

# *Beyond War: Russia, Ukraine and the State of the Field*

Marco Puleri, Alessandro Achilli

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THE war of aggression waged by the Russian Federation in Ukraine made clear how the international community is currently experiencing not only a diplomatic and humanitarian crisis, but also a true epistemological impasse. In other words, today, in public and scholarly debates, we witness a crisis in understanding the political and social dynamics arising in the territory of the former Soviet Union that made this conflict so ‘unexpected’. The dramatic developments devastating Ukraine since February 2022, undoubtedly, represent a true watershed not only for social and political dynamics in both countries, but also for Russian and Ukrainian studies – and, in broader terms, for post-Soviet and Eurasian studies – clearly impacting global public and academic debates around the region. The editors of “Ab Imperio” highlight the paradox:

Russia’s aggression against Ukraine has dealt a heavy blow to the entire international discipline formerly known as Russian studies [...] The war seems to have had an archaization effect on the field, pushing it back methodologically by several decades to its state of the early 1990s and putting into question all its accomplishments over the past three decades<sup>1</sup>.

During the months following the start of the aggression, political scientists, historians, and literary scholars gathered together to respond to the urgent need for a renewal of the categories and methodologies adopted for the study of the region, in an attempt to make sense of the current war, and of the political and historical narratives sustaining it<sup>2</sup>. In this

article, we aim to contribute to a preliminary review of some relevant issues touched by the academic debate emerging in the months following the start of the war. Our goal is to enrich our understanding of the role the academic community could play in countering the logic of conflict, and to highlight potential perspectives for an interdisciplinary renewal of this field of study.

Starting from a historical-political perspective, as Russian historian Andrei Kortunov highlighted in a dedicated column published last April on the online platform of the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), we may assume that today we are dealing with a political upheaval rooted in the last three decades of post-communist history, and in the gradual diversification of the outcomes of the so-called ‘post-Soviet transition’. From this point of view, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine may be interpreted as the final outcome of the plural path of troubled political, cultural and social transformations undertaken by the 15 independent states which arose in the wake of the collapse of the USSR in December 1991. We can therefore agree with Kortunov’s observation that “the Soviet Union did not actually collapse at the end of 1991, but only entered a long, complex, and contradictory process of a gradual imperial disintegration”<sup>3</sup>, which has defined

<sup>1</sup> I. Gerasimov – S. Glebov – M. Mogilner – A. Semyonov, *War and the State of the Field*, “Ab Imperio”, 2022, 1, pp. 9-18 (9).

<sup>2</sup> Among the several calls for a broader debate among scholars, Marina Mogilner’s commentary to the forum titled *Discussion: War Against Ukraine*, which has been hosted since the 28<sup>th</sup> of February 2022 by the website of the flagship journal of the Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies – i.e., “Slavic Review”, may be taken as an exemplary case: “The regime’s rhetoric – de-Nazification, the Big Russian Nation, Malorossia, Banderovites, Lenin, and the Bolsheviks committing crimes against the legitimate

Russian empire/nation – comes from the past. If this is a ‘dispute’ about History, let us respond as historians, as students of culture, society, and politics, not limiting ourselves to a formal statement by the ASEES Executive Committee condemning the war and declaring our support for Ukraine. How can our community, formerly known as ‘Russian studies’ – and informally called this today but including people who work on Russia and Ukraine, the Baltics and Central Asia, Poland and the Caucasus – survive if we do not initiate this conversation among ourselves?”, M. Mogilner, *Discussion: War Against Ukraine. There Can Be No “Vne”*, “Slavic Review”, 01.03.2022, <http://www.slavicreview.illinois.edu/discussion/> (latest access: 24.11.2022).

<sup>3</sup> A. Kortunov, *Tri desiatiletiiia bolezennyykh korrektyrovok: Rossiia na postsovetskom prostranstve*, “Rossiiskii Sovet po

its multiple forms over the following decades. Most emblematically, “the real collapse of the USSR is only taking place today, literally in front of our eyes, and the states that have emerged in the post-Soviet space have yet to go through all the challenges, risks, and pains of imperial disintegration”<sup>4</sup>. The ‘unexpected’ launch of the ‘special military operation’ in Ukraine could be thus interpreted “as the last act of the 30-years-long drama of Russia struggling with its imperial legacy”<sup>5</sup>.

