result, the distinct identity of Koreans was principally recognized under Japanese rule, even if the goal was to overcome it—unlike in Ukraine, where the unity of Russians and Ukrainians was declared a fact rather than a political goal. Hence, a differentiation was made in Japanese colonial discourse between “backward” Koreans and “civilized” Japanese, much more like western colonial discourses than the Russian one on Ukraine. See Jun Uchida, *Brokers of Empire: Japanese Settler Colonialism in Korea, 1876–1945* (Cambridge, Mass., 2014), 115–20; Ki-mun Yi and S. Robert Ramsey, *A History of the Korean Language* (Cambridge, Eng., 2011), 26–30.

⁸⁴ Gerhard Ernst et al., eds., *Romanische Sprachgeschichte / Histoire linguistique de la Romania: Ein internationales Handbuch zur Geschichte der romanischen Sprachen / Manuel international d’histoire linguistique de la Romania*, 3 vols. (Berlin, 2006), 2:1463–510.

⁸⁵ Søren Rud, *Colonialism in Greenland: Tradition, Governance and Legacy* (Cham, Switzerland, 2017), 122–33.

⁸⁶ Uğur Ümit Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913–1950* (Oxford, 2011).

⁸⁷ Velychenko, “Post-Colonialism and Ukrainian History,” 398–99.

particular can be very fruitful.⁸⁸ Both territories were considered part of the metropolis of the respective empire, and yet they occupied a subordinate position and were exposed to exploitation and forced assimilation. Moreover, Ukraine and Ireland share the experience of a catastrophic famine, in which the specific ethnicity of the peoples most affected played a significant role in the decisions made by the metropolis. Because of the structural similarities between the two countries, Ireland was a frequent point of reference for the Ukrainian national movement in the late tsarist and early Soviet periods.⁸⁹

Why Does this Difference Matter?

There are certain dangers in classifying Ukraine as a former colony. If we define all forms of foreign rule as colonialism, we might overlook the specifics of the individual cases. One area where the difference between colonial and non-colonial rule is particularly important is the question of independence. In modern colonialism, imperial officials always nurtured the idea that colonial rule might one day come to an end—whether as a worst-case scenario of a bloody uprising or a vision of a distant future in which the natives are finally ready to lead the destiny of their country themselves. As early as 1833, Lord Macaulay spoke of the Indians one day being ready for European institutions and claimed that this would be “the proudest day in English history.”⁹⁰ This day was generally only seen in the remote future, and for most actors such references were little more than rhetorical justifications for their present rule. Nevertheless, such remarks show that colonialism was not intended to last forever. In fact, when the global colonial system collapsed in the 1950s and 60s, the European public very quickly came to terms with the new situation. Typically, decolonization was supported by the most important political groups in the metropolises when it reached that point.⁹¹ This illustrates that colonialism can ultimately be abandoned when the time is right.

However, if the imperial elites regarded the subordinate country not as a colony but rather as part of the metropolis, it was much harder for that country to break away. Algeria, which did not have the status of a colony but was defined as an integral part of France, was only able to gain its independence after a long and bloody war, which also led to serious upheavals in France itself.⁹² From the point of view of the rulers in the metropolis, it is easier to release a colony into independence than a secessionist part of the motherland. This pattern is also evident in post-Soviet Russia: While the independence of the quasi-colonial Central Asian republics does not appear to be a major problem from the Russian perspective, the Russian leadership is bitterly clinging to its claim to rule over Ukraine, as well as Belarus. These two republics are not allowed to leave Moscow’s imperial orbit precisely because they were not considered colonies but are seen by many Russians as part of Russia. Putin’s essay “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians” is only the most prominent example of how the existence of a Ukrainian national identity is denied in Russia. Likewise, Joseph Brodsky’s infamous poem “On the Independence of Ukraine” shows how little the separation of Ukraine from Russia was accepted by the Russian intelligentsia.⁹³ To a certain extent, Ukraine shares the fate of Ireland or Catalonia: Due to its historical and

⁸⁸ See the articles in Stephen Velychenko, Joseph Ruane, and Liudmyla Hrynevych, eds., *Ireland and Ukraine: Studies in Comparative Imperial and National History* (Stuttgart, 2022).

⁸⁹ Gennadii Korolov, “Ireland of the East? A Case of the Anticolonial Rhetoric in the Ukrainian National Movement (1870s–1923),” *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung* 73, no. 4 (2024): 517–35.

⁹⁰ Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge, Eng., 1994), 34.

⁹¹ Osterhammel, *Colonialism*, 117.

⁹² Martin Evans, *Algeria: France’s Undeclared War* (Oxford, 2012).

⁹³ Olga Bertelsen, “Joseph Brodsky’s Imperial Consciousness,” *Scripta Historica* 21 (2015): 263–89.

cultural ties to the center of the empire it was never defined as a colony, but always as an inseparable part of the motherland, which made it difficult to break away.

