

## Chapter 1: Border Conditions

glue's not quite right  
and the eye color hair color height are slightly off  
go easy opening it  
at the border try to look honest  
and smile  
so the seams'll be less obvious  
on the other hand the first and last name are magnifico  
and the age suspiciously young  
while the watermarks are so fine  
that there's totally no reason to flinch  
if someone looks long and hard at your face

клей неудачный  
и слегка изменен цвет глаз цвет волос рост  
сильно не раскрывать  
на границе делать честное лицо  
и улыбаться  
чтобы швы были не так видны  
зато шикарное имя и фамилия  
и подозрительно юный возраст  
а водяные знаки такие

что можно вообще не дергаться

если кто-то не отрываясь смотрит тебе в лицо

—Semen Khanin, 2009

In the absolute, the Black is no more to be loved than the Czech, and truly what is to be done is to set man free.

—Frantz Fanon, 1952

### **<A> Empires and Peace Plans**

Passports are constructed from paper, power, and glue. All three components are liable to give out, in time. In late 1991, some 148 million people became the holders of a defunct state's passport. Liberated from the political order that had defined, for better or worse, past official identities, each former Soviet citizen faced existential questions of political belonging, identity, and geography that suddenly yawned open before them. An intensive period of political invention, economic competition, violence, and demographic resorting followed across Eurasia. For some, and in some regions, these processes quickly or slowly found a resolution. For others, questions are still open thirty years later. The new era presented a particular set of challenges to Russians and others who identified with Russian culture and identity outside of the Russian Federation. For the national majorities of the former Soviet states—especially in Baltic republics such as Latvia, the focus of this study—the Soviet collapse was a rebirth of national sovereignty and independence from an illegitimate, authoritarian domination. Notwithstanding the hardships of those years for all, that experience of national redemption was buttressed by hegemonic accounts of the historical significance and justice of the Soviet collapse, emanating from the

ascendant liberal western order. In contrast, Russians in the non-Russian republics, regardless of their stance towards Soviet power or its sudden vanishing, lost their privileged status of being ‘at home’ everywhere in the USSR—a status often hardly acknowledged by the Russians themselves, yet patently illegitimate in the eyes of many of their non-Russian neighbors—and especially from the perspective of Baltic peoples such as the Latvians. Overnight, Russians here found themselves cast into an unsettled historical and geographical border condition.

Latvia’s Russian population is a legacy of empires—quite literally so, in the case of the large number who arrived in this region during the Soviet era. Many of them, as is illustrated by their continuing orientation towards the media and public life of the Russian Federation and alienation from the social and linguistic realities of independent Latvia, have been unable to turn away from the political imaginaries and geographies of that past. As tensions have risen over the past decades concerning the Russian Federation’s projections of power and violence into neighboring states, this population—suspended between European, Latvian and Russian cultures and worlds—has more and more come to be regarded as alien, potentially threatening to the social body, a fifth column. As I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter Two, Latvians have often referred to Russians here as “okupanti” (“occupiers”), a term that has gained new resonance in the shadow of Russia’s 2022 invasion and occupation of Ukrainian lands, as the burdens and stigmas of the imperial legacy have reached a crescendo in Eastern Europe. In the words of Latvian president Egils Levits concerning those Russian Latvians who support, or do not oppose, Russia’s war, they are a social segment “disloyal to the state” that must be “isolated from society.”<sup>1</sup> Or as one Latvian acquaintance casually and cuttingly informed me in July, 2022: “Russians aren’t even really Slavs—they aren’t Europeans at all. They’re Asians.” A friend, an ethnic Russian from Ukraine who is married to a Latvian and resides in Riga, added

(in Russian) that the Russian invaders of Ukraine are quite simply a “horde” (“orda”)—a term that evokes accounts of the Mongol conquest of Slavic lands in the Medieval era.

Yet hold on a moment. In full recognition of the overt imperialism and criminality of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we must ask: don’t these last formulations reproduce a different imperial gaze—that of the Orientalizing view to the East from Europe? Adding a further twist, while my acquaintance’s remark might be seen as straightforwardly Eurocentric and racist, my friend’s condemnation of the Russian “horde” is redolent of the Russian Imperial historical mythology concerning the Mongols—a Russian redaction of a Eurocentric, Orientalist geographical vision. The imperial violence that looms over Eastern Europe seems to originate, for these voices from Latvia, from all directions at once. Is this Russian imperialism, plain and simple? Is it an alien imperialism of the East? Is it an archaic resurgence of European imperialism, which Russia learned from the West? Could Russian belligerence be a response to European imperialism, part of an ongoing confrontation between the West and the Rest, as Russian voices claim, and as other across the world appear to concur? The intersecting imperial legacies and perspectives that collide in the Russian border condition in Latvia are multiple, distinct, certainly incommensurate, yet also contradictory and intertwined.