Along these lines, a thorough scrutiny of the history of Russian-Ukrainian political and intellectual relations may play a crucial role in understanding the unprecedented dynamics that have taken shape within the region over the past thirty years. The latter has stimulated a process of rethinking of the cultural, political and social ties built up over the course of imperial and Soviet history between Russia and Ukraine. This process involved not only political actors, but also to a large extent the wider community of intellectuals, writers, and artists in both countries. Thus, the investigation of the new dynamics shaping the Russian-Ukrainian relationship, paired with an analysis of the instruments adopted in the political and intellectual debates to deconstruct – or to re-enact – old narratives around that relationship in the post-Soviet era, is a critical starting point for understanding the forms of political and cultural discourses emerging today in times of conflict. Not surprisingly, this urgency repeatedly presented itself in the lively academic debate following the evolution of the war, particularly related to the understanding of the complexity of Russian-Ukrainian relations in historical perspective. As Olga Maiorova put it:

Ukrainian and Russian cultural history are deeply interwoven, and there are many ways to explore this dynamic, as immense research on the topic has shown. But with the outbreak of the war, it has become urgent – more urgent than ever before – to tell the interwoven histories of the Russian and Ukrainian cultures without conflating them<sup>6</sup>.

Mezhdunarodnym delam”, 01.04.2022, <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/tri-desyatiletiya-bolezne-nykh-korrektirovok-rossiya-na-postsovetskom-prostranstve/> (latest access: 24.11.2022).

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>6</sup> O. Maiorova, *Ukraine in Russian Literature*, “Ab Imperio”, 2022, 2, pp. 70-76 (70).

As a specialist in nineteenth-century Russian literature, Maiorova questions the cultural roots of the current war, even going so far as to ask whether established scholarly perspectives on Russian literature have contributed to creating the conditions for the war itself<sup>7</sup>. Referring to Russian intellectuals who “came to terms with the idea of Ukraine as a separate nation”<sup>8</sup>, such as Nikolai Leskov, Aleksander Herzen and Nikolai Chernyshevskii, Maiorova emphasized how the emphasis on and attachment to their marginalization in the Russian literary canon – “which is itself a product of the imperial age” – paradoxically led literary scholars to “perpetuate the imperial model”<sup>9</sup>. Eventually, Maiorova poses the question to the broader scholarly community: “And do we thus profoundly underestimate the true scope and nature of Russo-Ukrainian cultural interaction and think about it in reductionist terms, shaped, once again, by the imperial past?”<sup>10</sup>.

Maiorova’s reflections are part of a wider discussion launched by “Ab Imperio” in 2022, which focuses on two key issues as windows into the war’s impact on the state of the field<sup>11</sup>. Scholars in Ukrainian literary studies, such as Taras Koznarsky<sup>12</sup> and Yuliya Ilchuk<sup>13</sup>, joined the debate, emphasizing the need to rethink our approach to Russian imperial history by recognizing “the hybrid nature not only of Ukrainian literature but of the

<sup>7</sup> “[...] as a literary scholar, I am asking: Is Russian literature implicated in creating the conditions for the war? And do we need to shift our established scholarly perspectives to address this issue?”, Ibidem.

<sup>8</sup> Ivi, p. 72.

<sup>9</sup> Ivi, p. 75.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>11</sup> As the “Ab Imperio” editorial team puts it in the opening pages of the first forum: “There must have been some deficiencies in global Russian studies if the politics of history promoted by Putin’s regime and discussed as a legitimate theory was not outright discarded as outlandish when it began taking shape at the turn of this century. Therefore, it is appropriate to raise the question of whether the imperial turn of the 1990s contributed to the legitimation of Russian imperial claims, or whether the methodological normalization of the Soviet period in post-Cold War historiography directly converted into the political rehabilitation of the Soviet regime”, I. Gerasimov – S. Glebov – M. Mogilner – A. Semyonov, *War*, op. cit., p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> T. Koznarsky, *Ukrainian-Russian Encounter in the Romantic Era*, “Ab Imperio”, 2022, 2, pp. 77-84.

<sup>13</sup> Yu. Ilchuk, *From Russian Literature to Russian-Language Literature of the Empire*, “Ab Imperio”, 2022, 2, pp. 85-89.

