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Svetlana Gorshenina

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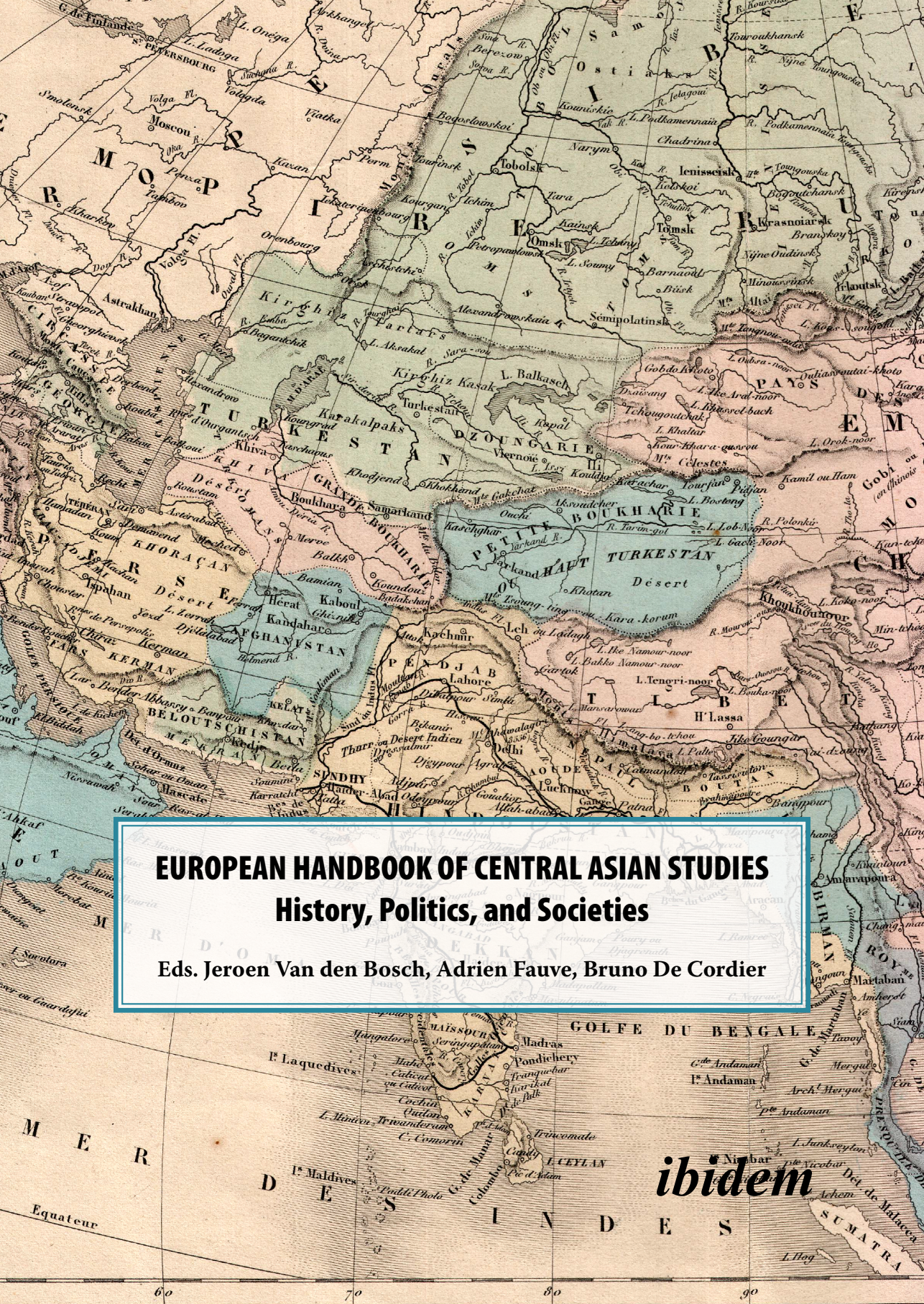
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**EUROPEAN HANDBOOK OF CENTRAL ASIAN STUDIES**  
**History, Politics, and Societies**

Eds. Jeroen Van den Bosch, Adrien Fauve, Bruno De Cordier

*ibidem*



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## CHAPTER 6

# Orientalism, Postcolonial and Decolonial Frames on Central Asia: Theoretical Relevance and Applicability

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THE HISTORY OF POSTCOLONIAL THEORIES and their (non-) acceptance is extremely controversial. This is not only due to the nature of their central premise, which calls into question the very process of knowledge production and the political biases of their producers. The complex dynamics that surround their promotion or rejection also contribute to their wide-ranging application (from the socio-political sphere to the areas of science, art and literature), which in turn is reflected in the complex corpus of scholarly works. Their plasticity and direct dependence on the researcher's personal view play a role, allowing diametrically opposing interpretations of ideas that (self-)originate in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978).

The complex structure of postcolonial research has become a further obstacle in the application of these theories. In order to better institutionalize their perspectives, researchers try to combine all anti-colonial discourses under the term 'postcolonial studies,' from the descriptive postcolonial history of the 'global North' to the postcolonial critique of the former metropolises and South Asian subalterns, through to the radical movements that seek to distance themselves from them.\* Among the latter are decolonial ideas that problematize (from the standpoint of political activism and ethics) the connection between the knowledge production process and the positioning of scholars in the context of global coloniality. In addition, Leftist-Marxist theories maintain an anti-capitalist stance, progressivism, and emphasize the economic motivations and material and social conditions of all actors of colonization.

The differences in the use of postcolonial theory by its 'conservative,' 'liberal,' and 'radical' proponents often reflect the different personal backgrounds or life experiences of the researchers. Among them are those from the 'global North,' people from what is often still colloquially called 'the Third World countries' who have received recognition in Western (primarily English-speaking) academic spheres and those from 'the global South' who continue

\*Tlostanova 2020

### Box 6.1 Defining Colonialism, Decolonization, and Other Prefixes

**Colonialism** – Originally from the Latin word *colonia*, meaning an agricultural settlement of a population outside of that population's original territory. In the context of this analysis, the term refers to a historically specific period, linked to particular conquests in the early modern and modern eras, which were presented as 'civilizing missions' aimed at modernizing 'backward' populations and cultures. The 'progressiveness' of modern colonial empires purportedly gave their forerunners and advocates the right to annex regions beyond the European continent and create a hierarchical structure of government. Within this framework, the local populations had limited rights in comparison to the inhabitants of the metropolises (the centres of the colonial empires) under the pretext of their alleged 'backwardness' and 'underdevelopment' and of cultural or racial particularities, while the metropolises reaped the colonies' resources and sought to maximise profits from them.

**Decolonization** – The process of liberation from colonialism and of gaining independence, as well as the process of overcoming (post)coloniality.

**Global coloniality** – The long-term results of colonialism, which manifest themselves in "certain local forms and conditions that remain a connecting thread for understanding the seemingly disparate manifestations of modernity."\*

**Orientalism** – A multi-faceted term that can refer to an academic tradition involving the study of 'oriental' languages and cultures, or to an artistic style imitating 'oriental art,' as well as to relations of dependence that allow an object to be subordinated by devaluing it. See Part 1.1 for a detailed discussion.

**Orientalization** – To evaluate any culture/identity (e.g. non-European, pre-modern) from a Eurocentric point of view in a snide and mocking way in order to underline its own superiority and the inferiority of the Other.

**Neo-colonialism** – Refers to any and all forms of control by ex-colonies or new great powers over former colonies that are politically (nominally) independent.

**Postcolonial** – Affected by the lingering effects and impact of colonialism, and also the transhistorical comparative framework focusing on local resistance to colonial rule.

**Post-colonial** – Linked to a period chronologically taking place *after* a colonialism, in contrast to 'pre-colonial.'

**Postcoloniality** – The intellectual, ideological and cultural consequences of colonialism that remain after the formal end of a colonial order.

\*Tlostanova 2020



to work beyond their own geographical and linguistic borders. The relative subjectivism that is encouraged in postcolonial studies allows for a broad interpretation of postcolonial ideas across the entire spectrum of anti-colonial and nationalist discourses.

The handbook's purpose has determined the structure of this paper: mapping out the (*quasi*-)full spectrum of current viewpoints on the issue. First, the author outlines the main ideas of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, the context of their emergence and their critique in the Western academic realm. Second, the chapter presents a history of colonial and anti-colonial discourses in the Tsarist empire and the Soviet Union. The third section analyses the acceptance or rejection of Orientalist ideas in the post-Soviet context, from the former Soviet centre and colonial periphery, to Europe's so-called 'overseas' of 'far abroad' (*дальнее зарубежье*), America and Japan. Fourth, arguments *pro* and *contra* on the most debated issues in postcolonial theory in relation to the post-Soviet space will be presented, such as the possibility of *not* analysing imperial Tsarist Russia through the lens of Orientalism, the definition of 'Soviet' as imperial, neo-imperialist, colonial, anti-colonial, post-colonial or postcolonial,<sup>1</sup> and the decolonization of post-Soviet, post-socialist and (or) postcolonial Central Asia.

The attention is focused on the Central Asian 'post-Soviet' space. The Caucasus and Siberia, as well as the Russian Federation, which are also important for understanding the particularities of Russian Orientalism, are not included in this text. For some detailed bibliographic references, the author recommends that the reader consult her earlier publications.\* Also, note that to indicate when this is text citing sources by referring to a relevant publication's own listed works, the author uses the label 'bib. ref.' *after* the short reference itself.

\*Горшенина 2007; Borney and Gorshenina 2014b

## 1. Orientalism: The Basic Concepts

### 1.1 Defining Orientalism

The term 'Orientalism,' which probably first entered the English language in Joseph Spence's *An Essay on Pope's Odyssey*, published in 1726,\* is key to postcolonial thought. It nonetheless invites different readings, which – depending on the position of the researcher – may be regarded as outdated, relevant or politicized hyperbole. The problematic nature of the term stems from the fact that it combines

\*Kalmár 2016

<sup>1</sup> Regarding the nuances between 'post-colonial' and 'postcolonial,' see Box 6.1.

lay interpretations with scholarly definitions. Among the possible definitions, the author outlines the notions that were formed in the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries:

- An *academic tradition* involving the study of 'Eastern' languages and cultures and encompassing historical, philological and archaeological understandings, whose roots go back to the Renaissance. This definition does not involve the politicization of knowledge.
- An *artistic style* that appeared in Western and Central Europe and Russia from the 18<sup>th</sup> century and articulated itself through a particular range of 'Eastern' themes and motifs in music, architecture, painting and literature. The analysis of this style was often carried out without any linking to the colonial or imperial context. It was originally created by writers and artists who travelled to 'Eastern countries' and was based on the 'Eastern' collections of imagery, art objects, paraphernalia, etc. that came into being and gained popularity in Europe. It was subsequently replicated, forming a visual image of an imaginary 'classical East' with geographical variation.
- A *pseudo-science*, as found in the Western politicized knowledge of 'the East' that contributed to the creation of a biased view toward the 'East.' The goal of this 'system of ideological fictions' was to legitimize Western cultural and political superiority and create relationships of dependence, dominance and subordination. This interpretation sees 'Orientalism' as a *discourse of power* constructed in 'the Occident' that is directly linked to imperialism and colonialism, as well as a *corporate institution* designed to preserve the ideological and political hegemony of Europe throughout Asia.
- Any *relations of dependency* that allow the subordination of an object by belittling it. Despite the collapse of the colonial system, 'Orientalism' has taken on new forms and expressions in the modern world, largely remaining the same, preserving all Western prejudice against the non-West. From a euro-centric vantage point, it evaluates non-European or (and) pre-modern identities and cultures in a sneering, mocking manner. In this new discourse, dependencies preserve specific emphasis on the colonial and postcolonial contexts and global coloniality for which postcolonial theories are no longer sufficient and instead decolonial ideas are needed to dismantle these dynamics.



These different interpretations of 'Orientalism' can be organized chronologically. In the period from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Orientalism was perceived as a neutral definition for the study of non-European cultures and the creation of artistic works on the theme of 'the Orient.' The same framework applies to the special late 18<sup>th</sup>-century policy of the *East India Company* regarding Indian languages, laws and customs. Since the 1960s, the understanding of Orientalism has become increasingly critical: its ideological bias and the biased scholarly and literary-artistic representations formed in its wake have been highlighted. The publication of Said's *'Orientalism'* in 1978 gave it a definitively negative meaning. The conclusions of researchers from previous generations, that idealized the role played by European scholar-administrators and deemed the European intervention to be beneficial to Asian societies, were called into question.

This critique provoked a wave of renaming in the Western academic spheres, in which the monolithic 'Oriental Studies' was replaced with the Departments of Middle Eastern Studies or East Asian Studies, while 'Orient' (and its adjective 'Oriental') became almost taboo and were replaced by 'Asian.' The subsequent spread of Said's ideas, somewhat resembling a hype, took the term out of its specific historical and geographical context, making it synonymous with a contemptuous attitude towards 'the Other.' Having become 'traditional,' Orientalism is gradually giving way to more radical left-wing theories of decolonization and anti-colonialism.\* At the same time, the relentless criticism of Said's ideas constantly revives the previous definitions of 'Orientalism,' transforming these four definitions from a chronological sequence into competing yet concurrent theories.

\*Tlostanova and Mingolo 2012;  
Tlostanova 2020

## 1.2 Context of Edward Said's 'Orientalism'

Starting with his research for a dissertation on the 19<sup>th</sup> century novelist Joseph Conrad, Said developed his concept in specific political, social and academic contexts. The general background to the work was the political-epistemological crisis of the post-war period, defined by "a series of events – the Holocaust, the post-war disintegration of the European empires, the 'Third World' revolutionary and minority movements in the West – that cumulatively undermined confidence in European modernity and its narrative of progress."\*\* These changes were reflected in the academic worlds, which experienced successive 'turns:' the structuralist and post-structuralist, the linguistic, the discursive and the postcoloni-

\*\*Shohat 2010: 44

\*Shohat 2010: 44

al-cultural. During the 'post-war seismic shift,' the decolonization of the academies occurred: "ethnic studies, women's studies, and Third World studies were already challenging the epistemological foundations of what constituted a legitimate object of knowledge."\*

Even if the first elements of anti-colonial criticism may tentatively be recorded as early as the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Said relied, on the one hand, on later ones, such as the anti-colonialist writings of such figures as Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Theodor Adorno, Roberto Fernández Retamar and C.L.R. James. On the other hand, he built his concept from Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony, French philosopher Michel Foucault's concept of knowledge and power and how they interact, along with the ideas of French Marxist scholar Maxime Rodinson. In the field of Middle Eastern Studies, his immediate precursors were Anouar Abdel-Malek, who was well acquainted with the Soviet excesses of Marxism, and Abdul-Latif Tibawi, who determined that academic knowledge about the Middle East grew out of deep-rooted medieval Christian hostility to Islam and was by definition Eurocentric and tainted by its association with European colonial rule and racism.