Yet beyond echoes of empire, fears of Russia’s new imperialism, and Orientalizing responses to it, we should also recognize in the Russian presence in Latvia the afterimages of dashed hopes for other geopolitical orders, based on peace and amity. From Washington, to Brussels, to Moscow, the decade following the collapse of the USSR seemed to hold out the promise of a world of increasing mobility and cohesion between ‘free-market democratic societies,’ as they were called then, all across Eastern Europe and inclusive of the Russian Federation—a new reality in which the geographical impropriety of Latvia’s Russian population

would fade in significance as the border zone itself progressively lost meaning. The failure of that world to take shape is among the topics of this book. Yet that is not the only failed scheme for peace that haunts this region and population. Somewhat earlier, in the late 1980s, as the Berlin Wall was being demolished and Cold War borders were opening, Mikhail Gorbachev invoked his own, distinct conception of a vast “common European home,” inclusive of territory from Paris to Vladivostok—a vision that “rules out [...] the very possibility of the use or threat of force.”<sup>2</sup> That vision, predicated on the presumed persistence of the USSR, foundered on its disintegration, which was already being demanded in mass protests in Latvia at the same moment the Soviet leader pronounced these words in 1989 before the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. In the wake of Gorbachev’s death in 2022, Latvian voices were among the least celebratory—less inclined to remember him as architect of military withdrawals and plans for peace than as the man who unleashed Interior Ministry forces in Latvia and Lithuania in an abortive and bloody attempt to reassert Soviet control in early 1991. Yet finally, buried beneath that violence, the looming memory of Stalinist mass crimes, and the banal inhumanity of the Soviet experience, which are at least as evident from the perspective of Latvia as from any other, lie aspirations for a global peace underwritten by socialist internationalism. Despite the cynicism with which they were often deployed, those aspirations were a source of inspiration and a resource for resistance against injustice for people and movements across the globe during the twentieth century, who saw the socialist world as an ally standing with them against capitalist imperialism and neo-colonialism—once again in the mode of the opposition of the West and the Rest. The border condition of Russian Latvians, in sum, attests to serial, intertwined, and contradictory histories both of failed empires and failed peace plans. There, we face the urgent question: can hope be salvaged from those histories at present?

In a central segment of *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno offers a critique of the Hegelian dialectics of history, in which the violent clashes and ideological contradictions of historical events are ultimately legitimated and regulated by the greater logic of the progress of the world spirit.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, it may be apt to recall that both the adepts of Marxism-Leninism, in its day, and many key front-men of Western hegemony following the Cold War have been heirs, in distinct ways, of Hegel's faith that history's transcendent ends explained and legitimated its contingent collateral damages.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, Adorno asked what we can make of history's contradictions and bloody clashes in the absence of an idealist philosopher's certainty in supervening unity and purpose? Rather than breathlessly anticipating a just resolution and a coherent synthesis, we are left to contemplate the etiology of contradiction: "Dialectics is the self-consciousness of the objective context of delusion; it does not mean to have escaped from that context."<sup>5</sup> The Russian border condition is one location where the objective context of delusion, the contradictions at the core of global contestation over power, money and territory in the twenty-first century, become palpable. The global history of the late twentieth century, as conceived in contemporary political discourses, founding national and civilizational myths, and history books alike, is defined by two supervening axiological distinctions: the ideological and geopolitical conflict between state socialism and liberal capitalism, on one hand; and the great drama of the decomposition of European world empires, the painful and complex processes of decolonization, and continuing contestation over legacies and aftereffects of empire, on the other. These processes intersect and overlap, yet fail to mesh and cohere in Eastern Europe, in Latvia, and especially in the Russian border condition. As I explain in what follows, critical examination of the incommensurate historical legacies of Eastern Europe reveals that these alternate dimensions of history, memory and actuality are radically out of synch and, further, that

this lack of synchronicity has resulted in a blockage of paths towards historical consensus and political comity, not just here, but in many places across the globe.

Comprehension of this broadly shared condition demands a consideration both of local histories and deep critical and ideological prehistories, tracing, on one hand, the intersection of imperial and ideological categories of analysis from the end of the Cold War, through the decade of history's 'latency' in the 1990s, to the accelerating emergence of inquiry into the intersection of post-socialist and post-colonial categories in the academy, and, on the other hand, the steadily increasing drumbeat of 'memory wars' in the geopolitics of the post-socialist lands. These processes, developing in parallel, have both come to a culminating point in the past several years: scholarly discussion of post-socialist post-coloniality has reached a new level of global coherence in recent publications on the transnational history of socialist anti-imperialism; and memory war has led to real war, signaling a new era of systemic antagonism between Russia and the West. It must be acknowledged that war generates an insistent demand, addressed to all, to choose sides. Recognizing the risks involved, in what follows, in this chapter and throughout this book, I instead dwell in the Russian border zone. There, under the overhang of failed empires and failed peace plans, one encounters a local space of contradiction that grants critical traction on the preconditions of geopolitical conflict today.