Russian Empire's cultural production"<sup>14</sup>. Similarly, there is a call for the renewal of the categories and methodologies adopted for the study of Russian literature and culture in historiographical tendencies and perspectives, as the "Ab Imperio" editors emphasize in their introduction to the May issue of the journal:

[...] the war has had a major polarizing effect, rearranging a broad gradient of conceptual approaches in the field of Russian history into two uneven clusters opposing each other [...]. The much trumpeted 'imperial turn' of the late 1990s or avant-garde disciplines such as memory studies and comparative history have ended up conceptually indistinguishable from traditionalist national histories [...] The mere recognition that Russia was an empire before 1917 did not change the historical narratives about 'Russians' a bit. Even admitting that Russia was a 'multiethnic empire,' historians still identified 'Russians' and 'national minorities' throughout centuries. These stable groups effortlessly transcended the 1917 divide to be incorporated into the Soviet system of national territorial republics, only to disintegrate into independent nation-states in 1991<sup>15</sup>.

Scholars in the post-Soviet era mostly agreed, first, on the necessity of 'differentiating' the respective historical paths of the Russian and Ukrainian communities, and second, on the potential creation of a critical perspective that could reflect the complexity of the common Russian-Ukrainian historical path. Yet they ended up falling back instead on a kind of "methodological nationalism", which probably contributed to the consolidation of historical revisionist tendencies linked to today's conflict. The "groundbreaking methodological innovations" generated by new theoretical approaches of the past three decades, such as postcolonial and gender studies, "have greatly enriched the vision of the past and advanced much more nuanced interpretations of it"<sup>16</sup>. However, these innovations "did not have a similar effect on deconstructing the political implications of the general history"<sup>17</sup>. And here the

questions posed by Marina Mogilner in a dedicated commentary hosted by Slavic Review may be helpful in understanding how the last thirty years may be interpreted as a missed opportunity for the revision, or "decolonization", of the field:

How many of us took the "decolonizing" claim as an epistemological challenge to go beyond sporadic inclusions of "imperial peripheries" in mainstream teaching and research? How many have started the difficult epistemological work on our analytical apparatus (Russia(s); Rus'; Rous'; Lithuanian Rus'; empire beyond the formal name of the state; imperial situation/formation)? Have we really succeeded in decentering the dominant literary canon?<sup>18</sup>

Regarding the future of the study of cultural and political history of not only Russia and Ukraine, but of the entire post-Soviet region, the editors of "Ab Imperio" claim that today "[t]he key to success is to strengthen metanational or transnational arrangements [...] in the field formerly known as Russian studies"<sup>19</sup>. Additionally, as a response to the urgency emerging in the aftermath of the war, we should assume that in order to develop a truly transnational approach to the study of Russian-Ukrainian relations, we should first guarantee "full historiographical legitimacy" to Ukraine, by just acknowledging that "the study of Ukraine, like any other culture, requires special training, knowledge of language, understanding of context"<sup>20</sup>.

From the perspective of Ukrainian Studies, Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine has been seen as an opportunity to eventually free the field of any colonial narrative still dominating the Western image of Ukraine and its culture and history, with the aim of establishing a new tradition of research on Ukraine

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reasons behind this failure: "It could be a failure of our field, but it could also be the responsibility of the original concepts and theoretical models. After all, postcolonial theory has demonstrated its possible compatibility with methodological nationalism; nuanced gender studies analysis has proved compatible with essentialist groupism; and global history is potentially compatible with nested centrisms and the reproduction of established hegemonies", *Invitation to a Discussion*, "Ab Imperio", 2022, 1, pp. 65-68 (67).

<sup>18</sup> M. Mogilner, *Discussion*, op. cit.

<sup>19</sup> I. Gerasimov – S. Glebov – M. Mogilner – A. Semyonov, *The Russian Leviathan: Does History Matter?*, "Ab Imperio", 2022, 2, pp. 9-29 (18).

<sup>20</sup> A. Portnov – T. Portnova, *Discussion: War Against Ukraine. Full Historiographical Legitimacy to Ukraine*, "Slavic Review", 03.03.2022, <http://www.slavicreview.illinois.edu/discussion/> (latest access: 24.11.2022).

<sup>14</sup> A. Lounsbury, *Introduction to the Forum: How Will Our Scholarship on Nineteenth-Century Russian Culture Change in Response to Russia's War on Ukraine?*, "Ab Imperio", 2022, 2, pp. 58-62 (59).

<sup>15</sup> I. Gerasimov – S. Glebov – M. Mogilner – A. Semyonov, *War*, op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> A thematic section of this journal has just been devoted to the exploration of postcolonial approaches to post-Soviet cultural and social dynamics. For more details, see A. Frison – M. Puleri (ed. by), *Oltre il "Post-". L'esperienza (post-)sovietica sotto la lente (post-)coloniale*, "eSamizdat", 2021, XIV, pp. 7-225.