### 1.3 Edward Said's ideas

Said built his concept from an analysis of scholarly, artistic, and political discourses related to mainly French and British Orientalists who came from the most implicated imperial nations in the Islamic Orient. Geographically speaking, his cases were limited to Pakistan, the Middle East and North Africa. The main tenets of his ideas can be summarized as follows:

\*Said 1978: 2-3

- Orientalism is based on essentialist discourse of ontological and epistemological fundamental differences between 'the Orient' and 'the Occident' that are presented as real-world givens and fundamentally unequal in essence. It is also associated with the notion of the Orient's or an Oriental's "Otherness."\* This discourse is not politically innocent but became a vehicle of control: according to the Gramscian idea, hegemony is not limited to political forces, and moral and intellectual leadership is the true foundation of political power.
- The Foucauldian ideas of knowledge and power have been extended by Said to the colonial world and were transposed to his notions of 'colonial power' and 'oriental knowledge.' After Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in 1798 in the context of the

assertion of capitalism, 'Orientalism' crystalized as an official discourse about the East, responding to the imperatives of imperialist power and reflecting the Westerner's fantasies and desires towards the East. Imperialism, colonialism and Orientalism become interdependent, influencing one another. This 'colonizing knowledge' institutionalized or formed itself into a system that went beyond the limits of the Academy: intellectual corporate institutions, scholarship, theories, concepts, terminology, imagery, colonial bureaucracies, colonial styles, etc.\* (Said 1978: 1-2)

- The result of this politicized, eurocentric, reductionist knowledge, constructed as such by Western observers, are 'ideological fictions' about the East. Its 'imaginative geography' has no clear boundaries, except for the understanding that this space, associated primarily with Islam, then with Hinduism and Buddhism, lies outside of the Christian world. Far removed from the reality of the 'East,' 'imagined' or 'constructed' rather than 'analysed' or 'studied,' this image generates stereotypical dichotomies between *positive* qualities of a civilized and superior European West and *negative* ones of a barbaric and inferior Asiatic East that are rooted in the opposition of the 'masculine West' and 'feminine East' (rational *vs.* aberrant; developed *vs.* undeveloped; modern *vs.* retarded). Thus, this discursive construct legitimizes Western cultural and political superiority. In fact, it was necessary to dominate the East on an ideological basis: it is a specific 'technology of power' intended to control colonial lands and peoples.

#### 1.4 Criticism of the Ideas of Edward Said

If the pre-Saidian writings on Orientalism were already objectionable, the publication of Said's book provoked a flurry of criticism from 'Western' and 'Eastern' researchers. Bernard Lewis, a British-born, American historian of Islam and the Ottoman empire working at Princeton University became a symbol of the most severe criticism of Said, which was echoed by many influential Orientalists\* (these include in particular Ahmad, Bayart, Clifford, Irwin, Kopf, Kramer, Mackenzie, Varisco, Warraq and Hamdi).\*

\*Lewis 1982

\*MacFie 2000

The main tenets of Said's critics go as follows:

- Said uses a specific, convenient set of examples, an 'arbitrary rearrangement' in his treatment of the historical evidence, reflecting a preformulated idea and a preordained conclusion.

- Said reveals a deep-seated, postcolonial resentment towards the West and only discusses its negative attributes. *Orientalism's* central thesis is essentially anti-Western, which hides an identity crisis associated with internal problems within the Middle East, down to elements of anti-Zionism (in some interpretations of this criticism, Said is practically an accomplice of Palestinian terrorists).\*
- Said does not know any Eastern languages apart from Arabic and allowed a large amount of inaccuracies into his text. As a literary scholar rather than a historian, he does not consider the history of Orientalism in the longer term. He therefore omits examples of the study of the East from earlier periods, for example, the Renaissance (although, it could be counter-argued that a narrow chronological frame allows him to preserve the integrity of a specific period that was marked by the development of modern European capitalism). He also does not distinguish between pre-colonial and colonial periods.\* At the same time, Said does not offer robust literary interpretations of Eastern images, motives, and plots. Literary texts for him are simply material that demonstrates some of the thought patterns of orientalist discourse. He does not consider texts as part of a system of literary hierarchies and reputations, multilevel intertextual references or the tradition of national literary processes that also have an internal logic of development.
- By presenting the localized experiences of the British and French empires as universal, Said leaves all other models of imperial-colonial relations out of his analysis. In particular, he does not address countries that did not have significant Eastern colonies or at least close relations with and presence in a number of Eastern polities, such as Germany (first and foremost) but also Italy, Portugal, Spain and the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires, that all made a great contribution to the study of Eastern cultures (within this, critics do not acknowledge the fact that by the end of the 1830s, the institutionalization of Orientalism had already been instigated within the English and French scholarly circles and that this produced very influential research and trained scholars and colonial administrators from countries that had a 'second wave' of Orientalism).
- Said reduced history to certain bipolar interpretations, describing the relationship between the authorities and researchers in an unclear manner. Without taking into account the specifics of individual disciplines, Said places researchers under the

\*Малахов 2003; Штейнер 2008;  
Глик 2020

\*Bornet and Gorshenina 2014b: bib.  
ref. 37 п61



umbrella term ‘Orientalists,’ although this term became obsolete in the early 1970s with the advent of more specific terms, such as ‘Indologists,’ ‘Sinologists,’ ‘Iranists’ and ‘Arabists.’ As a result, Said himself creates a homogenizing, essentializing and totalizing vision of the East. His analysis, that focuses exclusively on canonical Western literature created by white European scholars, ignores other categories of texts associated with peripheral actors (women, *métis* minorities and local elites), thus denying them critical thought and their own agency. Similarly, he does not see a difference between the Victorian national chauvinists and the researchers working in ‘pure research’ that were sympathetic to the local population, and does not discuss the multifaceted nature of the interaction between the colonizers and colonized.

These criticisms were not left unanswered. In his next book, *Culture and Imperialism*,\* Said developed several nuanced ideas about Orientalism and responded to his critics. He extended the chronological and geographical limits (with the addition of the American case study) and clarified the difference between capitalism and imperialism. He pointed out that ideological constructions, memory and cultural practices (mostly hybrid) survived the disappearance of colonial empires and reinforced the superiority of ‘the West’ over ‘the Third World.’

\*Said 1993

The debate on Orientalism, which started in Anglo-American academic circles and has been raging for over forty years now, has given rise to a new type of research on the particularities of conducting this critical dialogue and a specific mode of critiquing the critiques.\* In addition, the life and work of the proponents of classical postcolonial theory have also been the subject of study in recent years. Along with Said, ‘classical’ and ‘traditional’ Postcolonial Studies include also Indian scholars Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak who are the founders of Subaltern Studies.\* These ‘postcolonial Others’ have nonetheless managed to occupy an important place in the Western Academy.

\*Hsu-Ming Teo 2013

\*Abdalkafor 2015

## 1.5 Orientalism in the Present Day

Despite the criticisms it provoked, Said’s book remains probably one of the most influential scholarly books in the humanities to be published in the English language. *Orientalism* triggered a radical epistemological break within the Western academy. Said created both general ideas and concepts that set out the logic of the postcolonial perspective. He also developed more specific approaches

to the analysis of ‘colonial discourse,’ and the ‘decolonial turn’ that emerged from these approaches cannot be ignored, regardless of one’s stance towards it.

Researchers from different countries have taken the concept ‘Orientalism’ in many different directions.\*

\*Bornet and Gorshenina 2014b:  
bib. ref. 29n35

First, the geographical scope was expanded. On the one hand, studies of the Ottoman and Russian empires and Latin America (which are not frequent sources of enquiry in postcolonial and decolonization analysis) along with the classic cases of Middle Eastern Studies have been produced. On the other hand, researchers went beyond the limits of a set of related representations of the non-Western world, transferring the analysis to the functioning of Orientalism in European history and culture. This tendency has been called into question since it reverses Orientalism, generating another monolithic geo-fantasy of ‘the West.’

\*Lowe 1990; Shohat 1992;  
Chioni Moore 2001

From this perspective, concepts of Europeans’ “internal Others,” “the West colonising itself” and “Occidentalism” were developed.\* These allow a critical analysis of discriminatory and orientalisating discourse both in relation to Western European history (including the analysis of Shakespeare’s plays\*), the ‘secondary’ Western States (in particular, Ireland, Australia, Canada and New Zealand) and the ‘peripheral’ countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Within the framework of the so-called ‘social Orientalism,’ the working class, women and the ‘little colonialists’ of the ‘great powers’ (white people from the bottom of the social hierarchy whose living conditions in the colonies were harsh) also became the objects of analysis.

\*Singh 2019

Second, the disciplinary field expanded beyond the boundaries of textual analysis, branching out from literary theory and cultural criticism to the broader research fields of Anthropology, History, Art, Philosophy, Linguistics, Geography, Economics and International Relations. This led to the emergence of new areas such as the critical theory of cultural heritage and human geography. The typology of sources expanded accordingly: archival documents, iconographic and cartographic material, oral history, and new digital media were added to published texts of various descriptions.

The methodological framework has also been nuanced. Among the heuristic concepts found in the seminal works of second-generation postcolonial researchers, it is necessary to mention the concepts of ‘the contact zone’ between imperialists and colonial peoples, in which a preconceived idea of ‘Others’ was formed. In addition, the concept of ‘transculturality’ determines the hybrid result of this colonial encounter. This concept of ‘hybridity’ (along

with its related notions of ‘in-between-ness,’ mimicry and derivativeness) allows us to understand the formation of new identities during the course of interactions in the context of the colonial situation, while ‘subaltern agency’ describes local populations that are oppressed, but are far from being passive informants and in fact participated in the production of colonial knowledge.\*

A productive critique of Said’s *Orientalism* and its proponents emerged between 1990 and 2000.\*\* These new interpretations highlighted the need to reject generalizations as well as the need for a detailed and dynamic reconstruction of the historical context literally over decades. They emphasize diversity, historical and geographical discontinuities, irregularities, and the discursive heterogeneity of Orientalism that is not exclusively limited to imperialist propaganda (in particular, in the colonial literature created by women). These new approaches allow the construction of counter-discourses that run parallel to the process of “provincializing Europe.”\* They mean not only debunking myths about the universalism of European values and desacralizing official discursive structures, but also shifting the emphasis from the centre to the periphery.

There is an entrenched understanding that the interactions between ‘the East’ and ‘the West,’ different groups of colonizers, the colonized elite and colonized masses do not occur according to the logic of binary oppositions, but are multi-vector, non-linear and marked by subjectivity.\* They represent a specific situation in-between, implying mimicry, ambivalence, hybridity, heterogeneity, the reversibility of roles of colonizers and colonized, and the subversion of the relation between centre and periphery. Accordingly, precedence is now given to the vision of an ambiguous, changing, much more complex reality, which can only be comprehended through the discourse analysis of individual characters located in different times, spaces and bodies. The emphasis on actors dictates the relativity of evaluations depending on the selected points of view that are sometimes incompatible and thus subjectivity is prioritized. Event-based narratives are replaced by an analysis of the background to these events, the hidden and articulated motivations of actions and deeds, while finally, the initial colonization projects and their often unsuccessful or unexpected implementations are compared.

Today’s postcolonial researchers methodically turn to Derrida’s theories on ‘deconstruction.’ Rather than emphasising the power of colonial discourse (which Said wrote about after Foucault), instead they underscore the weaknesses that undermine it from within,

\*Spivak 1987; 1988; 1999; Pratt 1992; Bhabha 1990; 1994; Ashcroft et al. 1995; Matar 2000; Raj 2007; Schaffer et al. 2009; Loomba 2015; Gorshenina et al. 2019; Bornet and Gorshenina 2014b: bib. ref. 31 sqq notes 40-43, 66, 67, 68, 69, 74, 79, 81

\*\*Behdad 1994; Lawrence 1994; AHR 2000; McEwan 2000

\*Chakrabarty 2000

\*Allen 2002; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013

\*Bhabha 1994; Escobar 2007

thus opening up possibilities for decolonization.\* Alongside post-colonial theories, there are interesting ideas of: cultural transfer (Michel Espagne, Michael Werner); cross-over history (*histoire croisée*); history-in-equal-parts (*histoire à parts égales*); connected histories (Serge Gruzinski, Romain Bertrand, Sanjay Subrahman-yam); transnational history or microhistory (Carlo Ginzburg, Jacques Revel); the phenomenon of hybridization (Homi Bhabha); mixing (Alexis Nouss); and shared or entangled history (Sidney Mintz, Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann 2003).

\*Wiredu 1996

At the same time, many researchers started to discuss the fact that Orientalism has metamorphosed into a neo-Orientalism that reflects the new globality of the world that is marked by global coloniality and Islamophobia. The opposition of West-versus-East has given way to an unequal relationship between ‘the global North’ and ‘the global South’ in which hegemonic discourses reproduce hierarchical relations between (former) colonizers and the colonized in the form of a binary opposition of the developed versus the undeveloped. The need for “conceptual decolonization”\* led to the emergence of more radical methods and approaches. Along with representatives of radical (neo-)Leftist anti-colonial discourse, decolonial researchers criticize postcolonial scholars for using theories and language developed by Western academia.\*

\*Mbembe 2021

## 2. Russian and Soviet Orientalism

Russian Orientalism was often cited by Said’s critics as an example of the ‘pure research of the East’ that was developed independently of empire and colonialism. Nonetheless, in the Tsarist and Soviet experience, Orientalism, empire and colonialism form a single block, outside of which it is impossible to analyse the common history of Russia and Central Asia over the last few centuries.

However, the adoption of the theoretical framework of Said’s *Orientalism* for Central Asian historical study both in the Western world and, to a greater extent, in the post-Soviet space is delayed, uneven, often with a bias towards important stances and subjective interpretations. There is an evident – but not huge – body of work that rigorously develops postcolonial approaches based on examples of Russian/Soviet/post-Soviet cases. Unsurprisingly, works by ‘Western’ researchers or ‘local’ (i.e. Russian and Central Asian) scholars associated with Western Academia and academic institutions undoubtedly feature prominently in this corpus.



## 2.1 Reception of Postcolonial Theories in the USSR and post-Soviet Countries

Nathaniel Knight initiated a broad discussion about the applicability of Said's framework to the contexts of imperial Russia, the Soviet Union and the post-Soviet space.\* Citing the example of Vasily Grigoriev in Orenburg who did not find political use for his own knowledge of 'the East,' Knight demonstrated the 'specificity' of the interactions between Russian imperial power and knowledge. He suggested that it was impossible to fully apply the theory of Orientalism to the history of Russia. Knight, in this instance, followed the approach favoured by David Kopf\* who was writing in relation to some British Orientalists who were in opposition to the British colonial administration.