### **<A> Zones of Indistinction**

The Russian border condition eludes easy definition and description. Over the three decades that have elapsed since the Soviet collapse, the social position and cultural imaginaries of Russians in the new states that surround the Russian Federation on three sides, from the Baltic to the Caucasus to Central Asia, have remained fluid and fragmented—neither national nor diasporic,

neither wholly integrated into ‘mainland’ Russian society nor entirely divorced from it, unevenly integrated with the majority non-Russian cultural scenes of post-Soviet states, never displaced, but out of place nevertheless. Sociologists have termed these populations ‘beached’ diasporas, evoking the receding tide of Soviet power and state socialist ontology that left them stranded on the shores of new societies in a new era, emigrants who never left the comfort of their own homes.<sup>6</sup> The castaways found themselves suspended between, on one hand, a transnational ‘Russian World,’ refracting long histories of imperial domination and socialist internationalism, as well as present projections of soft power (i.e., the Russian state’s “Russian World Foundation,” to which I will return in Chapter Four), and, on the other hand, historical or incipient regional varieties of Russian cultural life, assimilated to greater or lesser degree with local cultural circuits and social belonging. In this overdetermined geography, fundamental questions of identity emerge with every act of cultural creation: in Latvia, is a poem written in Russian, such as the epigraph to this chapter, a contribution to a multilingual Latvian cultural scene, a form of Russian cultural neo-imperialism, an affront to poetry written in the official national language, or something else again?

The Russian border condition has unfolded in parallel with, and dependent upon, a scene of increasingly fraught interstate relations, culminating most recently in the war in Ukraine, which will leave it permanently altered in ways that are still impossible to anticipate. This book addresses the cultural lives of the half-million people who have occupied the Latvian redaction of this condition over the past decades. Their situation is not historically unique in any absolute sense. It is comparable to those of many other bordered populations resulting from other collapsed empires or the refugee crises that followed the great wars—from the Russian imperial refugee populations and subsequently Armenians, former Ottoman subjects, and others who held



the Nansen passport in the twentieth-century interwar era, to the Jews of Egypt in the post-WWII era, Sudeten Germans in the interwar period, Chinese in post-war Malaya, Mexicans in Texas or California following their incorporation into the USA, or Turks in present-day Cyprus. Yet as will become apparent in the pages below, the circumstances of Russians in Latvia, poised between Eurasia and Europe and between a state socialist past, a liberal capitalist present, and the illiberal political and economic order rising in the Russian Federation, casts unexpected light on conditions that all share in the present, uncertain moment of global history.

The Russian border condition is a heterogeneous category. In consequence of profound distinctions among the histories, demographic and cultural-linguistic situations of post-Soviet states, the status of Russians and Russian culture varies tremendously. In Latvia, a long and complex history of Russian empire, early twentieth-century national independence, differentiation between Latvian and Russian cultures and languages, post-war Soviet occupation and population transfers, and the incomplete assimilation and active resistance of Latvian society to the Soviet order resulted immediately in fraught relations between ethnic Latvians and Russians at the dawn of the post-Soviet renewal of independence. In distinction from the interconnection and blurry boundary between Ukrainian and Russian cultural and linguistic realities, for instance, Russians and Latvians lived in what were in many ways separate worlds, and they continue to do so—with some important exceptions that will be examined in the pages below. In distinction from, for instance, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, where Russian language and culture enjoys relatively high social status among the non-Russian majority, ethnic Latvians by and large privilege their own language and culture and regard that of the Russians as an existentially unnecessary or accidental feature of their territory.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps most importantly, in distinction from some Soviet republics that featured relatively small enclaves of Russians as a

percentage of total population at the end of the Soviet era, such as nearby Lithuania (9.4% in 1989) or the Republic of Georgia (6.3% in 1989), in the wake of serial historical catastrophes and brutal and happenstance Soviet social engineering, by 1989 some 34% of residents of Soviet Latvia were ethnic Russians (compared to 8.8% in 1935), with perhaps another 10% of assorted other Russian speakers, such as Ukrainians and Belarusians.<sup>8</sup> The case of Estonia is in many respects comparable to that of Latvia, although its Russian population is territorially segregated to a greater degree than is the case in Latvia, where most Russians reside in the cities of Rezekne, Daugavpils, and Riga (the last being the largest metropolis of the republic, around which fully half of its population resides), each of which is divided more or less equally between Russians and Latvians. All of these factors combined contributed to render the Russian presence extraordinarily prominent and fraught in independent Latvia.