<sup>17</sup> As the editors of "Ab Imperio" highlight, here we could find multiple

as a fully autonomous multidisciplinary area. This kind of scholarly approach reflects a general mood easily observed in environments outside of academia, based on the idea of excluding Russia and Russian culture from conversations about Ukraine and its future. While such a reaction to Russian aggression is emotionally understandable — and drawing attention to Ukraine and its subjectivity more incisively than has been done hitherto can only be positive — the lack of a solid and unbiased understanding of Russo-Ukrainian relationship in their historical development remains a significant problem in geopolitics today.

In a recent contribution published in a forum on the war in Ukraine hosted by “Canadian Slavonic Papers”, Bohdan Kordan described the relationship between Ukraine and Russia as that of two narratives telling two “incompatible”, “mutually exclusive” stories that cannot result in a dialogue between peers<sup>21</sup>. As Kordan put it, “The disconnect between the Russia and Ukraine stories makes conflict inevitable”<sup>22</sup>. Kordan also considers the disparity between Ukraine’s view of its own history and aspirations as a European nation and the West’s reluctance to accept Ukraine’s claim to be regarded as a fully fledged member of the European community. This contrast calls attention to the fact that the West has some responsibility in creating the conditions for Russia’s aggression against Ukraine.

In an article published in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union, Oleh S. Ilnytzkyj argued that during the separation of Ukraine from Moscow, Russia’s traditional aversion to Ukraine’s independence was matched by the West’s lack of preparedness for Ukraine’s autonomy and its recovery of its own repressed history<sup>23</sup>. The striking coincidences between Ilnytzkyj’s and Kordan’s observations despite their being published thirty years apart is a sobering reminder of the general reluctance on the part of

Western scholars and political actors to deal with Ukraine as a self-standing cultural and national body.

In spite of Ilnytzkyj’s pessimism, the 1990s also saw the organization of conferences and publications devoted to the study of the Russo-Ukrainian relationship from a multidisciplinary point of view. In his introduction to an edited collection with the telling title *Ukraine and Russia in Their Historical Encounter* — a book even containing two essays by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn<sup>24</sup> — Omeljan Pritsak, founder of the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, wrote that discussions between Ukrainians and Russians were “essential” and that Ukraine’s recently gained independence was as an opportunity to make up for the dearth of dialogue and research on Ukrainian-Russian issues for the whole of the Soviet period<sup>25</sup>. The very fact that a book conceived with the clear aim of shedding light on fostering academic conversations on the Russo-Ukrainian encounter was published by the University of Alberta’s Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies shows that in the mid-1990s, historians and scholars of literature and culture regarded this theme as both significant and emotionally and politically ‘acceptable’. In his contribution on the nineteenth century included in that volume, George Grabowicz claims that “from the perspective of modern Ukrainian history and literature the Russian-Ukrainian relationship is undoubtedly the more central”. He even stated that “the relation between Ukraine and Russia is not that of an ‘encounter’ but something much more intimate and long-lasting — in the language of Soviet pathos, a historical and indissoluble embrace, or, as others might see it, a Sartrean *No Exit*”<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> B. Kordan, *Russia’s War Against Ukraine: Historical Narratives, Geopolitics, and Peace*, “Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes”, 2022 (64), 2-3, pp. 162-172 (164).

<sup>22</sup> Ivi, p. 167.

<sup>23</sup> O. S. Ilnytzkyj, *Russian and Ukrainian Studies in the New World Order*, “Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes”, 1992 (34), 4, pp. 445-458.

<sup>24</sup> See Ivi, p. 446: “From Solzhenitsyn to Rutskoï, from Zhirinovskii to Lebed’, and including such acclaimed Western minds as Hélène Carrère d’Encausse (who is of Russian descent), Ukraine’s independence is interpreted as a tragedy for Russia, an unnatural violation of history, culture, and geography”.

<sup>25</sup> O. Pritsak, *Introduction: The Problem of a Ukrainian-Russian Dialogue*, in *Ukraine and Russia in Their Historical Encounter*, ed. by P. J. Potichnyj et al., Edmonton 1992, pp. ix-xiv (ix). The project was continued in a subsequent volume: *Culture, Nation and Identity: The Ukrainian-Russian Encounter (1600-1945)*, ed. by A. Kappeler et al., Edmonton 2009.