\*Knight 2000

\*Korf 1980

Despite the fact that this issue had already been clearly covered in the 1990s,\* it was Knight's statement that provoked a lively discussion in the journals *Kritika* and *Ab Imperio*\* and these polemical works remain the most frequently cited in the post-Soviet space.\* However, over the past twenty years, the body of publications on Russian-Soviet Orientalism has been supplemented by a number of serious works (*infra*) and analysis of these trends.\* Despite this, the question of the applicability of these theories to the former Soviet space is still relevant for a number of reasons:

\*Brower and Lazerini 1997; Evans 1999

\*Горшенина 2007: bib. ref. 218n5-16

\*David-Fox et al. 2006

\*Forum Al 2010; Sunderland 2011; Morrison 2009, 2012; Borneo and Gorshenina 2014b: bib. ref. 30n36; Schimmelpenninck van der Oye 2014; Алаев 2016

(1) Said's *Orientalism* was published in Russian as recently as 2006 and Govorunov's translation was a poor one.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, it was accompanied by an epilogue written by Konstantin Krylov, an ideologue of 'moderate' Russian nationalism, and founder and editor-in-chief of the journal *Questions of Nationalism*.\* By linking Said to Russian nationalism, Krylov presented his own imperialist discourse as an anti-colonial defence of the "oppressed Russian people," which overarchingly sent readers in a misleading direction.\* A more faithful re-translation, as well as the publication in Russian of Said's second key book *Culture and Imperialism*,\* did not change the situation.

\*Крылов 2006

\*Бобровников 2008; 2016

\*Сайд 2012

(2) The majority of post-Soviet researchers are not entirely familiar with the genesis of postcolonial discourse, an issue exacerbated by the lack of postcolonial readings on university programs and an insufficient amount of translations of the key texts on post-colonial theory into Russian. Thus, one of Franz Fanon's key works was published in Russian for the first time in 2020, while the works of Georges Balandier, who proposed the concept of "the colonial

<sup>2</sup> The KGB's internal translation and fragments published in *Kino* magazine in 1995-2003 remain unknown to the general public.

\*Balandier 2001 situation” back in 1951 are still relatively unknown.\* A consequence of such lack of specific knowledge of the political, cultural, historical and other contexts to the emergence and existence of post-colonial discourse was, for example, the oversimplified argument that Said’s ideas were formed under the direct influence of Soviet Orientalists,\* which stems from a much more nuanced study by Vera Tolz.\* However, it would be more accurate to say that Said was familiar with anti-imperialist Soviet criticism indirectly through the works of Abdel-Malek as well as Marxism (particularly its French and German interpretations), which were just several of many important theories for him.

\*Рейтблат 2020  
\*Tolz 2011

(3) There are widely disseminated statements from researchers and the public about imperial Russia’s and the Soviet Union’s ‘special path,’ which purportedly encompasses ‘European’ as well as a ‘Oriental’ patterns and elements.\* What reinforces this position, which is actively supported by Vladimir Putin,\*\* is ‘self-Orientalization,’ a stance which represents Russia either as a specific part of the East, or as ‘Eurasia’ (an intermediate space between West and East).\* This perception implies some sort of special relationship with Asia rather than a Western type of colonialism. Accordingly, Russia is removed from the vortex of postcolonial issues and is thus transformed from an empire that is ‘catching up’ (*nedo-Evropa* – *недоЕвропа*) into a key player on the world stage.

\*Горшенина 2007: bib. ref. 212-213n3-4; Borne and Gorshenina 2014b: bib. ref. 28n29, 59, 128  
\*\*Oskanian 2018

\*Горшенина 2007: bib. ref. 250-251n86-87; Bassin 2008; Laruelle 2008

(4) There is an entrenched view that Russian and Soviet history is essentially non-colonial, which makes the model that Said outlines not applicable to the Russian/Soviet context, since this model is allegedly only relevant to the ‘traditional’ Western empires and their colonies in the Middle East and South Asia. This close-mindedness is facilitated by the widespread notion of the existence of certain ‘classical colonies’\* and only a small number of comparative works in which the Russian-Soviet experience is compared to other (post)colonial situations.\* These viewpoints are often abstracted from existing historical interpretations regarding the (non-)colonial past of both the Tsarist empire and the Soviet Union.

\*Горшенина 2007: 246-248

\*Morrison 2008; Горшенина 2007: bib. ref. 222n25, 246n74; Borne and Gorshenina 2014a; 2014b: bib. ref. 52-53n110-116; Sabol 2017; Gorshenina et al. 2019

## 2.2 Evolving Perspectives on Russian and Soviet (Non-)colonialism

Whether Orientalism is accepted or rejected in relation to Tsarist and Soviet dynamics depends on whether Tsarist or Soviet history is interpreted as being colonial. The interpretation of Tsarist and Soviet history has changed on numerous occasions over the past three centuries.

### 2.2.1 *Tsarist and Soviet Perspectives*

The **Tsarist generals and administrators** described the Russian presence in Turkestan, Trans-Caspia and other parts of Central Asia almost-exclusively in terms of conquest and colonization. Referencing the European experience (which was repeatedly mentioned in Russian projects), theorists and practitioners of the colonial settlement of Turkestan argued exclusively about whether the Russian conquest and colonization was ‘better,’ ‘less destructive’ and ‘more humane’ than the Western ones. These arguments centred around the specifics of Russia’s geographical position (the continental nature of the empire and the absence of natural geographical barriers between the mother country and the colony), its proclaimed Messianic role as ‘a unifier of East and West,’ and the ‘Russian character’ which allegedly was more capable of adaptation and assimilation.\* This was necessary in order to connect the perception of Central Asia as ‘ours’ or as an ‘internal Orient,’ which later developed into a rather controversial concept, given that the Western powers also perceived their colonies as ‘their’ territories, despite being separated from the mother country by seas.

\*Gorshenina 2012: 37–94; 2016

In the **early Soviet period** and more specifically the **1920s**, in the works of a number of Soviet functionaries and historians (Mikhail Pokrovsky, George Safarov, Turar Ryskulov and Peter Galuzo,\* the Tsarist empire was presented as a “reactionary state” that imposed “obscurantism” within its borders, by leading colonial conquests and transforming Turkestan into “a prison of peoples” – in other words, “absolute evil” (*абсолютное зло*). This was reflected in the Bolshevik policy of the early years, which proclaimed that an anti-colonial agenda was central to its domestic and foreign policy. This agenda was expressed through the expropriation of foreign property (which was presented as decolonization) to their attempts to lead an anti-colonial movement around the world. Having created the language of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism, historians analysed the Tsarist colonization of Turkestan and the rest of Central Asia through the lens of Marxism, from the perspective of class struggle and shifts in socio-economic structures (*социально-экономические формации*). So, the imperial and capitalist dichotomy of ‘East-and-West’ was replaced by the concept of class struggle. Anti-colonial Bolshevik discourse was theorized but not always implemented in practice since it proposed the Orient’s liberation from several positions all at once:

\*Горшенина 2007: bib. ref. 227п36–37

- Liberation from Tsarist imperialism, which led to an official break with colonial discourse, politics, and symbols of the Rus-

sian Empire; while at the same time hiding the clear signs of continuity. These included, in particular, the rapid reconquest of land extending to the former imperial borders during the civil war, which suggests a very specific, under-the-radar hybridization of colonial and class discourses.\*

\*Sahni 1997

- Liberation from ‘Islamic obscurantism’ and the ‘backwardness of feudalism,’ which meant the implementation of a number of projects with a certain liberating potential that envisaged the social progress and transformation of the physical and cultural landscape of Turkestan. These projects required the broad mobilization of Muslims to support the Bolsheviks against anti-Soviet national elites (that were primarily religious), in particular, the active participation of ‘progressive’ local elites, who had been operating within the framework of the reformist Muslim movement (*Jadids*)\* and had already been proposing the modernization of Central Asian society since the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- The liberation of all oppressed countries of the ‘East’ from the encroachments of the ‘West,’ which meant spreading the revolution beyond the Soviet borders, utilizing the example of Central Asia. The emphasis shifted from the vision of proletarian revolution in highly developed industrial nation-states to the anti-imperialist struggle in colonial and semi-colonial countries around the world.\*

\*See also: Box 7.2

\*Wallerstein 1997: 7

Considering these particularities, scholars are cautious to define this period as colonial. Instead, they suggest describing it as post-colonial, especially in the early Soviet years. Adeb Khaled’s idea of the “nationalization of the revolution in Uzbekistan by the *Jadids*” points in the same direction.\*

\*Khaled 2015: 90–116

In the **Soviet Union** of the **1930s**, the theory of ‘absolute evil’ was criticized, and its supporters were repressed. The search for the ‘positive’ in the Russian conquest of Turkestan began in tandem with the strengthening of the idea of Empire and the rise of Rusophile and Pan-Russian sentiment. Inspired by a quote from Karl Marx about the modernizing role of England in India, a new narrative was launched in 1929, which stated that the region’s Tsarist conquest provided the ‘positive attributes of Russian enlightenment’ and ‘social and economic progress for the backward peoples of Asia.’ The Stalinist government justified this as being a continuation of the ‘progressive activities of the Russian intelligentsia,’ rather than a direct heir of Tsarist policy. This revisionist theory proposed the notion of ‘the lesser evil’ (*меньшее зло*), which assumed that out of the many evils – localist feudalism, endless feuds between

local khanates and emirates, the capture of Turkestan by the Western imperialist powers and (or) the Ottoman Caliphate, subjugation under China, invasion and conquest of the Russian empire itself – Tsarist-Russian rule was the least problematic since, on the one hand, the Russian empire possessed more advanced social formations and links with the revolutionary movement, and on the other, ‘the Asians’ eventually preferred the Russian presence to the encroachments of other colonial powers.\* Nonetheless, Soviet historians did not deny the revolutionary potential of the Central Asian proletariat and peasantry (*дежханство*),<sup>3</sup> but at the same time did not assume that the subsequent ‘progress’ was possible without the Russian leadership. The right to introduce modernity was assigned to the ‘progressive’ Russians alongside the rejection of the policy of ethnic particularism and radical emancipation of populations at the edge of the empire (the discourse of nationalist progress began to fade into the background, since by 1934, the policy of ‘nativization’ (*коренизация* – *korenizatsiya*) was curtailed, and the right of nations to self-determination had not been discussed since 1925).

\*Hauner 1992: 40; Горшенина 2007: 229

The promotion and ‘export’ of world revolution was removed from the Soviet agenda under the new Stalinist course. Radical expansionist internationalism gave way to the construction of ‘Socialism in one country’ under the leadership of an ‘older brother’ that, even in relation to the historical past, could not be held to any kind of account, let alone for colonial misdeeds. The USSR became increasingly like a new socialist empire with a colonial flavour, organized around a centre-periphery model. The anti-colonial discourse was gradually replaced by a discourse of co-optation.

Within this framework, the rehabilitation of the Russian nation and culture (1932-1938) occurred in conjunction with the propagation of the concept of the ‘friendship of peoples’ (*дружба народов*), which promoted the idea that “those who had suffered from oppression in the past no longer held grudges against their former exploiters (the Tsarist regime) nor the corresponding cultural paradigm (Russian culture).”<sup>\*</sup> In 1938, the paternalism of this policy became evident with the adoption of the law on the compulsory study of Russian for all the republics’ (non-Russian) schools.<sup>\*</sup> The large-scale program of Russification was intended to support the position of the Communist Party (which was dominated by Russian-speaking members), as well as to facilitate the management of the state.

\*Skakov 2020

\*Blitstein 2001

<sup>3</sup> This specific term *‘dekkhanstvo’*, whose roots go back to the Samanid period, defines the peasants of Central Asia.



World War Two strengthened the importance of the Russian people in the 1940s, since they constituted the first among equals, and the war also solidified the official political narrative of a single Soviet community through the unification of all republics. At the same time, the republics saw a rapid growth of local, native but Russian-speaking Soviet intelligentsia, who were associated with and owed much to ‘the centre.’ This process began with the temporary de-centralization of the Soviet polity during the period of military evacuation to the Central Asian hinterlands necessitated by World War Two.

In the 1950s, the ‘theory of the lesser evil’ was transformed into the narrative of ‘absolute good’\* In particular, in an open letter written in 1951, the historian Melitsa Nechkina criticized the ‘lesser evil’ theory, claiming that the (Tsarist) empire had lots of positive achievements.\* This was an important ideological shift in the interpretation of the Russian presence in Turkestan, which was now regarded as a ‘progressive process’ which was deemed objectively beneficial to the local native population. The post-Stalinist United Sessions of Central Asian historians, which met in Tashkent in 1954, 1955, and 1959, officially declared that the annexation of non-Russian peoples to Russia had objectively progressive significance, despite the colonizing role of Tsarism. The alleged positive role of the Russian proletariat, together with the Bolshevik party, and the significance of the fraternal union with the oppressed and the poor of the peripheral republics were particularly emphasized, the role of which was not to be confused with the negative role of Tsarism, which “deliberately cultivated a patriarchal-feudal oppression.”\* Thus, at the moment of de-Stalinization, the conceptualization of the empire as a positive force came to the fore. Anti-colonial language faded from official Soviet rhetoric but nonetheless continued to be perpetuated in scholarly works, art, as well as in propaganda that was aimed outside of the Soviet space, influencing the formation of the global anti-colonial movement.\*

The 1960s saw a complete rejection of terms such as ‘colonization’ as well as ‘colonial,’ ‘military capture,’ ‘conquest’ and ‘colony.’ They were replaced by ‘entry,’ ‘inclusion,’ ‘accession’ and ‘national question,’ reflecting the essence of the new approaches and the attempt to reinforce a positive image of the USSR, which was presented as a symbol of the “free and non-colonial Union of fraternal peoples” and the “solidarity of diverse workers in their class struggle against Tsarism.”\* From this point forwards, Soviet historiography, which had been preoccupied with the struggle against ‘bourgeois falsifiers of history,’ constructed certain binary oppositions

\*Горшенина 2007: bib. ref. 229п41

\*Нечкина 1951

\*Объединенная научная сессия  
1959: 7–9, 39–41, 50–51

\*Caffee 2020

\*Халфин 1965

in its narrative of Soviet rule. It shunned the concepts of military conquest and annexation and instead emphasized the voluntarism and objective progressivity of the Soviet project, contrasting the 'progressive activity' of the Russian revolutionaries, democrats and proletarians against 'reactionary' Tsarism. This artificial binary juxtaposition, which was fundamentally dishonest in its understanding of the colonial order and in fact was no more than a derivative of the theory of 'friendship of peoples,' became the main point of discussion, creating a series of false logical associations. Such black-to-white shifts and *vice versa* (i.e. hopping from one position to another) were frequent but by then had lost the propagandist fervour from the previous decades.