By way of entry point into the complexities of Russians' lives here, consider the overlapping official categories of identity that have been applied to them. Latvia and Estonia were the only two post-Soviet republics not to adopt some version of a "zero-option" policy of citizenship, that granted to all legal residents of the Soviet republic citizenship in the post-Soviet one. In 1990–91, the post-Soviet Latvian state was declared legally continuous with the interwar Latvian Republic (1922–40), the constitution of which is therefore still in force. In a clumsy, yet comprehensible response to ethnic Latvians' near minority status following huge population flows into the republic over the decades of Soviet rule, only citizens of the interwar republic and their descendants were granted automatic citizenship in the new era, thus ensuring ethnic Latvian dominance in the (re)new(ed) state's political life.<sup>9</sup> This left all other residents, many of them born and raised in Soviet Latvia, stateless and stripped of political and many economic rights, their Soviet passports reduced nearly to paper and glue alone. In 1994 and 1995 these terms of

citizenship were reaffirmed in laws that introduced the novel category of “nepilsonis,” or “noncitizen,” for this large group—who made up nearly 30% of the republic’s population in 1995 and the majority of whom self-identified as “Russians,” although there are many other ethnicities mixed in here as well.<sup>10</sup> The status of noncitizen is expressly not the same as that of stateless person, as Latvia’s Constitutional Court has consistently affirmed, for although it includes no rights to political participation and bars employment in certain professions, it does grant other rights usually associated with citizenship, such as the right to permanent residency, to hold property, to work, etc. As legal scholars Dimitry Kochenov and Aleksejs Dimitrovs write, analysis of this status and its history suggests that “we are dealing with a classical nationality, only with no voting rights.”<sup>11</sup> Until recently, one of the most problematic implications of the law on non-citizens concerned children, who inherited the status from their parents, so perpetuating a patently inequitable status that could most generously be considered a temporary solution to a thorny post-imperial demographic problem. Automatic citizenship for children born to non-citizen parents was passed into law in 2019, coming into effect in 2020.

The 1995 law on noncitizens offered this population a path to naturalization (at first organized by “windows” restricting the process by age group over a number of stages, which were eliminated in 1998), requiring linguistic proficiency in Latvian, knowledge of Latvian history and culture and the Latvian anthem.<sup>12</sup> Yet in the present, non-citizens still make up some 10% of the population—about 180,000 people, or a little less than half Latvia’s population of Russians.<sup>13</sup> As these numbers make plain, many noncitizens have not naturalized, either out of inability to learn Latvian, lack of incentive, disaffection, or protest. And while significant numbers of noncitizens emigrated (or repatriated) to the Russian Federation, a large number opted not to leave, even though many view their status as state-sanctioned ethnic discrimination.

I have had more than a few conversations with Latvians who sustain a simmering outrage at Russians who refuse to accept citizenship according to the not-terribly-onerous terms on which it has been offered—or to opt out and move on. They have a point. On the other hand, as a gold-chained, black-t-shirted car dealer named Dima—a former musician and the son of an “illusionist”—told me, “They should have sent me a citizen’s passport in the mail!” That was in 2009, eighteen years after independence, and he was still angry. Perhaps his anger had even grown—stoked by media chatter and political sparring that has held open, rather than healed wounds. And sparring aside, the persistence of the category reflects the lack of any incentive to resolve the matter on the part of Latvia’s political establishment. While some pressure towards social integration and normalization for this population was applied by European international organizations during the run-up to EU accession, those political pressures have long since become muted and routine.

Noncitizen—a term that, first and foremost, bestows upon its bearers a lack—is an apt demonstration that the eloquence of bureaucrats can at times rival that of poets. Yet it is not the only confounding term to be applied to bordered Russian Latvians. When the law on non-citizens was adopted in the 1990s, Russian diplomats complained, not without reason, that the status had a “half-way” (“polovinchatyi”) character.<sup>14</sup> Yet terms developed for this population in the Russian Federation are no more lucid. Since the late 1990s, a multiply revised law has granted special privileges with regard to travel, emigration, access to medicine and education to the category of “compatriots abroad” (“sootechestvenniki za rubezhom”): former Soviet citizens in neighboring states who might, in some calculation, “belong” more properly to the Russian Federation.<sup>15</sup> Yet what calculation could be applied to determine who could rightfully enjoy these rights? Vladimir Putin, in his much-cited Address to the Federal Assembly of 2005 (the