With regard to Ukraine, there is another factor that comes into play: The cultural proximity and close social ties between Russians and Ukrainians mean that developments in Ukraine are particularly relevant for Russia. It has been convincingly argued that successful democratization in Ukraine could set an example for Russia, and that the Russian leadership therefore wants to prevent Ukraine from developing into a stable, prosperous, and democratic country at all costs.⁹⁴ It is therefore not Ukraine's status as a former colony that makes the country so important for Russia but its historical and cultural proximity, which Putin is exploiting for his imperial ambitions.

It is also problematic in an epistemic respect to regard Ukraine as a former Russian colony. This would significantly extend the boundaries of what historical scholarship has understood as "colonialism" thus far. Of course, it would be possible to propose a new concept of colonialism that includes power relations between neighboring peoples with a common cultural basis. In this new concept, the politics of difference would no longer be a central criterion. However, this would mean that essentially all forms of foreign rule could be considered colonialism. In that case, a separate term would no longer be available to analyze those forms of rule based on the cultural and discursive divide characteristic of modern colonialism. Therefore, it is unlikely that historians working on regions other than eastern Europe would accept such an expanded concept of colonialism. Extending the concept of colonialism to Ukraine could even have undesirable consequences. While proponents of a colonial view of Ukraine aim to place east European history more firmly in the context of global history, they may actually achieve the opposite. To integrate the tsarist empire into comparative colonialism research, we need to agree on the terms used. However, if historians of eastern Europe use a concept of colonialism much broader than the commonly accepted one, communication between different branches of historical research would be more difficult. For decades, Russia was not included in surveys of colonialism, and when mentioned, it was only as a marginal phenomenon. Only in recent years has a consensus emerged that the tsarist possessions in Central Asia should be considered colonial territories as well. However, introducing a new concept of colonialism specifically for eastern Europe could marginalize Russian colonialism in historiography once again, which would ultimately reinforce the Russian self-image of a non-imperialist power.

Yet this does not at all mean that any comparison of Ukraine with colonial rule is generally invalid. The opposite is the case. As a recent essay by Moritz Florin has shown, it is quite fruitful to look for traces of "coloniality" in the Russian practice of rule, defined by Florin as "forms of thought and state action that are based on the conviction of one's own cultural and civilizational superiority and that derive the claim and the right to rule from this."⁹⁵ The thinking and actions of Russian actors in relation to Ukraine do indeed exhibit striking parallels to western colonialism in several areas. Moreover, as research over the last three decades has convincingly shown, examining Ukraine from a postcolonial perspective can yield fruitful insights. It is also worth going beyond comparison and asking about exchange processes between different regions of the world, regardless of the colonial character of the region in question. Mark von Hagen, for example, has shown how closely the revolutionary movement in Ukraine in the early twentieth century was intertwined with global anti-colonial activism.⁹⁶ However, neither the comparison nor the examination of

⁹⁴ Norman M. Naimark, interview, "Democracy Is Threatening," *Hoover Digest*, no. 3 (2022): 25–28.

⁹⁵ Moritz Florin, "Russifizierung, Verfolgung und Genozid: Ist die Ukraine eine ehemalige russische Kolonie?" in Franziska Davies, ed., *Die Ukraine in Europa: Traum und Trauma einer Nation* (Munich, 2023), 119.

⁹⁶ Von Hagen, "Imperial Russia."

interdependencies presupposes that the relationship between Russia and Ukraine can be equated with colonial rule.

This article is an attempt to bring more conceptual clarity to discussions of the relationship between Russia and Ukraine. To this end, it argues for a terminological distinction between colonization and colonialism. “Colonization” has a broad meaning that encompasses the establishment of agricultural settlements, migration processes, or the subjugation of foreign lands. “Colonialism,” on the other hand, is a narrowly defined technical term that refers to a specific form of rule over foreign peoples, often characterized as “rule of difference.” If its use is broadened to such an extent that it also includes relationships between culturally cognate countries such as Russia and Ukraine, it threatens to lose its analytical value. An undifferentiated equation could lead to the peculiarities and complexities of Russian-Ukrainian relations being overlooked. As the comparison with Central Asia has shown, Russian rule was not uniformly organized in different parts of the empire. Turkestan and Ukraine mark two very different points in the broad spectrum of imperial rule under the tsarist empire. While the imperial government in Turkestan established a regime whose backbone was the omnipresent distinction between “Russians” and “natives,” the situation in Ukraine was quite different most of the time. Here, the difference was not institutionalized but denied for long stretches, and Ukrainians were increasingly subjected to attempts at forced Russification. Therefore, it is not Ukraine’s status as a colony, but rather the lack of recognition of Ukraine as an independent nation with its own language, political tradition, and identity that has underpinned Russia’s full-scale war of aggression since 2022. Even though Ukraine was a site of Russian *kolonizatsiia*, this did not result in colonialism.

Acknowledgements. I want to thank Oleksandra Krushynska, Börries Kuzmany, Paolo Sartori, Ricarda Vulpius, Jeremy F. Walton, and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback on earlier versions of this paper.

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