The late-Soviet discourse of the 1970s and 1980s was marked by the Cold War and not characterized by integrity or consistency. The overall constant was the regular reference to the 'backwardness' of the Central Asian populations. According to the Soviet *doxa*,<sup>4</sup> this derived in particular from the lack of important intellectual and cultural centres, and the absence of a viable economy and social-economic infrastructure prior to Soviet development efforts and social engineering, such as industrialization, electrification and the mass literacy campaigns. Like in Tsarist times the Soviet discourse emphasized that their regime was the best for the Central Asian peoples in the current stage of history, characterized by a clash and final struggle between two ideological systems. This ideological viewpoint dictated certain debates\* about 'accession,' its economic, political and cultural progressive consequences, the 'reactionary' nature of certain events or characters of the Tsarist colonial administration, the value of the social-democratic and revolutionary workers' movements, as well as the international situation of Turkestan, which was 'rescued' by its unification with Russia. At the same time, the range of opinions remained very wide and sometimes there were works that produced sharply critical assessments of 'Tsarist colonialism' in the line and spirit of those of the 1920s.\*

\*Ахмеджанов 1995

\*Кастельская 1980

Finally, the climate of the *perestroika* years (1986-1991) revealed the fragility of these ideological structures. Many members of the local<sup>5</sup> intelligentsia, who were disillusioned with the Soviet system,

<sup>4</sup> From the Greek δόξα, meaning popular belief.

<sup>5</sup> The author uses 'local' here to refer to the titular Turkic and Tajik ethnicities (or 'nationalities' in Soviet parlance) of Central Asia. A titular nationality (*титульная национальность*) or nation (*нация*) corresponds to the dominant ethnic group in a given republic. This ethnic group's language and culture determine the state language policy and education system, and its name determines the name of the state (for example, in Uzbekistan, the titular nation is Uzbek, in Turkmenistan it is Turkmen, and so on).

turned to the opposition. At the same time, they reproduced, in accordance with Soviet attitudes and constructed Soviet identities, various versions of the self-Orientalization and self-Westernization theses that were deemed acceptable in a pan-Soviet culture.\* The criticism of the Soviet reality that swept across the Central Asian republics was both anti-colonial and nationalistic. Despite it being the same rhetoric that was employed in the 1960s to criticize US and (or) Western European imperialism, the raising of the status of local languages was at the forefront of demands.\* Anxiety about the appearance of so-called *mankurts* (people who had forgotten their cultural origins), famously described by Kyrgyz author Chingiz Aitmatov in his novel *The Day Lasts More Than One Hundred Years* (1980), permeated the political discussion against foreign domination, showing that all aspects of the so-called modernization programme were being called into question.\* The local intelligentsia, who drew direct parallels with the plight of 'Third World' countries (mainly India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran) and for whom the national Soviet republic served as a reference point, expressed doubts about the possibility of equality within the Soviet Union itself, based on the dependency relationships between the centre and the periphery. However, since the Soviet authorities accepted and even encouraged such criticism, some scholars are inclined to determine the start of the postcolonial period with the opportunities of *perestroika*.

\*Ilgmen 2012

\*Kalinovsky 2018: 19-42

\*Karagulova and Megoran 2011

### 2.2.2 "Western" Historiographical Perspectives in the Twentieth Century

In the US and Western Europe, research on Turkestan and Central Asia in general suffered altogether a less dramatic fate. During the Stalinist era and the Cold War, access to Soviet archives and libraries was simply denied to Western researchers, depriving them of direct contact with Central Asian source material, which affected both the number of specialists on the region and contributed to the simplification and schematization of the Western analysis of Turkestan.\*

\*Mackenzie 1967: 265n.3;  
DeWeese 2002: 317-318

While the concept of '(voluntary) accession' was strengthened in the Soviet Union after World War Two, a 'national narrative' that was grounded in the 'national liberation' resistance of non-Russian peoples to the oppression of Tsarist administrators and Soviets flourished among Western historians, Sovietologists and emigrant specialists who worked primarily in the US, France and the UK.\* They tended to view the Soviet Union as a colonial empire, not

\*Горшенина 2007: bib. ref. 233n51

unlike the other modern high-imperialist European empires, and considered the closest parallel to Central Asia to be the situations in India, Algeria, and Indonesia. This contention was supported by a series of factors, such as the relative religiosity of the population, the ‘alien-ness’ of the Bolshevik ideology to the non-Russian peoples, the commitment of local intelligentsia to their own ‘traditional’ languages, and the relatively superficial – despite all the efforts of the Soviets – spread of the Russian language among the population, etc.\*

\*Myer 2002

The few works that sympathetically described the results and impacts of Soviet modernization in the more ‘backward’ areas of the country were most frequently written by journalists or geographers and had little impact on Western historiography.\* In general, disparate publications were not able to reverse the general scholarly disinterest in the history of the Central Asian region, which was marginal for Western research centres until the first specialized department (the Centre for Inner Asia Studies) opened at Indiana University in the early 1980s. In the first post-Soviet years, Western scholars, mainly Sovietologists and specialists in literature and oral traditions, published fairly politicized works on Central Asia.\*

\*Горшенина 2007: bib. ref. 234п52

\*DeWeese 2002

### 3. Central Asian Historiographic Trends after Independence

Today, the scholarly community that is writing the history of (post-)colonial Central Asia concurs that it is fragmented and polarized – an assessment which is, by the way, also applied to work on the Caucasus and Siberia. Internal, personal and (or) ideological tensions among its members did not simply vanish at the end of the Cold War. The opposition of the Western and (post-)Soviet worlds and the notions of ‘bourgeois’ and ‘progressive’ scholarship did not evaporate at once. On the contrary, this inertial and deeply ideological confrontation has intensified, creating new conflicts, which are nonetheless no longer reducible to the opposition of the so-called different schools of scholarship.\* The post-Soviet period, which is marked by a postcolonial polycentricity, possesses an even wider range of views on Said that are both favourable and more critical, denoting not merely differences of interpretation but a rift between postcolonial theories and decolonial ideas.

\*Bornet and Gorshenina 2014b: bib. ref. 39п65

In other words, the boundaries between pro- and anti-Said, and between post-colonialists and de-colonialists, have become much more complex. Positions across the spectrum of this epistemological framework can be taken by all types of scholars: ‘local’ post-Soviet Russian and Central Asian experts (let us not forget an exist-

ing distinction between researchers from *korennye* (native) and (or) *titul'nye* (titular) nations, and *russkie* and (or) *ruskogovoryashchie* (Russophone) scholars), post-Soviet specialists who emigrated to the West and were integrated into Western Academia, Western researchers who moved to Central Asia (usually for a very short time, for example, to work at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan's capital Nur-Sultan), Western scholars from Western universities, as well as Central-Eastern European scholars from universities in formerly socialist Central-Eastern European countries. The character of the knowledge produced is no longer directly linked to its place of production and to the origins of researchers, even if we can still see predominant intellectual orientations in different countries and environments. Now the belonging to a current of thought is mainly due to a scholar's personal history and intellectual choices.

### 3.1 Conservative Russian Assessments of Orientalism and the (Non-)colonial Russian/Soviet Past

The demise of the Soviet Union did not lead to the disappearance of the idea of Russian superiority in a specific 'civilizational' sphere involving the former 'Soviet East.' In 2008, Russia's 'near abroad' (*ближнее зарубежье* – *blizhneye zarubezh'ye*) was proclaimed a sphere of privileged interest. Simultaneously, several political projects intended to unify and re-integrate the post-Soviet space around Russia were formulated.\* Being the third incarnation of its kind (after the Tsarist and Soviet projects), the post-Soviet 'civilizing mission' has not caused Orientalism to fade from some kinds of research in Russia.<sup>6</sup> On the contrary, this project supports the negative stereotypes in the scholarly interpretation of postcolonial ideas\* and permits statements like those made by Mikhail Piotrovsky, the director of Saint-Petersburg's Hermitage museum, in which he called for an "end to this postcolonial ideology and culture with its stance of contrition and repentance."\* Moreover, while rejecting the heuristic potential of postcolonial and decolonial studies, some Russian scholars have reacted negatively to the decolonial ideas of their Central Asian colleagues (e.g. the com-

\*Шелекпаев and Чокобаева 2020: 75

\*Штейнер 2008; Serebriany 2012; Панарин 2015

\*Пиотровский 2020

<sup>6</sup> For example, the Russian Foundation for Fundamental Research and the Russian Historical Society launched a call for a research project related to the centenary of the creation of the USSR. The call listed priority research strands like the "civilizing mission" of the Soviet project, the concept of the Soviet Union as a "special civilization," the concept of the "Soviet people" in theory and in practice, the experience of language policies, the role of the Russian language, and the Russians and representatives of other nations in Soviet history. For the text of the call (in Russian), see: РФФИ 2021.



memoration of the centenary of the 1916 Steppe Uprising in Central Asia and especially Kyrgyzstan.\*

\*Morrison et al. 2019

There is a wider social and political context that fuels this attitude. The growth of imperialist nostalgic moods about faded glory, propelled by official propaganda,\* occurs in the context of sporadic attempts at territorial expansion, increased labour migration from the peripheral southern territories of the former Soviet Union to Russia, the stagnation and unravelling of economic complexes once connected to a centralized Soviet structure, the subordination of culture to 'neoliberal politics,' and so on. In the public sphere, imperial-nationalist rhetoric is being revived, along with an ethnonational hostility that verges on imperial chauvinism, xenophobia, nativism and racism.

\*Dadabaev 2021a

In the current context, ideas of Russian nativism are becoming more and more present despite the fact that, politically speaking, Russia remains a federation in which the attitudes of its various regional and federal actors towards the past – and the instrumentalization of that past – is very complex. In the process of this nationalist revisionism – the most visible in the political and academic panorama of today's Russia – the history of the Russian-Soviet empire is construed predominantly as the history of the Russian nation and Russian culture. Historians are still predominantly influenced by the research of those who were trained in the late Soviet years and who remain oriented towards Soviet academic doctrines and beliefs. As a consequence, they find it difficult to acknowledge and face the colonial past. These researchers favour the late-Stalinist thesis of 'voluntary accession' and describe the 'increment' (expansion) of the imperial space without using terms like 'colony' or 'metropole'.

The 'increment' of the imperial space is referred to as a consequence of the abstract law of cultural and geographical determinism and the peculiarities of the international situation. The notion of the 'positive role of colonialism' regularly surfaces in official Russian discourses, without shocking or provoking a negative reaction either from historians or among the general public. Economic speculations that certain fringes of the Russian empire were in a better position than, say, central Russia, and that the 'huge costs' of this 'modernization' far exceeded the 'insignificant benefits' of co-existence form the main link in a series of arguments supporting the view of the 'progressive' nature of Russian expansion in Asia.\* Russia's 'unique civilizational role,' which goes back to the traditions of both the Orthodox and Soviet search for a 'special path' also remains an argument in the historians' stockpile, in addition to the

\*Горшенина 2007: bib. ref. 240п66

notion that Russia had an important role in organizing a dialogue between different civilizations within a single state that had traces of universalism.

Researchers refuse to accept the term 'colonialism' and downplay the specific features of the colonial conquest in modern times. Instead, they seek out a tactful narrative in which it is possible to combine 'conquest' or 'accession,' the 'progressive role of the Russians,' the 'objective benefit' from these events and the cult of 'pure research.' The argument that there is a regional disciplinary approach to 'the Orient' represented by the Caucasus, Central Asia, China, Japan, etc.\* is presented as proof of the non-Orientalist nature of Russian and Soviet research and state administration, and repeats the aforementioned criticism of Said's ideas (cf. Part 1.4). At the same time, the term 'postcolonial research' has become in vogue among certain circles of scholars, but this often constitutes superficial rhetoric that adorns the opening paragraphs of publications, rather than a robust, sustained engagement with the question of postcolonialism in the Russian and Soviet context. A similar superficial understanding of postcolonial ideas can be also observed in the work of some researchers from Central Asia.

\*Рейтблат 2020

This (neo-)Orientalist discourse also developed in the context of the disappearance of Central Asia from the collective nationalizing memory of Russia and is also facilitated by the dropping number of Russian specialists on the region (e.g. on Kazakhstan, see A. Remnev\*). Everything that cannot be included in the new official notion of 'the Russian world' becomes 'foreign' and 'superfluous.' The most significant and dramatic episodes in the joint history of Central Asia and Russia (such as the battle of Geok-Tepe in 1881)<sup>7</sup> are minimized in the process of the reconstruction of Russia's official history and historiography. The 'forgetting' or denial of the colonial past comes forward in the fact that in today's Russia there is no official anniversary commemoration date and virtually no commemorative monuments related to the Russian presence in Turkestan, and also in the fact that this topic receives minimal attention in the school curriculum. This reluctance to recall one's own colonial history or active denial of the very existence of colonies or colony-like polities in the Tsarist and Soviet context creates "new, neo-colonial, forms of co-dependence with the countries situated at the periphery of the empire."<sup>\*</sup>

\*Ремнев 2011: 190-191

\*Abashin 2020

<sup>7</sup> The disastrous defeat of the Turkmen forces at the fortress of Geok-Tepe (Blue Hill) in 1881 by Tsarist troops signified the last major battle before the annexation of the Turkmen lands. An earlier siege of the same fort in 1879 had resulted in Russian defeat and retreat.

### 3.2 The Contrasting and Shifting Positions of Central Asian Researchers

Orientalism, when understood as the reproduction of relations of dependency, retains its position in Central Asia. Due to the “transculturality of the contact zones,”\* the voice of the formerly colonized, along with elements of anti-colonial discourse and nationalism, pierces through the Soviet model of history, albeit with varying success. In Central Asia, as in Russia, several ways of conceiving history coexist. The character of these approaches depends on the countries of Central Asia, as each republic now has its own trajectory defined by the specifics of the political administration, internal and external conjunctures and forces, and particular ideologies.\* At the same time, in the neo-liberal context, the ways in which history is written also depend on the individual author, their personality, their ethnicity, their educational and training background and their inclusion (or aspiration to be included) in different academic networks that may require (self-)censorship. As a result, many historical narratives, constructed in the region over the last three decades, are ambivalent, easily alterable and contradictory in relation to each other.\*

On the one hand, some scholars write history from a Soviet perspective, using Soviet rhetoric and truisms, while trying to adjust Russian and Soviet clichés to a specific political momentum. This is largely due to the region’s political and economic dependence on Russia, as well as Russia’s influence on the everyday life of the Central Asian states, which leads to fear, censorship and self-censorship in the interpretation of the past. A certain lack of intellectual and material resources (in particular, limited access to new scientific publications) should perhaps not be underestimated either. On the other hand, another group of Central Asian historians rewrite national history in a radical and problematic way, downplaying Russo-Soviet agency in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. At the same time, they regularly review their attitude to Russo-Soviet ‘colonialism.’ In their works, one can observe the containment of the colonial era to the parameters of the Tsarist period then its subsequent extension to 1991.