equivalent of the State of the Union address in the United States), announced that in the wake of the Soviet collapse, “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century . . . , tens of millions of our compatriots and fellow citizens found themselves beyond the borders of Russian territory.”<sup>16</sup> In his address announcing the annexation of Crimea in 2014, he declared that in 1991, “millions of Russians went to sleep in one country and woke up in another, in an instant becoming national minorities in former union republics, as the Russian people became one of the largest, if not the largest, divided people in the world.”<sup>17</sup> The distinctions between these two formulations point to the increasing political load and rising nationalist dither of this category, which was created in an era of globalization and opening borders, yet has become an instrument contributing to the bloody reshaping of closed ones. Since the early 2000s, with increasing attention and resources from the Russian state, the compatriots, their identities and their cultural and linguistic rights have been the subject of media discourse in and out of the Russian Federation; they have been gathered into congresses; they have been recognized with literary prizes; publications and websites have been created to address them; and, since 2014, their presence has become a *casus belli* underwriting military mobilizations, invasions, land grabs, and occupations in Ukraine that, justified as a defense of compatriots’ rights, have in fact resulted in their mass deaths along with the deaths and suffering of their Ukrainian neighbors.

For all that, the question of who, in fact, the compatriots are has remained unresolved. As the relevant Russian law specifies, the category includes representatives of all “peoples who have historically resided on the territory of the Russian Federation.”<sup>18</sup> Yet clearly, this is not really about Finns, or Ukrainians, or Latvians, for that matter. In public discourse and common parlance, as in Putin’s address, the term primarily evokes Russians who remained outside “Russian territory” following the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, given the complexity

of ethnic Russian identity following centuries of social and cultural assimilation—in which a proud Russian might well be the grandchild of a Pole, a Jew, an Ossetian and a Ukrainian, or in which an ethnic Russian might well be a Ukrainian patriot who volunteers to battle against the Russian invasion—determining which former Soviets are the “real Russians” is not so easy. Successive revisions of the law have attempted, without much success, to resolve this conceptual incoherence. The current redaction specifies that compatriots abroad are those persons who, beyond their ethnic and historical relationship to Russia, have additionally “made a free choice to be spiritually, culturally, and legally linked to the Russian Federation.” This choice can be demonstrated by:

An act of self-identification, reinforced by social or professional activity for the preservation of Russian language, the native languages of the peoples of the Russian Federation, the development of Russian culture abroad, the strengthening of the friendly relations of the states of residence of the compatriots with the Russian Federation, the support of social organizations of compatriots, and the defense of the rights of compatriots or by other evidence of the free choice of the persons in question of spiritual and cultural linkage with the Russian Federation.<sup>19</sup>

During the years before the annexation of Crimea, there was talk in Russia of creating a new identity document, a “Russian Card” for compatriots abroad,” that would confirm their privileges and grant additional rights to work and to medical, educational and other entitlements normally associated with citizenship in the Russian Federation. Yet this project foundered on endless debate over the proper definition of “compatriots” and objections from neighboring states.<sup>20</sup> And, definitional questions aside, the Russian state found it expedient simply to make Russian

passports easily available to populations in border zones such as the Caucasus and eastern Ukraine, over all objections of the neighboring states in question.

The categories of “non-citizen” and “compatriots abroad” illustrate the collision in the Russian border condition of identity formations inherited from Soviet and Russian imperial pasts with contemporary problems of disaggregation of citizenship that have been observed as a global phenomenon—a lingering legal and cultural tangle that has gained critical significance with the reemergence of active contestation of borders and spheres of influence in Eastern Europe.<sup>21</sup> As the above makes clear, ‘being Russian’ in the border zone, or alternately being something else—a Russian Latvian, a European, a Rigan, or a Latvian noncitizen, for instance—boils down to choices of “spiritual and cultural” affiliation. To spell out the implications: questions of civilizational belonging and collective identity—questions that, as the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine demonstrates, have a direct bearing on territorial claims and the murderous work of armies—depend on culture. All of this is to say that the poem by the Russian-speaking Jewish Latvian poet Semen Khanin that I have taken as an epigraph to this chapter touches a nerve. The poem’s structure is calculated to impede recognition of the object it describes, which is itself a false document, intended to obscure identity. The author’s name, Semen Khanin, is a pseudonym. Identity recedes behind a series of masks, poised on an international border where state structures confront individuals and their histories, yet are unable to contain them in available official categories. Khanin’s poem opens a window on pressing questions. What does it mean to be a Russian Latvian, or a Russian in Latvia? If the border between Latvia and the Russian Federation is plain enough, where are the boundaries between Latvian and Russian culture located? Are there, or should there even be such borders? If one counts oneself as a Russian in Latvia, speaks Russian and raises one’s children to do so, does this necessarily

constitute a “free choice to be spiritually, culturally and legally linked” to the Russian Federation? What about Russians who choose not to be so linked—can one be Russian in a distinctive Latvian manner instead? Can one be both a Russian compatriot and a Latvian patriot? What does it mean to promote Russian culture in this region “outside of Russian territory” or to preserve Russian cultural heritage here—is it enough to write poetry in Russian? Must one write it under one’s legal name? Will the Latvian masculine ending “s” appear after the name in the passport, if its bearer is a man?<sup>22</sup> Can the poem contribute simultaneously to both Russian and Latvian cultural life? Can one write it in free verse?