<sup>26</sup> G. G. Grabowicz, *Ukrainian-Russian Literary Relations in the Nineteenth Century: A Formulation of the Problem*, in *Ukraine*

After the enthusiasm of the early Nineties, one cannot say that the agenda put forward by scholars such as Grabowicz and Pritsak has been fully realized, especially as far as literary studies are concerned<sup>27</sup>. In spite of the significant scholarship published in the fields of history and political science<sup>28</sup>, comparative Russian-Ukrainian studies can be said to appear suspicious to most scholars active in the two fields. A major, although unwanted and unexpected consequence of this scholarly inertia has been the persistence of colonial and imperial biases, which has condemned Ukraine to remain scarcely known to the West while having to face Russia's growing neo-imperial ambitions. One of the challenges facing scholars of Russian-Ukrainian studies is the need to strike a balance between supporting Ukraine as an autonomous object of research and exploring the interaction between Ukraine and Russia over the centuries. A clearer picture of the encounter between Ukraine and Russia, one able to highlight crucial moments in European history like Ukraine's role in Russia's modernization processes and Russia's repressions of Ukraine's autonomy, might contribute to the long-awaited recognition of Ukraine's subjectivity by both the scholarly community and the general public.

In his 1995 ground-breaking article with the

provocative title *Does Ukraine Have a History?*, published in another forum on Ukraine hosted by the "Slavic Review", Mark von Hagen wrote that:

Ukraine represents a case of a national culture with extremely permeable frontiers, but a case that perhaps corresponds to post-modern political developments in which subnational, transnational and international processes need as much attention by historians, social scientists and "culturologists" as those processes that were formerly studied as national<sup>29</sup>.

It is possible that recent tragic events have succeeded in convincing the international audience that Ukraine does indeed have a history and that its history and culture are worth exploring; yet the complexities of this history and culture require scholars to combine a national approach with a comparative-transnational one. After 2014 and even more so after 24 February 2022, calls to silence Russia and to put cooperation between the West and Russian cultural actors on hold in order to hear Ukraine are understandable and in most instances necessary and ethically unavoidable<sup>30</sup>. Nonetheless, a fresh start in Ukrainian-Russian scholarship would likely have positive effects in clarifying the extent of Ukraine's historical and cultural individuality.

[www.esamizdat.it](http://www.esamizdat.it) ◇ M. Puleri, A. Achilli, *Beyond War: Russia, Ukraine and the State of the Field* ◇ eSamizdat 2022 (XV), pp. 19-24.

and *Russia in Their Historical Encounter*, op. cit., pp. 214-24 (214).

<sup>27</sup> Among the few available studies see M. Shkandrij, *Russia and Ukraine: Literature and the Discourse of Empire from Napoleonic to Postcolonial Times*, Montreal and Kingston-London-Ithaca 2001; V. Chernetsky, *Mapping Postcommunist Cultures: Russia and Ukraine in the Context of Globalization*, Montreal-Kingston 2007; M. Soroka, *On the Other Side: The Russian-Ukrainian Encounter in Displacement, 1920-1939*, "Nationalities Papers", 2009 (37), 3, pp. 327-348. A growing field of scholarship is that on Gogol's hybrid identity, including works by Yulia Ilchuk, Oleh S. Ilnytskyj, and Edyta Bojanowska.

<sup>28</sup> See among others S. Plokhyy, *Ukraine and Russia: Representations of the Past*, Toronto-Buffalo-London 2008. In the opening paragraph of his introduction, Plokhii notes the following: "Where does Russian history end and Ukrainian history begin? This question, which the dissolution of the Soviet Union placed on the scholarly agenda in the West, has not yet received a satisfactory answer", p. 3. See also A. Kappeler, *Ungleiche Brüder: Russen und Ukrainer vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart*, München 2017. In political science, a major contribution is P. D'Anieri's *Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Uncivil War*, Cambridge-London 2019, a book that insists on the incompatible character of Europe's and Russia's vision of the European order.

<sup>29</sup> M. von Hagen, *Does Ukraine Have a History?*, "Slavic Review", 1995 (54), 3, pp. 658-673 (670).

<sup>30</sup> See V. Sheiko, "Cancel Russian Culture" as a Means of Survival, <https://krytyka.com/en/articles/cancel-russian-culture-as-a-means-of-survival>, March 2022 (latest access: : 24.11.2022).

◇ *Beyond War: Russia, Ukraine and the State of the Field* ◇

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***Abstract***

The dramatic developments devastating Ukraine since February 2022 represent a true watershed not only for social and political dynamics in both countries, but also for Russian and Ukrainian studies. In this article, the authors aim to contribute to a preliminary review of the most relevant issues touched upon by the academic debate emerging in the months following the start of the war of aggression waged by the Russian Federation in Ukraine.

***Keywords***

Russia, Ukraine, War, State of the Field.

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