The degree to which the Tsarist and Soviet regimes are deemed to have colonized (in particular, the representation of the Soviet era as a ‘national tragedy’ and (or) ‘occupation’ or as part of national history) is dependent on the current relations with Russia and on the strength of political pressure from the authorities, who impose a discourse of legitimization of their national and international narratives on historians. Regardless of these internal oppositions

\*Pratt 1992

\*Cooley and Heathershaw 2017; Rico and Frigerio 2019

\*Dudoignon and Komatsu 2003-2006; Amsler 2007; Горшенина 2007: bib. ref. 236-238n56-60; Adams 2010; Laruelle 2017; Шелекпаев and Чокобаева 2020

among the intellectual currents of the republics, there are several common features that characterize the present historiography of the region. The chronological breakdown that was created in Soviet times, the adherence to Russian-language sources, and the specific, often purely factual manner of presenting material that is focused 'objectivism' are retained.

Frequently, they do not focus on local actors, but on the actions of Russian agents, presenting themselves not as subjects of history, but rather as objects, or even victims (see R.M. Masov about Tajikistan; and other analyses).<sup>\*</sup> Even the appearance of new facts does not change the Moscow-centric vision of history or the doctrines of the Soviet academy, due to its relative isolation from world trends.<sup>\*</sup> The problem persists in the way in which arguments are constructed, their quality and interests, their political implications, self-censorship in some cases, etc.

These narratives are not static and are directly influenced by the political discourse of the country's leadership and opinion-makers aligned with them. For example, in Uzbek historiography, ideological attitudes have changed several times, from sharply negative in the wake of independence to almost positive following the 'new course' under the presidency of Shavkat Mirziyoyev. After the demise of the Soviet Union, Uzbek historians almost unanimously spoke of 'Russo-Soviet colonialism' (see also the narrative line in the *Museum of the Memory of the Victims of Repression in Tashkent*), focusing on the most painful subjects and denying or concealing the existence of any positive contributions from the Soviet government, including the creation of modern state institutions in Central Asia between 1924 and 1936. At the same time, 'traditional culture' has been presented as superior to 'Soviet culture.'<sup>\*</sup> This criticism was accompanied by a collection of facts no less biased than those presented in Soviet times, and an amnesia towards the fact that colonization was not possible without the assistance of the local population or at least certain categories thereof.<sup>\*</sup> The increase in the number of publications in Uzbek has also been a response to assert the value of Uzbekistan's own national Academy and the desire to escape Russian framing and the Russian 'lens' (many Russian researchers do not read Central Asian languages easily).

In the context of the fight against Islamists and during the thaw in Uzbek-Russian relations, the tone of Uzbek historians' writing softened. They re-evaluated the character of the Andijan uprising<sup>8</sup>

<sup>\*</sup>Масов 1991; Bregel 1996; Abashin 2015: 360–364; Масанов et al. 2007; Шнирельман 2015; Шелекпаев and Чокобаева 2020: 81–85

<sup>\*</sup>Никитенко and Шагалина 2016

<sup>\*</sup>Adams 2005

<sup>\*</sup>Bregel 1996; Горшенина 2007: bib. ref. 238n 62; Cameron 2018

<sup>8</sup> A short-lived rebellion against Tsarist rule in the region of the abolished Kokand khanate on 29 May (17 May *old style*) 1898.

of 1898 and the Basmachi movement<sup>9</sup> (*басмачество* – *bas-machestvo*) that had previously been described as national liberation movements exclusively. Even certain positive consequences from Central Asia's incorporation in Russia were recognized. With the thawing of political relations between Russia and Uzbekistan initiated by Mirziyoyev, any discussion of the colonial past, as well as the use of the term 'conquest,' became undesirable, so as not to offend the new-old partner. This shift in tone and the critical publications written during the first years of independence that were put down to 'growing pains'\* did not greatly advance the analysis of 'colonial problems.' Uzbek historiography is mostly unaltered by postmodern and poststructuralist criticism, and draws its intellectual ideas both from the legacy of Muslim progressives of the early-20<sup>th</sup> century (can this be seen as 'de-Westernization?') and from Soviet methodologies.\* It thus remains true to the Soviet tradition of selecting past events that can be regarded as a precursor to or justification for the present.

\*Алимова 2004

\*DeWeese 2016

These fluctuations and this dependence on political circumstances are also valid for the intellectual elites of the other republics. The pre-electoral speech of the new head of state of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev about the history of Kazakhstan, for example, was riddled with anti-Russian attacks, victimhood discourse, scare-mongering about an external enemy and references to and glorifications of the country's ancient history.\* These attitudes will undoubtedly lead to a new upsurge in research with strong anti-colonial rhetoric. Despite the use of elements of anti-colonial discourse in the construction of new collective and individual identities in the former Soviet republics, the process of decolonization is proving to be inconsistent. 'Empire' is viewed increasingly clearly as an 'absolute good,' even if it is projected to the very distant past (for example, the Timurid empire) or to the near future, which of course has not yet come to pass.

\*Токаев 2021

The Tsarist and Soviet periods are now often off the radar and off the mental map of researchers in the region itself. It is difficult for postcolonial theories to fit into this particular context, because their criticism is aimed not only at colonialism of the past, but also at national projects in the post-colonial space of the present. This makes them inconvenient for some Central Asian researchers, mostly advocates of strong nation-states with strong rulers (so-called *государственники* – *gosudarstevenniki*), who are not

<sup>9</sup> A set of complex anti-Soviet insurrections (1917-1926), see also footnote 6 in chapter 14.

willing to question and criticize the national canon and the current stage of de-colonization connected with the formation of independent states by former Soviet elites once virtually at the behest of ‘the centre.’ The understanding that colonial history continues into the present has not found its way into scholarly and political discourse. At the same time, the problem of choosing the official languages to be used in the Central Asian countries – a clearly postcolonial issue – became more acute between 2019 and 2020.\*

\*Ulko 2020

### 3.3 The ‘New Wave’ in the Context of Old and New Divisions

The opening up (albeit momentary and incomplete) of the Russian and Central Asian archival repositories contributed to the formation of a cohort of researchers from all horizons by the early 2000s who came to associate their work with these ‘archival revolutions.’ These researchers, who are mainly American, European and Japanese but often know or understand the various Central Asian languages, have made local actors more visible, thanks to a new corpus of primary sources originating both from the archives of the colonial administration and from texts by local authors.\* Cautious attempts to apply postcolonial theories have partly influenced Russian and Central Asian approaches.\* Postcolonial ideas or their elements were adopted as a theoretical framework mainly by researchers who are in close contact with the Western Academy, despite the fact that the early post-Soviet years were characterized by a total rejection of the socialist legacy and a reverence for the newly-discovered Western, liberal school of thought.

\*Горшенина 2007: bib. ref. 253п89;  
Котюкова 2016

\*Morrison 2011; Adams 2011;  
Kudaibergenova 2016

The ensuing brain drain to the US, Western-Central Europa and some other countries also helped to contrast and transform the understanding and methodology of the Soviet and post-Soviet worlds. In other words, this new generation of post-Soviet scholars is constituted of those who have been trained in pro-Western universities in Russia (e.g. *European University in St. Petersburg*) or Western-inspired universities in Central Asia (e.g. *Nazarbayev University*,\* *American University in Central Asia* in Bishkek), have studied in Europe, Japan or the United States, or have joined Western academia as professors, researchers or lecturers. This process weakened the universalist claims of Russian Oriental studies, since Central Asian researchers’ direct contact with Western academia and the ability to directly search for answers in Western sources made the tradition of the Russian and Soviet mediation between the ‘backward peripheries’ and modernity redundant.\*

\*Laruelle 2019

\*Tlostanova 2020

Their publications have contributed to shifts in thematic focus

and, more importantly, intellectual initiatives. The analysis of the histories of Central Asia and Russia in the context of postcolonial world history as well as the application of methods that are used to analyse European empires and colonialism seem in their view to be an appropriate and logical approach.\*

These studies stem from different cases, with varying degrees of attention to theoretical aspects, history of dissemination of these ideas, and comparisons with other colonial practices. They have addressed different disciplinary fields, from archaeology and ecology\* to gender activism (*ShTAB/Femshtab – ШТАБ/Фемштаб*, the *Feminist School for Theory and Activism* in Bishkek, or the LGBT Organization Labrys Kyrgyzstan\*). One of the most important features of these new publications is the use of oral history and non-Russian archives.\*

Scholars have also analysed terminological aspects: for example, the meaning of the toponym 'Central Asia'\* or the validity of the definition 'post-Soviet' among the generations born after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.\* Starting from the idea of colonial mimicry,\* they have questioned the agency of local elites, mechanisms of knowledge production, the manipulation of memories, or gender issues.<sup>10</sup> They have attempted to identify connections among modernity, postcoloniality, decoloniality and (both 'bad' and 'good') nationalism.\* There are also examples of new approaches from transnational-global history and comparisons between the Tsarist and Soviet experiences and other colonial and postcolonial countries.\* In this cosmopolitan context, as of 2020, there is a strong self-reflection on the role of post-colonial or decolonial 'local' experts in the system of knowledge production.\* At the same time postcolonial theory is sometimes used to explain complex situations with simplistic linear patterns.\*

\*Горшенина 2007: bib. ref. 251n88

\*Gorshenina et al. 2019; Sharipova 2019

\*FB ШТАБ/Фемштаб; FB Labrys

\*Sartori 2016; Ab Imperio 2018; Сартори and Шаблей 2019

\*Gorshenina 2012; 2014

\*Ibañez-Tirado 2014

\*Bhabha 1994: 122

\*Adams 2005; Tlostanova 2020

\*Beissinger and Young 2002 ; Kandyotti 2002; Khalid 2006; Levi 2015; 2017; 2020; Mark et al. 2020; FB PoC  
\*Кудайбергенова 2019

\*Abykayeva-Tiesenhausen 2016

## 4. Sensitive Issues and the Diametrically Opposed Propositions for their Resolution

### 4.1 Orientalism and the 'Distinctiveness' of the Russian Empire

In addition to the varying discourses about the (non-)coloniality of the Russian presence in Turkestan (cf. Part 2.2), researchers from

<sup>10</sup> For the agency of 'local' elites, see: Heathershaw et al. 2018; Uyama 2020; Бисенова and Мукашева 2020; for mechanisms of knowledge production, see: Rottier 2004; Ремнев 2011; Бисенова and Медеуова 2016; for the manipulation of memories: Dadabaev 2021b; Bekus 2021; Забыть и вспомнить 2021; and for gender issues, consult: Northrop 2004; Edgar 2006; Kandyoti 2007; Kamp 2009; Kane and Gorbenko 2016; Шелекпаев 2020; Шерстюков 2020.



different horizons often argue that the theoretical framework of Orientalism cannot be used to understand the Russian-Turkestan dynamics due to the ‘distinctiveness’ of the Tsarist empire. Adherents to this **non-coloniality thesis** give the following reasons as to why:

- The ‘Asian’ nature and character of Russia, its history and religion, sharply distinguishes it from the Catholic, Protestant and Enlightened West, a distinction which is reinforced by its technical and political ‘backwardness’ in comparison with Western-Central Europe and its own late transition from pre-modern to European modernity. Accordingly, it is doubtful that the Romanov empire could truly count as an ‘Orientalizer.’
- The primarily continental nature of the Russian empire and the geographical indivisibility of the colony and the metropole.
- The specific features of the conquest of Central Asia, such as the ‘accidental move eastward,’ submission to ‘fate,’ and the existence of petitions from the local population that requested ‘voluntary’ inclusion into the empire.
- A more ‘humane,’ ‘fraternal’ and ‘educational’ attitude to the local population (in particular, the absence of racial discrimination and Christian proselytism, the prohibition of the slave trade), that permitted the creation of ‘their own Orient’ and the improvement of the living conditions of the indigenous inhabitants of the region.
- The assimilation and acculturation of the Asian elites into the Russian aristocracy, which eventually transformed into a cosmopolitan supra-ethnic elite.
- The significant numerical presence of a Russian(-speaking) population in Central Asia.
- Turkestan’s eventual ‘unprofitability’ for Russia.

These arguments, which are used by many scholars as a refusal to recognize the heuristic contribution of the concept of Orientalism, are refuted through a very different understanding of Russia’s role. The main idea behind this opposing position is that Russian history is comparable to other colonial powers, both European and Asian (e.g. Japan or China) and, accordingly, can be fully analysed through a framework of postcolonial ideas.\*

Those who consider the **Russian coloniality thesis** formulate their arguments as follows:

\*Горшенина 2007: bib. ref. 213п6-8;  
Collier et al. 2003; Cronin 2015; Levi  
2017; Keller 2019; Morrison 2020

- The Western European Enlightenment influenced the formation of modern, secular features of Russia through the selective adoption of elements of Western modernity within its imperial power-knowledge nexus, while at the same time maintaining a distance from the West.
- The imitative nature of the imperial Russia's pursuits which constantly reproduced existing Western-Central European models, and Russia's participation on equal terms with Great Britain and the Chinese empire in the colonial division of Central Asia.
- Russia's desire to conquer Central Asia in order to change its purportedly lowly position in the world political system, imposing the role of the 'backward East' on it and defining its own place as a strong imperialist power comparable to and equal to the modern European empires.
- The military nature of the capture of the khanates and emirates, which provoked resistance of the local populations that led to military rule and several major uprisings.
- Large distances (be it steppes, rather than seas) separate the major centres of the empire – Saint Petersburg, Moscow, Riga, Kiev, etc. – from the southern periphery. There were also strongly marked differences between the Central Asian world and Russia at the levels of demography, geography, politics, religion and social structures.
- The spread of imperialism through railways which were a successful equivalent of the steamships in the European maritime empires.
- A sense of superiority over the 'Orient' because of Russia's Orthodox Christianity and its partially European identity. This despite Russia's so-called 'special affinity' with 'its own East', its 'hybridity' and the proximity of Russian Orientalists to their subject matter.
- The assimilation of local elites and the Russification of the population, which acquired a totalizing nature in the Soviet period (the various relocation and resettlement programs of Slavic populations into the region were indeed meant to Russianize non-Russian areas and territories). While no Christian proselytizing took place, there were policies of transforming or limiting the systems of *Sharia* Islamic law and *Adat* customary law.\*

\*Сартори and Шаблей 2019; Sartori and Abdurasulov 2020

- The establishment of new forms of political and economic dependence and hierarchical management structures in the conquered regions, designed and developed by representatives of another culture, using the application of modern sciences and administrative methods. After assuming a leadership function, Russian administrators introduced structural inequalities: the native Turkic and Tajik populations had limited rights compared to the inhabitants of the metropole (which was explained away by the ‘superiority’ of Russians over people from the ‘Orient’ or their ‘underdevelopment’ or ‘unfavourable’ cultural or racial characteristics in contrast to Russians). In other words, local candidates were only allowed to occupy lower-level positions, all reforms were initiated and granted from Saint Petersburg only, and in any election native candidates (*инородцы* – *inorodtsy*) were proportionally given fewer seats than Russian candidates, so that their vote primarily counted for less. Nonetheless, the inhabitants of Central Asia had some agency, which forced the Russian administration to adapt to local conditions, in particular, they had to allow the Russian border and territorial management to be organized with the input of local nomads and traditional authorities.
- The emerging scholarly approach to the study of Oriental peoples in the fields of Ethnography, Linguistics, and Archaeology was interlinked in Russia’s imperial rule. Just like Western researchers, Russian researchers worked (studied, catalogued and classified) in order to facilitate the process of integration into an autocratic empire.