Strings of open questions are definitive of the Russian border condition—yet here the word “definitive” acquires an ironic ring. In his seminal study of “identities in formation” in four former Soviet republics in the 1990s, David Laitin envisioned the fate of Russians in Latvia as hanging between two options—assimilation to Latvian language and social life or a strong “Russian-speaking national revival” with claims for cultural autonomy and political rights, possibly leading to the articulation of a commonly recognized and passionately espoused separate identity for the Russians of the region.<sup>23</sup> Yet as has become clearer in the decades since Laitin published his study, two is not enough options, and one is not enough outcomes. Thirty years after the fall of the USSR, the identities of Russians in the region remain contested and multiple. Suspended between European and Latvian citizenship and non-citizenship, compatriots of a *patria* that no longer exists, subject to overlapping media environments and cultural imaginaries, lacking many unifying institutions as a result of social marginalization, Russian Latvians assume any number of distinctive stances towards the contradictions of life in the border zone’s variegated social scene.<sup>24</sup> And the palpable multiplicity of Russian Latvian social experience raises the ante on the meaning of cultural activity *per se*, presenting them with the



question of what they want to *make* of themselves both as Latvians and as Russians. Here, everyone has the opportunity to be a cultural constructivist, in a very practical sense.

Yet opportunity does not automatically translate to agency, for Russian Latvians live in force field of competing political regimes that also seek to make something of them. Their situation may be compared to that of other post-imperial populations that are subject to contestation among competing hegemonic regimes, such as that of extraterritorial Chinese, for instance, which has been described by scholars including L. Ling-Chi Wang and Shu-Mei Shih as one of “dual domination.”<sup>25</sup> In Wang’s formulation, “the conditions for Chinese assimilation are reconceived as racial exclusion or oppression and the demand for loyalty to the homeland as extraterritorial domination. Both are seen as omnipresent and omnipotent powers or forces.”<sup>26</sup> In the Russian Latvian border zone, the halfway statuses of non-citizenship and compatriot abroad present the form of dual domination, while these competing hegemonic forces, that have loomed more and more insistently for years, are its content.

In summer, 2014, as military conflict was unfolding in eastern Ukraine, I took a break from work on this book and went for a swim in the Baltic Sea at the Latvian resort of Jūrmala. As I paddled through the waves, I swam by two teenaged boys who were also splashing around. It was an ideal, northern European beach day—endless sun but not too hot, and surprisingly warm water. Then one of the boys yelled at the other, in English with a heavy Russian accent: “I am American military forces. Get out of the way, you Russian dog, or your ass will be burning.” His friend answered in Russian, “Damned Americans, we will now destroy you!” (“Proklatye amerikantsy, my vas seichas unichtozhim!”). The first responded, in English again, “Don’t killing me, I am good man. I am German, your military partner.” Their happy splashing continued. Then the first boy switched to Russian: “How do you handle these participles in

English? You add -ing or something” (“Kak po–angliiski s etimi prichastiami? Dobavliaesh' –ing, kak–to”). Identity is not fashioned from nothing: its building blocks include languages and cultural legacies, but also the past histories and present realities of imperial domination and subordination that have inscribed political and cultural life into the Baltic landscape over the centuries and continue to do so today. While it is true, as I write above, that the collective identities that states deploy to their own ends depend on culture, it is also true that cultural life derives from social geographies and political realities shaped by states. The game played by those two boys, and the contested social space of Latvia, too, are particular, local expressions of global conflicts and processes that extend from Moscow, to Brussels, to Washington, D.C.—a short drive away from my home in Philadelphia. An account of the cultural processes of the border zone requires careful attention to shared worlds and civilizational contestations of multiple scales, from the intimate to the intercontinental, and histories ranging from the deep past of imperial conquest, to the global ideological divisions of the twentieth century, to the most recent decades of independence and transition, global English and heritage Russian. It also demands a combination of critical frames derived from study of these distinct histories that, as a series of recent scholarly inquiries have shown, fit together as imperfectly and inconveniently as do these multiple contested histories: the post-colonial, with its focus on the deleterious, always already traces of empire; and the post-socialist, that attends to the remains of the forever not yet of socialist global modernity.<sup>27</sup> It is to these larger critical frames and their ill-fitting applications to the Eastern European borderlands that I now turn.