In spite of the oppositions between these two stances, a number of researchers have developed an understanding that it is possible to speak about a specific Russian Orientalism in a way that takes account of the Russian specifics and as well as any nuances or shades. Of course, it should be recalled that debates about Russian colonialism, which gave rise to a specific Russian Orientalism, derived from the opposition between a ‘greater’ or ‘lesser’ evil as well as from the perspective that heralds the alleged ‘uniqueness’ of the Russian case. Most of the works, following in the wake of global trends, analyse postcolonial issues through the prism of empire (cf. concepts ‘New Imperial History,’ ‘Imperial Turn’ and ‘Imperialology’), while highlighting the differing colonial situations of the Russian/Soviet East.\* Among them, in particular, are several books that analyse Russian Orientalism in a similar way to Said i.e. in terms of the production of knowledge and representations.\*\* They

\*Bornet and Gorshenina 2014b: bib. ref. 29–30n35, 37–39, 41, 52n109; Clem 1992; Campbell 2017; Keller 2019

\*\*Meaux 2010; Schimmelpenninck van der Oye 2010; Рахимова 2013; Алексеев 2015; Чач 2016; Gutmeyr 2017; Volkov 2018; Issiyeva 2021

do not always ally in their conclusions or in the manner in which they employ postcolonial theories, but they reveal a complex picture of Orientalism as an academic tradition, political practices, or various interpretations on the theme of the 'East': literary, theatrical, musical, and artistic.\*

The most significant of these works is Vera Tolz's *Russia's Own Orient*,\* which draws a link between the Orientalists of the Russian school (headed by Baron Viktor Rosen) and Said's theories. Connecting the first stages of anti-colonial criticism with the Russian Orientalists, Tolz describes the paradoxical and evasive nature of Russian Orientalism, which was formed under the strong influence of the West but was also led by Orientalists who were themselves of Eastern origin. This Orientalism, which at the same time reaped the benefits of Russian expansionism and criticized it, created its 'own-own-East' in which objects and subjects operated in extremely close proximity to each other. This did not prevent it from being involved in the reorganization of the Eastern peripheries, where it was constantly torn between asserting Russian superiority and favouring positive discrimination towards minorities.

Alexander Etkind's book, *Internal Colonisation*,\* and subsequent studies of the internal vector of Russian capitalism\* attempt to demonstrate that the empire did not only exploit ethnic 'others,' but also 'their own people' (cf. the nature of the relationships between the Russian elites and the Russian popular masses). However, these attempts to apply existent Western theories of social Orientalism to Russian material have provoked sharp criticism.\* According to these critiques, the intellectual approaches exclude the initial stages of military capture ('external colonization') from their analyses, replacing them with an internal counterpart ('internal colonization') which is based on the very controversial idea of 'no man's land.' Bringing this theory to its logical conclusion allows not only the colonization of the Russian masses by the elites, but also the colonization of the latter by 'the West.' The proponents of these ideas refer to the "strategy of 'border indeterminacy' that Russia historically used for expansion (...) and the colonialist tendency towards the 'non-differentiation of the external and internal.'" They argue that their work was not limited to just one internal aspect, calling for the need to study both vectors of colonial expansion.\* However, even if fully thought through, this theory has limited application in relation to Central Asia, which was the most 'colonial' edge of the Tsarist and Soviet empires.\*

\*Bornet and Gorshenina 2014b: bib. ref. 32n43

\*Tolz 2011

\*Etkind 2011

\*Эткинд et al. 2012

\*Morrison 2013; 2015; Uffelmann 2019; Горшенина 2007: bib. ref. 213n5

\*Эткинд et al. 2012: 9, 24-25

\*Горшенина 2007: bib. ref. 249n85

#### 4.2 The Most-heated Debate: 'Soviet' as Neo-imperialist, Colonial, Anti-colonial, Post-colonial or Postcolonial?

The Soviet period remains one of the blind spots in modern post-colonialism, provoking controversies at the academic and political levels. Attempts to apply postcolonial theories to the Soviet period produced conflicting results and added to the existent possible readings (Marxist or nationalist) of this era. For researchers of all persuasions, the important question is whether one can talk about the Tsarist and Soviet periods in Central Asia in terms of continuity or difference and this itself depends on how one defines 'Soviet.' The problem of periodization is particularly evident in relation to the periods at the beginning and at the end of the Soviet era, often defined as anti-colonial and post-colonial rather than colonial.\*

One position that insists on a **Soviet 'rupture'** by emphasizing the specific features of Soviet society proposing a more specific definition that would take into account the following factors:

- The use of anti-colonial rhetoric in Soviet ideology and post-colonial transition within the early Soviet polity itself.
- The rejection of the Tsarist empire's hybrid and exceptionalist 'civilizing' project, which was branded as tainted by 'Great Russian chauvinism.'
- The lack of institutionalized superiority, according to racial criteria, of Russians over other Soviet ethnic groups.
- The spread of the same 'colonial' technologies of subordination and modernization on both the Russian and the Central Asian peasants and workers.
- The equal powerlessness of Russians and non-Russians *vis-à-vis* the repressive apparatus of the state.
- The co-optation of the post-colonial discourse during *pere-stroika*.
- The demise of the Soviet Union which occurred not as a result of anti-colonial struggles for independence (with the exception of the Baltics) but following top-down decisions taken at 'the centre' itself.

By staying on these positions one of the most significant differences between the Soviet regime and the Tsarist regime was the policy of nurturing a national consciousness among non-Russians. From these deliberate and calculated efforts from Moscow – the core of the empire – modern nations were created with all the lit-

\*Akiner 1998; Горшенина 2007: bib. ref. 215n10; Bornet and Gorshenina 2014b: bib. ref. 33n47, 34n49; Khalid 2007; Pianciola and Sartori 2007; Teichman 2007

eral and symbolic attributes of national statehood.\* The existence of ‘the modern mobilizational state’ and the specific policies of the ‘affirmative action empire’ bringing **modernization** and **modernity**\* is particularly evidenced in economic indicators that show: the growth of industry; general electrification; an increase in the number of hospitals, schools and kindergartens per capita; the training of native personnel in various fields; the development of national culture and language in the republics; the involvement of indigenous people in party institutions, state and administrative power not only at the local level, but to some extent also in the centre; the universal right to participate in elections; and finally, access to all social services like pensions, free secondary education and medical care. However, the question of the modernity of the Soviet Union, and indeed of imperial Russia, remains debatable.\*

This position is also supported by the **self-identification of many (ethnic) Central Asians**, who – with the exception of nationalistic and religious intellectuals<sup>11</sup> – are not ready to accept the definition of the Soviet period as colonial, nor recognize themselves as ‘formerly colonized.’ This also applies to members of the younger generation who were born after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but who do not define themselves “in opposition to the Soviet legacy.”\* The anti-colonial discourse that was created in the 1920s and cultivated with periodic intensity by the Soviet government (increasing significantly during *perestroika*), particularly for the formation of military-political alliances in foreign policy, exerted a great influence here (cf. Part. 2.2.1).

This discourse was also facilitated by the influential trope of Western Slavistics about **Russia’s not-entirely-European nature**, which enabled Russia to be removed from the sphere of fully-fledged European colonial powers (later to become the ‘First World’) that were in undisputed opposition to the ‘East’ (as part of the postcolonial ‘Third World’). This position was reinforced by the perception of the Soviet Union (and the Soviet-aligned socialist countries in Central-Eastern Europe) as the ‘Second World,’ whose geopolitical status as a country of emerging communism was recognized as an official counterbalance to imperialism due to their sharp ideological opposition. It also led to a number of researchers

<sup>11</sup> In 1989-1991, the nationalist movements of *Rastokhez* (*Ҳаракату мардумии / Растохез* – ‘Revival’) and the *Islamic Renaissance Party* in Tajikistan (*Ҳизби наҳзати исломии Тоҷикистон/Партия исламского возрождения Таджикистана*), and *Birlik* (*Берлик/Единство* – ‘Unity People’s Movement’) in Uzbekistan carried out anti-colonial strategies and discourses.

\*Roy 2000; Haugen 2003; Hirsch 2005; Bergne 2006; Edgar 2006; Gorshenina 2012

\*Martin 2001; Khalid 2006, 2015

\*AHR 2011; Споря о модерности 2016

\*Laruelle 2009; 2019: 15

seeking to describe Soviet society as postcolonial in contrast to the colonial Tsarist regime, because according to the official ideology, the Soviet polity implemented the decolonization of the Central Asian peoples, freeing them simultaneously from the local feudal system and from the Tsarist colonial empire (cf. Part 2.2.1).

Arguments about the (non-)coloniality of the Soviet regime depend on whether it is viewed as a modernist social state or an empire. Of course, this contrast is overstated, because the fact that the Soviet Union as a social state pursued a policy of economic and social modernization and used anti-imperialism as the main component of its ideology does not preclude it from being an empire. As John Heathershaw\* observes, this ambiguity of the union, defined both as an empire and a modernizing state, is reflected in the definitions given by scholars, such as “affirmative action empire,”\* “empire of nations”\* and “empire-state.”\*\*

\*Heathershaw 2010

\*Martin 2001

\*Hirsch 2005

\*\*Beissinger 1996, 2006

So, much depends here on how one understands the **concept of ‘empire,’** which at one end of the spectrum, can be defined as the “direct administration of different communities from an imperial centre.”\* This of course does not correspond to the Soviet principle of sovereign equality. At the other end of the spectrum, however, the Soviet Union can be understood as empire due to the existence of *de facto* structures, mechanisms and practices that legitimized relations of dependence within a centralized structure and the constant tendency towards territorial expansion and interventionism throughout the Soviet period (for example, the ‘Soviet-Polish War’ of 1919-1921, the secret protocols to the ‘Molotov-von Ribbentrop Pact’ of 1939 and subsequent first Soviet annexation of the Baltics, the ‘Soviet-Finnish Winter War’ of 1939-1940, the formation of the ‘socialist bloc’ or ‘Eastern bloc’ in 1947-1955, the more covert intervention in the Ethiopian-Somali ‘Ogaden War’ in 1978-1979, and the intervention and war in Afghanistan in 1979-1989).

\*Watson 1992: 16

That is why the purportedly non-colonial policy of ‘affirmative action’ can also be regarded as a **manifestation of colonialism** in the context of a social state, which was implemented through national (social) policy versus anti-colonial resistance.\* Under the Soviet regime, a civilizing mission with several differences and a change in official rhetoric was repackaged in the Marxist-Leninist formulation of the progressive role of the Russian working class and revolutionary intelligentsia guiding ‘the backward East’ along the path towards socialism and communism. The interaction with the Western periphery, in particular with the Baltic republics, in which Moscow saw itself as ‘the East,’ was built on a different equation, and the variation in the relationship of the mother country

\*Northrop 2004; Pinciola 2008; 2009; Bornet and Gorshenina 2014b; bib. ref. 33n 47; Kassymbekova 2016; Бисенова and Медеуова 2020; Шерстюков 2020



with different colonies also undermines the concept of affirmative actions.

The very rhetoric of the **'enlightenment of the backward'** (which was one of the key points in the construction of socialism and social policy) reproduced classic examples of Orientalist discourse that justified the annexation of regions to Russia and its integration into the Soviet polity after the 1917 revolution and the civil war. Within the framework of this discourse, the Bolsheviks had to play the role of mediator between the 'unenlightened' indigenous population of the peripheries and the universal values of 'global' civilization. "Socialist construction (the physical transformation of space) and complex cultural initiatives (the development of mental space)" were the specific practices that were supposed to help "'backward' peoples 'catch up' with the flows of history and become independent builders of a communal socialist building."<sup>\*</sup> This dual discourse – the propagation of an idea of emancipation under a structure of domination – was adopted by local researchers and politicians, who used it to try to push the centre towards more proactive policies for the development of the national peripheries. They recognized themselves as dependent on 'the big or elder brother' and, where necessary, they were prepared to self-orientalize as a means to attain their goals.<sup>12</sup> The construction of a national culture could only be realized through the use of the institutions of socialism, Soviet rhetoric and the acknowledgement of inequality.

\*Skakov 2020

In the same vein, the Soviet Union's foreign paternalistic policy towards the countries of the 'Socialist East' (e.g. Mongolia from 1924 to 1991, Tuva from 1926 to 1944, China from 1949 to 1962, Afghanistan from 1978 to 1989, South Yemen between 1967 and 1990, etc.) sought to guide them, as an elder brother is supposed to do, along the path of progress.\* The Soviet government provided an important role to Central Asia in the international information-propaganda efforts. From the 1950s, the Soviet Foreign Ministry increasingly appointed specialists from Central Asia to important diplomatic posts who were, in the words of Artemy Kalinovsky, a kind of Soviet poster boys for modernity and anti-imperialism.\* In the 1960s and 1970s, Central Asia, whose once so 'backward'

\*Applebaum 2019

\*Kalinovsky 2020

<sup>12</sup> A very illustrative example was given to the author by Pavel Aleekseyev (recording, 01 August 2020): "On the occasion of the arrival of party functionaries in Gorny Altai, the local Altai poet (who graduated from the Communist University of the Toilers of the East) was routinely disguised as a shaman and staged a *kamlanie* performance. After the departure of the Moscow bosses, this poet reverted to his cultivated status in respect to the local population. The metropolitan and regional press also promoted and affirmed the role of the Siberian peripheries as exotic open-air museums of savagery."

\*Kirasirova 2011; Tasar 2011

peoples had already purportedly made an accelerated transition to modernity while preserving their cultural heritage, was increasingly presented as a model and springboard for the spread of Soviet influence into the South and East.\* The pursuits of the local Orientalists, even those that were working on the most 'classical' forms of historical-philological analysis became a symbol of the favourable social, cultural, economic and political conditions created by the Soviet government for the Central Asian intelligentsia. That is why, even without touching on "issues of economic development, political conditions or international politics," these pursuits were used as a tool in the USSR's anti-imperialist struggle, becoming a kind of continuation of the Soviet nationalities policy.\*

\*Kalinovsky 2020

\*Suny and Martin 2001

At the same time, the government, with the help of researchers, established a system of grading 'national development,' **constructing a hierarchy** of tribe-people-nationality-nation that had implied differences in the level of autonomy.\* Since the 'nativization' programme (*korenizatsiya*, that had been an important element of negative discrimination) of the 1920s had ensured the creation of new Soviet national elites, the Soviet government cultivated a kind of national consciousness compatible with the Soviet socialist modernity project and official multiculturalism, which implied creolization rather than racial and ethnic segregation. Nevertheless, the presence of the so-called 'fifth line' in every Soviet passport, which indicated ethnicity ('nationality' or *национальность*) within the framework of Soviet citizenship, could have negative consequences in the lives of Soviet people in certain situations.