### **<A> Socialist Empire**

In the summer of 2009, I sat in a private Russian language lending library in central Riga speaking with one of its dedicated patrons, Valentina Nikolaevna. I will return to consideration of the library itself—the Krievu grāmatu bibliotēka–Russkaia biblioteka (Russian Library, in Latvian and Russian)—in Chapter Three. It was in conversation with Valentina Nikolaevna about her status as a Latvian noncitizen that I first encountered a locution that I would stumble over uncomfortably many times again in other such conversations: “Look,” she told me, “negr is written right there in my passport.” The Latvian term “nepilsonis” (“noncitizen”) is rendered “negrazhdanin” in Russian, and might therefore be abbreviated “negr.” (But, for the record, “negr” is not written in the Latvian passport for non-citizens). For Valentina Nikolaevna, and many other noncitizens of Latvia, this happenstance bureaucratic pun provides an ironically inflected and intentionally jarring means to describe the social position of noncitizens by comparing it with regimes of racism and discrimination towards dark-skinned people. It is no simple matter to make sense of this utterance. For one, the meaning of the word “negr” in Russian is the subject of some debate—does it carry derogatory and racist connotations, or is this merely a projection of a different linguistic coincidence—its phonic and etymological relationship to the unambiguously offensive English racial slur? It should be added that the etymology, meaning and contestation of “negr” are paralleled in Latvian in connection with the word “nēģeris.” How, then, shall we understand Valentina Nikolaevna’s usage: as an expression of solidarity with dark-skinned people, as one of racism towards them, or somehow as both? (With respect for the potentially offensive nature of the terms in question, in what follows I refer to them as the “Russian n-word” and the “Latvian n-word,” except in direct quotes.)

Before zeroing in on the precise meaning of Valentina Nikolaevna’s use of the Russian n-word, let us observe the shared syndrome of indistinction that ties that word and its Latvian

equivalent to “nepilsonis” and “compatriot abroad,” not only in this series of bilingual puns and translations, but on a conceptual level. For as we have seen above, “nepilsonis” and “compatriot abroad” are no easier to define or to evaluate than the Russian and Latvian n-words, and in each case this definitional problem arises from the historical and political conditions that have conspired to place these terms and the populations that use them in the series of uneven, half-way positions that constitute the Russian border condition: between Russia and Europe, the Russian Federation and Latvia, and Russian, Latvian and European linguistic regimes and matrices of social identity. What, after all, does it mean that Valentina Nikolaevna is both a Latvian “non-citizen” and a Russian “compatriot abroad”? By a similar token we may ask: in the discursive intertidal zone between Russia and Europe, who has the authority to dictate whether the Russian n-word is a neutral descriptor or a derogatory slur? Yet, considering that this term, a borrowing from western European languages, derives from the historical dissemination of colonial constructions of racial identity, hierarchy and subalternity into the Russian Empire, we might see in Valentina Nikolaevna’s locution a call to consider carefully our frame of critical inquiry at the broadest level: is the status of Russians in Latvia best described as a post-Soviet condition—via terms like “nepilsonis” and “compatriot abroad”—or as a postcolonial one—as that of an oppressed postimperial minority?

At the outset, it may appear counterintuitive—perverse, even—to consider Valentina Nikolaevna, who is aligned in both identity and sentiment with the former occupying power, as comparable in some way to subjects of colonial domination in other historical and geographical situations. Surely, the experience of the Latvians and other non-Russian nationalities who were forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union and sphere of influence should be the starting place for any consideration of the relationship of the Soviet experience to the category of empire?

Certainly, one might be justified in viewing Valentina Nikolaevna's pun in terms of well-documented histories and present realities of racism towards dark-skinned people in Russian society—towards the dominated peoples of the southern peripheries of the Russian Empire, Africans, and others—arising from centuries of Russian participation in and identification with European modes of empire, ramified in recent decades by the gravitation of many post-Soviet Russians toward global regimes of white power.<sup>28</sup> In short, Valentina Nikolaevna's joke expresses the legacies and actuality of Russian imperial racism. Yet for all that, her words might also spur one to consider a different history: that of the Soviet engagement with oppressed minorities and anti-imperialism, which from the start of the Soviet era inspired intellectuals and thinkers from across the globe—including such luminaries as Langston Hughes and W.E.B. DuBois—and was later expressed in political and material support for anti-colonial struggles and post-colonial states during the Cold War.<sup>29</sup> Should we also, or instead, read this joke as heir to that history of Soviet anti-imperial solidarity with the oppressed? In sum, the hermeneutic tension of Valentina Nikolaevna's pun rises out of a deep historical and conceptual fault line that has been emerging into visibility since she and others like her found themselves in the Russian border condition three decades ago—a fault line between assessments of a shared globe defined primarily by ideological distinction and those defined by considerations of nation and empire—one that we will stumble across, uncomfortably, many times in the pages that follow.