The inevitable, voluntary melting (*слияние – sliyanie*) of all the Soviet peoples into one single socialist nation with a clear dominant Russian language and culture was declared as the ultimate goal. Reforms and repressions under the banner of the fight against 'backwardness' did not lead to the equalization of social space, but strengthened the structural inequality between the elites and ordinary people both in the centre and in the peripheries, creating a quasi-classist social system. Russian nationalism, total Russification, Islamophobia, racism and progressivism, which led to the violent destruction of the former way of life, as well as anti-nomadic policies for sedentism and the introduction of 'European' (or at least the Russian interpretation of European) norms and rules of everyday life contributed to this new social system.\*

\*Pianciola 2009; Kudaibergenova 2013; Абашинов 2015; Мамедов and Шаталова 2016; Dadabaev and Komatsu 2017; Teichmann 2017: 35-40; Kindler 2018; Thomas 2018; Аманжолова 2019; Tlostanova 2020

Meanwhile, in the early years, the Bolsheviks reproduced the main features of the classical colonial empire. From 1918 until the 1920s, they presided over the military conquest of the territories of the Kokand (Turkestan) autonomy, the Bukhara emirate and the

Khiva khanate, as well as the destruction of the popular Basmachi insurgent movement and their adjoining peasant army of Russian settlers, initiating reprisals against the political elites of the region in the 1920s and 1930s. Later, the Soviet government recreated several attributes of colonial rule, but with the notable difference that instead of adopting a dead-end agrarian colonization, which had provoked popular unrest against the Tsarist administration, it favoured industrial colonization. This could more effectively ensure the mass migration of the population from European Russia and Ukraine as well as the more speedy and thorough integration of the indigenous population (although most of the local workers were still employed in the agricultural sector, which intensified the colonial nature of industry). This framework set out a planned economy and an inter-republican division of labour through the development in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan of cotton monocultures, which were perceived as “adjuncts of agriculture and raw materials.”\*

\*Obertreis 2017

Thus, efforts to transform ‘underdeveloped’ peoples in each nation took place in the context of the colonial economy of the state with a centralized administrative structure. These efforts involved numerous organs of external control that operated in parallel with the national authorities<sup>13</sup> as well as through the political inequality between the ‘centre’ and the regions (all decisions were made in Moscow; as a rule, the second Secretary of the Central Committee in local Communist parties was appointed by ‘the centre’). In this sense, the Soviet Union was not quite typical, but nonetheless represented a continuation of the Russian empire, and did constitute a colonial system. Moreover, the main lines of the regime’s policy resembled the European countries’ ‘civilizing mission,’ with all the flaws of modernity and modern colonialism, but in the form of state socialism. From this point of view, the USSR is perceived as “another recolonization of a society that had previously been captured and subordinated to a different modernity/colonialism, but at the same time was taught to think that socialist modernity was a form of decolonization.”\*

\*Tlostanova 2020

\*Kalinovsky 2020

However, according to Kalinovsky,\* this thesis of a Soviet-style decolonization, along with the Soviet nationalities policy, was called into question at the time of the tentative de-Stalinization that Nikita Khrushchev started in the 1950s, which nonetheless did not result in any anti-colonial uprisings. The result of comparing the arguments of these two positions leads to an understanding of

<sup>13</sup> For example, the Turkestan and Central Asian Bureau of the Central Committee of the CPSU(b), the Central Asian Economic Council, the KGB and troops from the Central Asian military district.

the Soviet version of colonialism as extremely complex and ambivalent. This modernizing and multinational state with a Euro-centric imperial aspect was, in the words of John Heathershaw, “more or less foreign or domestic over different spaces, times and media,”\* and one which still requires a robust and detailed assessment.

\*Heathershaw 2010

### 4.3 The Decolonization of the Post-Soviet, Post-socialist and Post-colonial Space

It is even more difficult to explain the simultaneously post-Soviet and postcolonial experience through classical postcolonial theory, which does not take into account the problems of post-socialism and post-Sovietism, and Central Asia’s belonging (or not) to ‘the global South,’\* see also the singular proposal to include the region in the “global East.”\* Its analysis requires special critical optics that must “take into account the broader relations of dependence and post-dependence that are associated with the critical analysis of modernity as a set of epistemological attitudes and patterns created for its self-legitimization and reproduction.”\*

\*Almaty 2011

\*Müller 2018

\*Mignolo 2007; Mignolo and Tlostanova 2007; Tlostanova 2018; 2020

Even if we dismiss the terms ‘post-post-colonial’ as historically inadequate, ‘post-Soviet’ as irrelevant for generations born after 1988-1991, and ‘post-socialist’ (which continues to be used\*) probably as a non-viable concept that is only valid in relation to regional studies,\* the modern inhabitants of Central Asia are simultaneously post-colonial, post-Soviet and post-socialist ‘Others.’ They are associated with the peripheries not only in relation to the former metropole, but also on the scale of **global coloniality**.\* As Madina Tlostanova writes, these “individuals and groups are often products of a specific Soviet creolization, lack monoethnic cultural roots, were born and raised in the Russian (imperial) language continuum and within the framework of the late Soviet intellectual culture that was oriented towards the West.”\*

\*Breed et al. 2020

\*Müller 2019; RSR 2020

\*Spivak et al. 2006; Bornet and Gorshenina 2014b: bib. ref. 34n49, 45n89; Djagalov 2020; Mbembe 2021

\*Tlostanova 2020

The roots of the creation of these specific societies go back to the 1920s policy of ‘nativization’ (*korenizatsiya*) but its main attributes were formed between the 1950s and 1970s, including for the intellectual elites. From the mid-1940s, when Soviet scholarly traditions were strengthened in Central Asia (through the creation of academies of science and the opening of universities and institutes), the focus of regional study gradually shifted to the republics. The centre, represented by the ideological party leadership and leading institutions, reserved the right to make final decisions over theoretical articles, reviews, commentaries, the awarding of degrees, etc., but lost full control over regional scholarly debates. Central Asia’s elites were able to reflect on the past and traditions of their ethnic

groups, often even within the framework of Marxism-Leninism, going beyond the ill-defined limits of what is permissible or forbidden. In this sense, the **local intelligentsia cannot be defined as a subaltern** in the same way that the proponents of Subaltern Studies had envisioned it.\* Despite the persistently watchful eye of the centre, they always had access to the printed word, the university department, and politically important posts. In this situation, a new, inconspicuous conflict began to form within the historiographical groups in the republics.

\*Spivak 1988

This conflict was between Central Asian scholars from the titular nationalities, who usually received the necessary training in the academic centres of the Soviet Union, and the ethnic Russian and other Slavic researchers who lived in the same peripheries and had received the same education. For the Central Asian scholars, an open (as far as the situation allowed) or veiled reference to the colonial character of the Russian Empire became an important element of the **emerging national identity** and an indication of their equal status with their 'older brother' (*старший брат*) in Soviet society.\* For the region's ethnically Russian or Russianized scholars, the emergence of anti-colonial rhetoric threatened their special status as 'enlighteners.' Over time, the 'little Soviet colonizers' were relegated to supporting roles and the highest positions became inaccessible to them. This was despite their knowledge of the Russian language, which still provided them with access to the local intellectual elite and made their secondary roles crucial to the functioning of the overall system. The position of scholars from the centre was even more privileged: while retaining control over postgraduate and doctoral research, they continued to be 'teachers,' tutors and gatekeepers.

\*Kemper and Connerman 2011; Kemper and Kalinovsky 2015; Kalinovsky 2020

'Sovietness' was a common trait shared by all of these researchers, which, according to the observations of Artemy Kalinovsky,\* was not exclusively due to censorship or self-censorship, or the 'wearing of masks' (to borrow Bhaba's term), but was in fact due to their personhood. Born mainly after the 1917 revolution, they grew up under Stalin or during the Khrushchev 'Thaw.' Some of their teachers had survived the repressions of the 1930s.\* Not knowing any other reality than the Soviet one, they trained new generations of local elites by the same Soviet standards.\* The first post-Soviet generations of Central Asia's researchers ought to have undertaken their research in the context of decolonization, but they were not be ready to do so. Indeed, it was necessary to wait another twenty years to be able to openly address these problems.

\*Kalinovsky 2020

\*Bornet and Gorshenina 2014b: bib. ref. 33n46; Bustanov 2014

\*Kudaibergenova 2013; Бисенова and Медеуова 2016

Nonetheless, the process of 'decolonization' is not limited

exclusively to intellectual elites, nor to research on Russian, Soviet and post-Soviet Central Asia, nor to the postcolonialism of Central Asians exclusively. Global coloniality, which affects all areas of life, concerns both ex-dominant territories and ex-metropolises, which should also be regarded as 'post-colonial' and 'post-colonialist' societies because of the profound, interdependent transformations they have experienced in their recent shared past. Within the imperial borders of Russian society – both in the centre and the periphery – profound changes have occurred that were due to the domination of 'the Other.' The colonial structure of the Tsarist empire and the Soviet polity was formed by the assimilation of physical space, the reformation of the mentality of 'the natives,' the recruiting and co-optation of local elites, the creolization of the population and the integration of local economies into an overarching Russian and Russo-Soviet economic framework.

This **dialectic of interdependence** does not reduce the colonial situation in Central Asia to a conflict between Central Asian societies and Russian imperialism within the conundrum of colonial history and (or) anti-colonialism. It reveals all of the ambiguous dynamics found in the relationships between the colonized, colonizers and hybrid groups, which, representing heterogeneous communities, had to adapt Soviet-era practices and networks to new situations and new relationships of inequality.\* Colonial and orientalist issues and the problem of decolonization have become unavoidable in the contemporary context. The recognition that post-Soviet/post-socialist existence can be viewed not only as post-colonial and postcolonial, but also as neo-imperialist, makes us think about a new coloniality/subalternity that has been arising during the decolonization of the post-Soviet space.

**Decolonization**, understood more widely in the context of global colonization/coloniality, is a term that covers increasingly diverse areas (see for example the #*dekolonizirueto* ( #*деколонизируйэто*) podcast series). This contributes to the blurring of the historical context to Said's *Orientalism* as well as the emergence of conspiracy theories at one extreme and de-colonialist ideas that diverge from postmodernist and progressive thinking at the other. Proponents of decolonial theory believe that it is necessary to abandon the prefix 'post-' and apply any Western theories, whether colonial and anti-colonial, to postcolonial material dating back to the European Enlightenment.\* As an alternative, they suggest going beyond the vector of time (trans-modernity, decoloniality, separation, etc.) and legitimacy of forms of knowledge previously discredited as inferior and subordinate (such as religion or folklore).\* From

\*Davé 2007: 2, 12

\*Chakrabarty 2000: 5-6

\*Плостанова 2009: 70

their point of view, it is presently necessary to focus not on the historical definitions of the strategies of (neo-)colonialism, but “on the long-term ontological, epistemological and axiological traces that remain after colonialism seems to have been consigned to the past.”\* These ubiquitous, entrenched stigmata from the colonial past inflect the current ‘post-dependence’ situation.

\*Tlostanova 2020

In the same vein, the ideas of the early 2000s (although not always presented as de-colonialist theories) proposed that the Tsarist empire and the Soviet Union represented both the object and subject of Orientalism and that the analysis of their history should be conducted within the entire matrix of the diverse and contradictory colonial and postcolonial practices of ‘Orientalism’ and ‘Occidentalism.’ A number of researchers have introduced the concept of an imperial distinction between ‘inferior’ and ‘minor’ empires and Western European or ‘major’ empires, which implies the presence of an **imperial hierarchy** built from “several imperial leagues.”\* This concept is based on the same principle of the non-European, ‘Asian,’ ‘Euro-Asian’ or ‘Eurasian’ essence of the Russian empire and draws parallels with other societies of a ‘Euro-Oriental’ nature (e.g. the Balkans).\*

\*Boatca 2010; Tlostanova 2014

\*Todorova 1997; Горшенина 2007: bib. ref. 221n19

At the top of the pyramid of this hierarchical structure are the champions of European and American modernity (the US, the UK, France, etc.), which are followed by the Mediterranean and Central and Eastern European countries, thus forming some sort of an ‘internal imperial distinction.’ This second level is followed by a third level of external imperial distinction, in which Russia – a ‘second rate, forever-catching-up-to-the-West empire’ – is placed next to the Ottoman empire by virtue of its religious, ethnic, linguistic, and economic characteristics. Following this, the researchers state that these minor empires were integrated into the capitalist world-system on unequal terms. The next step in this chain of reasoning is to classify the Tsarist and Soviet empires as targets and victims of the West’s colonial policy and define it as an ‘oppressed’ or a **subaltern empire**.\* According to Tlostanova, “Russia, as a secondary empire that pivots between semi-peripheral and peripheral statuses in the world system, follows the law of regressive transition from the imperial distinction into a colonial one. This dual-faceted empire, in respect of its victorious rivals, is in fact viewed as a colony.”\* Accordingly, the entire literary, scholarly and political discourse that originates in ‘the West’ is perceived to orientalize Russia/the USSR. The same model is found in discussions about the term ‘post-socialism,’ which is also proclaimed to be a supporting structure for the orientalist concept by which Western research-

\*Morozov 2015; Koplatadze 2019

\*Tlostanova 2020

\*Müller 2019; RSR 2020      ers describe post-Communist Europe and therefore orientalize it.\* To complete these lines of reasoning, it can be argued that these discourses also convert postcolonialism into a self-victimizing nationalism in the spirit of Krylov's epilogue to the Russian translation of Said's *Orientalism* (cf. Part 2.1).

However, this idea of 'subaltern empires' has its own heuristic value. It allows us to provincialize Russia's imperial experience as an interpretative matrix and, accordingly, to look at other forms of imperial experience in the region of the post-Soviet period, which is marked by various forms of **imperial fantasies** and quests for 'great power status' (e.g. the Kyrgyz *Velikoderzhavie*, which also applies to Kazakhstan\*). By using the concept of empire, it is possible to analyse the relations between the dominant nationality and other nationalities, and by way of colonial terminology towards ethnic minorities in post-Soviet quasi-federal states.\*

Another significant rupture in the current period of postcolonial and decolonial thinking is the debate about academic language. The **existing linguistic hierarchies** reflect the geography of the centres of knowledge production, in relation to which Central Asia remains a peripheral region.\* Currently, only works published in the English-speaking American and post-imperial British contexts are recognized as 'proper scholarship.' De-colonialists believe that the use of these specific terminological and conceptual apparatuses, and of a language subtly created to describe their own history, implies the recognition of a Western intellectual hegemony and their own inferiority and 'secondariness' in relation to Western academia. This, in turn, signifies self-colonization and post-dependence, and, consequently, their unproductivity as a research object and/or supplier of raw materials.\*

Having called out this Orientalization, de-colonialists appeal for a revolt against the Anglo-American dominance within postcolonial theory. They argue for the de-Westernization and de-globalization of scholarship whose central premise rejects the binary opposition of the 'backward' ethnic culture and 'progressivism' (which is purportedly only ever Western or, even more so, *global* in character). However, there are those that oppose this view, who argue that such a negative attitude to "intercultural openness and globalization as part of post-colonial thinking indicates a dislike for the West, which, in turn, is a kind of post-colonial nationalism."\* Since the scholarly languages that have been formed to date are Western languages, a radical rejection of them means a transition to some other, but no longer scholarly, field. Thus, the epistemological problems raised by Said remain insoluble in the context of the global criticism of Western modernity and coloniality.



## 5. Conclusion

It is not necessary to define all the innovative studies of the last decades as postcolonial. However, the majority of recent publications are based on the idea that the history of Central Asia during Tsarist and Soviet periods was directly linked to imperial Russia and the Soviet Union. This union was not equal, but it fundamentally changed the situation in both Central Asia and Russia. Even after the collapse of the Soviet system, Russia did not lose its central character, and continued to use Central Asia as a resource base and object of study. In response to this evidence, many scholars have cyclically returned to the same question: can Said's ideas be used to analyse the history of the post-Soviet space?\* Indeed, more than twenty years have passed since the question about the relevance of postcolonial ideas to Russian, Soviet and post-Soviet history was formulated for the first time.

By constantly raising this question (with varying degrees of innovation), scholars were able, by the beginning of 2020, to form a block of publications that can be fully included in the overall category of postcolonial studies. Although all periods of modern history have been covered, the majority of these publications are devoted to the post-colonial period and remain related to the problems of nationalism and national, religious and ethnolinguistic identity.\* However, a surge in interest in these theories among the general public occurred precisely in 2020-2021. With the Covid-19 pandemic, the scientific communities have moved to online communication. These virtual interactions have made the boundaries among researchers with different backgrounds even more arbitrary, and have opened up scientific discussions to a wider public.

The debate on the applicability of Said's ideas has shifted from scientific publications and academic audiences to the broader online context, displaying a polycentric structure. Public conferences have been organized by the *Tbilisi-Tashkent Project* (Amsterdam),<sup>14</sup> *The Oxford Seminar for the Caucasus and Central Asia*,\* the London Central Asia Research Network,\* the University of

\*Moog 2001; Горшенина 2007; Khalid 2007; Adams 2008; Abashin 2014; Tlostanova 2014; Шафранская 2015; Мамедов and Шаталова 2016

\*Abashin 2014; Kudaibergenova 2017

\*TOSCCA

\*LCARN

<sup>14</sup> This project was implemented as part of the *Tashkent-Tbilisi Telegram* blog in cooperation with Neon University and the media outlet *Sigma*. Since autumn 2020, it has popularized post-colonial theories, combining publishing translations of classics of post-colonial thought (Mbembe) and organizing lectures with the participation of researchers, artists and activists, like: Sergey Abashin, Georgy Mamedov, Alima Bisenova, Vyacheslav Morozov, Madina Tlostanova, Rosen Djagolov, Anton Iskhanov, Anna Temkina, Artem Sleta, Alexander Etkind, Saodat Ismailova, Marianne Kamp, Cloé Drieu.

New Hampshire (USA), *Nazarbayev University* (Kazakhstan),<sup>15</sup> the *European University of Saint Petersburg*, the *Eurasian, East and Central European Studies Women Academics Forum* and *Columbia University*<sup>16</sup> and the *School of Literary Practices* (*Школа литературных практик* – [www.literatice.ru](http://www.literatice.ru)). The cosmopolitan composition of the participants, many of whom took part in all these activities, echoed the wholly globalized composition of the public.

Two special thematic issues of the journal *Новое литературное обозрение* (*New Literary Review*), published in 2020 (no. 161 and 166), supported this interest at an academic level. The belief that well-known theorists of postcolonial studies were uninterested in the former Soviet Union, which represented a long-standing complex, has lost its *raison d'être*. These new developments, while still in an initial phase, have nevertheless given some respectability to the ideas of postcolonialism and de-colonialism, outlined the spectrum of issues that can be discussed in light of these theories, and brought to the forefront researchers working in this field. Among them is a small group of young academics of Central Asian origin (mainly from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) but trained at Western institutions.

They have begun to play the role of Central Asian subalterns, openly expressing their desire to work within the framework of post- and decolonial theories and become full-fledged interlocutors in the debates. They have also showed the limitations of these ideas in post-Soviet societies: the discussions, which were held in English and Russian, reminded of the double dependence of Central Asian academics on Russian and Western scholarship. They have outlined what should be done to find a different (and personal) voice and subjectivity. In fact, their work has been the first to show that new ideas can come from a local academic community that resists the diktat of Russian and Western institutions and protests against the appropriation and objectification of the experience of local researchers. Behind these reflections there is a hope of entering “global science” as a full member rather than as a peripheral provincial.\*

This renewed interest in postcolonial theories (or, more accurately, their rediscovery) has not abolished a deeply rooted tradition in Central Asia of denying the heuristic potential of such theories, including the key concepts of hybridity, subalternity and orientalism. The reluctance to work with post-colonial frameworks

\*Соколов and Титаев 2014; Форум 2014

<sup>15</sup> For Alima Bisenova’s lectures see the recommended literature at the end of this chapter.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, their online seminars like “Decolonizing Post-Communist Studies” promoted on social media (Twitter).

may be explained by the success of the Soviet project and by the “resistance to new global hegemonic theories of post-coloniality that are not ‘forged’ in local experience and are not rooted in the local intellectual tradition.” This may be the reason why scholars sometimes dismiss this strand of the literature, even if they do not possess sufficient knowledge of it. However, this dismissal is increasingly difficult, because most state institutions and practices are of a hybrid nature and many people in the region see themselves as subordinates.

Hence, a line of demarcation remains between two groups: Western specialists (and their post-Soviet colleagues trained in the West) and Central Asian scholars. The former group perceives the ideas of Said and his followers as ‘traditional,’ whereas the latter, with few exceptions, still adhere to the isolationism of Soviet scholarship. This coexistence of opposing ways of writing history can be seen in several historical topics, such as the evaluation of the 1916 revolt,<sup>\*17</sup> and the discussion of the so-called Basmachi movement of the 1920s and 1930s.\*\* We should not forget a broader problem: in the growing body of research on Central Asia, scholars often do not read publications beyond their narrow interests and the usual bibliographic circle of “sacralised” authors.\*

Despite all these facts, we can say that postcolonial theory has gained a foothold in Central Asia, occupying an already significant niche in the fast-growing scholarship on the region. The situation in Central Asia has become comparable to that of other regions of the world. It seems likely that reflections on the history of Central Asia will continue to unfold at different rates. The balance between Orientalism, Sovietism, nationalism and decolonization will continue to be struck, on the one hand, by regularly changing historical interpretations; on the other hand, through attempts at depoliticizing and humanizing our knowledge of Central Asian history and society.

\*Бисенова and Медеуова 2016: 234-235

\*Nurtazina and Uyama 2012; Айтпаева et al. 2017; Morrison et al. 2019; Шелекпаев and Чокобаева 2020: 81-83

\*\*Абашин 2020

\*Kamp 2009: 2

<sup>17</sup> The Central Asian revolt of 1916, also known as the ‘Semirechye Revolt’ was an anti-Russian uprising in the context of forced military subscription and general hardship under Tsarist rule during World War One.

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## 7. Recommended Literature

First, the author suggests that reading should start with Said's own works, which will give an understanding of his main ideas. Then, it is useful to read other classical texts as well as the critique of post-colonial theories (A. L. MacFie) and some analyses of the difficulties of applying Said's theories to the Russian, Soviet and post-Soviet cases (В. Бобровников, V. Morozov).

An analysis of the complex nature of Russian Orientalism in the imperial period is presented in V. Toltz's book. The author recommends also to see some critical analysis of the Soviet period in terms of postcolonial theories by A.K. Bustanov, A. Kalinovsky, and Г. Мамедов and Ш. Шаталова. For an understanding of the de-colonial approach, the works of M. Tlostanova are important. The links between Orientalism, nationalism and decolonialization are presented in J. Heathershaw's paper, A. Bisenova's online lecture (1) in Russian, as well as Timur Dadabaev's lecture in English (2).

The forum related to the М. Соколов and К. Титаев's paper and С. Рапин's paper outline the panorama of knowledge production in a polarized context between the 'Global North' and the 'Global South.' The appearance of local voices in the decolonization process are analysed in papers by А. Бисенова and К. Медеуова, Д. Кудайбергенова, Н. Шелекпаев and А. Чокобаева. Finally, Ph. Bornet and S. Gorshenina's article provides numerous bibliographic references for further reading.

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## TOPICS FOR WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS

### TOPIC 1

How could the choice of language and location of academic publications be linked to Orientalism, nationalism and decolonization?

### TOPIC 2

Is it possible to put decolonial or nationalist theories into practice in urban spaces? Can we talk about orientalization or self-orientalization in relation to urban space? Is it possible to rewrite history through urban structures?

### TOPIC 3

\*Etkind 2011; Etkind et al. 2012

To what extent is the concept of 'internal colonization'\* applicable to the analysis of colonial situations in Tsarist or Soviet Central Asia?

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

All the topics suggested for written assignments could be the subject of a classroom activity. This work could take the form of: 1) role-plays in which the group of students are divided into two or more opposing parties; 2) debates between several protagonists, at the end of which a decision has to be reached. Below two examples are given.

### ACTIVITY 1

(See TOPIC 1)

Postcolonial criticism of the (neo)colonial pursuits of Western powers (both past and present) claim to draw on delocalized and universal knowledge. However, postcolonial criticism is formulated almost exclusively by researchers operating in the 'global North' who write in the English language and function within the parameters of Western 'critical theory', whose roots can be traced back to the European Enlightenment.\* Works that are published in other languages and that do not use Western terminological and conceptual frameworks remain excluded from the category of 'proper' research. As a result, there remains a Western, and especially Anglo-American, monopoly over the production, control and dissemination of knowledge.\* Essentially, the Western disciplinary frameworks reproduce a coloniality of knowledge, since "postcolonial discourse is mainly concerned with interpreting the (post)colonial Other for the occidental Self in a language that it understands."\* Given this, how might we attempt to decolonise knowledge?

\*Spivak 1999; Bhabha 1994; Said 1978; Ahmed 2014; Chakrabarty 2000; Горшенина 2007: 224n27; Rapin 2019

\*Соколов and Титаев 2014

\*Tlostanova 2020

The following role-play situation is proposed for this activity: students play the role of members of the board of the rectorate of a certain Central Asian university, where they (in small groups) have to develop guidelines for the academic staff on where and in which language academic papers should be published. In doing so, they have to take into account the demands of developing a "national" language and local scientific publications (journals, book series, textbooks), global trends and requirements (SCOPUS, index Hirsch, ORCIDID, Academic Ranking of World Universities or Shanghai Ranking, Times Higher Education World University Rankings, Quacquarelli Symonds World University Rankings), and ideas of decolonization.

**ACTIVITY 2**

(See TOPIC 2)

For this activity, the teacher divides the class into two groups. The first group – the “top city officials” – wants to make the city modern and nationally recognisable (“exotic”) in order to attract tourists and generate income by signing building contracts. The second group – the “activists” and “architects” – fights for the preservation of the city’s “cultural heritage”. Each group has to develop an argument on how, from their point of view, cities should be redeveloped. At the end of the discussion, students should analyse how the arguments used can be classified as orientalist, nationalist or decolonialist; how “cultural heritage” is defined; whether the Soviet past could be part of “cultural heritage”; what the “national” aspect of cities is, and how urban planning could be used to write a new national history.

Examples could include Tashkent, Samarkand, Dushanbe and Nur-Sultan. Classroom discussions should be preceded by independent research on the internet (in particular the debates in specialized *Facebook* groups and reading some studies on Central Asian cities, such as this handbook chapter by Abel Polese and Suzanne Harris Brandts, as well as:

- Adrien Fauve, *Bienvenue à Astana: la capitale des steppes... et du monde*, (Paris: Éditions B2, 2014).
- Svetlana Gorshenina, 'Iran ou Tūrān? Une guerre de la mémoire autour du Shāhnāme en Asie centrale contemporaine et ses racines russo-soviétiques,' in: Anna Caiozzo; Laurent Dedryvère; Stéphanie Prévost (eds), *Le Touran entre mythes, orientalisme et construction identitaire*, (Valenciennes: Presses de l'université de Valenciennes, 2018): 95-124.
- FB group: “Slom:” <https://www.facebook.com/groups/328799110874813/about>
- Ferghana.ru: <https://ferghana.ru>
- AsiaTerra: <http://www.asiaterra.info/news/>
- The Red and Black Book of Uzbek Architecture: <https://archalert.net/>

**VIDEO**

To see the recorded lecture for this chapter, go to:



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ftWkfZNI66o>

*"The Handbook features leading European and international scholars studying Central Asia who bring rich insights from the region and offer robust analysis on a wide range of topics. It provides a useful guide to social science departments across continents."*

Erica Marat, College of International Security Affairs, National Defense University.

*"A long-awaited pedagogical volume on an still unknown but key region in today's world. A must-read for students and teachers on Central Asia."*

Marlène Laruelle, George Washington University, Elliott School of International Affairs.

*"The Handbook contains rich material on various aspects of Central Asian past and current development. The multidisciplinary nature of the features, logical structure of the narration, as well as a team of leading European experts ensure a high quality of the handbook, which can be used not only for teaching, but also academic purposes."*

Ablet Kamalov, Turan University, Almaty; President of European Society for Central Asian Studies.

**T**HIS HANDBOOK is the first comprehensive teaching material for teachers and students of Central Asian Studies with an actual strong pedagogic dimension. It presents 22 chapters, clustered around five themes, with contributions from more than twenty scholars, all leading experts in the field of Central Eurasian Studies. The book doubles as a reference work for scholars. The book is framed to address post-colonial frameworks and, where possible, untangle topics from their 'Soviet' reference frame and point out pitfalls, myths and new insights. Chapters aim to de-exoticize the region and draw parallels to European or to historical European-occupied territories.

The goal is to provide solid background knowledge about Central Asia to readers, and intertwine this with an advanced level of insight to leave readers equipped with a strong foundation to approach more specialized sources either in classroom setting or through self-study. Authors (together with didactic experts and editors) took great care to explain concepts and provide (working) definitions.

In addition, the handbook offers a comprehensive glossary, concise atlas, didactic sections, info boxes, overviews of intended learning outcomes, and a smart index (distinguishing between: names, concepts, events and places). Online lectures (YouTube), recorded by the authors themselves, accompany the handbook either as instruction materials for teachers or as visual aids for students.



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