So let us retrace the emergence of this fault line, shifting optics from tight focus on a bad joke to the widest angle of historical and geographical generality. Frederic Jameson began his 1984 essay on “Periodizing the 60s” (a companion piece to his seminal essay on postmodernism of the same year) with evocation of a condition of impasse in that era's political situation that arose from the “opportunities and failures” of the 1960s, as well as in critical practices for

making sense of the past, given that “historical representation [...] is in crisis.”<sup>30</sup> Jameson’s account of these paired quandaries in politics and in historiography traced them to the effects of decolonization in the “Third World,” which he saw as the source of newly problematic contradictions between class and other forms of identity and solidarity. The effects of this disarticulation were apparent in the common orientation of political aspirations in the formerly colonized world towards nationalism, as well as in the parallel rise in the developed world of identity politics, which together worked to radically unsettle “the more universal category that had hitherto seemed to subsume all the varieties of social resistance, namely the classical conception of social class.”<sup>31</sup> In Jameson’s account, it was decolonization and the accompanying mobilization around racial, national, gender and other identities that broke apart shared histories and fates, conceived in terms of class solidarity, in a new and challenging manner.

Yet in that same essay Jameson predicted that this fragmentation of political vision and historical comprehension would pass: the dismantling of empire had unleashed new forms of transnational domination—the processes of globalization that were reintegrating the world in new or renewed relations of domination and subordination:

The unifying force here is the new vocation of a henceforth global capitalism, which may also be expected unify the unequal, fragmented, or local resistances to the process. And this is finally also the solution to the so-called “crisis” of Marxism and to the widely noted inapplicability of its forms of class analysis to the new social realities with which the 60s confronted us: “traditional” Marxism, if “un-true” during this period of a proliferation of new subjects of history, must necessarily become true again when the dreary realities of exploitation, extraction of surplus value, proletarianization and the

resistance to it in the form of class struggle, all slowly reassert themselves on a new and expanded world scale, as they seem currently in the process of doing.<sup>32</sup>

However, Jameson's confidence that the late capitalist conditions of the "First World" must subsume the "local resistances" and "social realities" of the "Third World" was misplaced. His prediction of the reemergence of universal solidarities and unified subjects of history never came to pass, at least in part as a result of the unanticipated collapse of the state socialist 'Second World' (curiously absent in his analysis), which not only extended the scope of capitalist globalization to the globe as a whole, but also scrambled the interrelationships between the 'First' and 'Third' worlds and between nation and class on which he founded his analysis. Whereas in the mid-1980s it was possible to imagine that particularistic identities and histories of imperial oppression, on the one hand, and class solidarity and ideological categories, on the other, would soon fall into alignment in coherent terms—racial capitalism and capitalist empire, for instance—as the twenty-first century has gotten under way, such a synthesis has come to appear more distant with each passing decade. The overhang of the legacies of the Soviet Union—an empire of the left—have delivered us to a world in which ideological and imperial histories operate according to dissimilar logics that cannot be reconciled across time and space. Rather than a renovation of "the classical conception of social class," post-socialist post-coloniality has brought—not simply for territories that might be described with both terms in a limited sense, but across much of the world—an intensification of the significance of national, racial, gender and other forms of identity and more and more potent technologies for their cooptation by economic and political elites, via their combination with the broadest possible set of divergent ideological orientations. Twentieth-century global conflict, focused on substantively distinct capitalist and state socialist visions of humanity's future, has given way to neoliberal

technocratic consensus in matters of governance, combined with instrumentalized contestation concerning the meaning of the past and conflict over resources and raw power.

It was not immediately apparent at the end of the Cold War that this is where we would arrive three decades later. And we should give Jameson credit due for identifying the phenomena that would be definitive for developments in historical events and scholarship alike in the coming decades—accelerating globalization, on one hand, and critique of its reproduction of imperial domination in new forms, on the other. During the immediate post-Cold War decade, the seeming orientation of elites everywhere—in the decolonizing world and the former socialist world alike—on transnational integration under the sign of free trade, replication of western liberal models of governance, and neoliberal rightsizing of social welfare programs appeared to correlate with Jameson’s diagnosis. Critical assessment of these processes turned emphatically towards post-colonial tools of analysis, rooted in pioneering anti-colonial critiques by Said, Fanon, and others, often firmly based in Marxist critical traditions, which abruptly rose to the fore in the western academy at the end of the 1980s and the start of the 1990s. Yet few turned those tools of analysis towards the history and present reality of territories from Warsaw to Vladivostok, which were instead described in the conceptual frame of political, economic and cultural ‘transition’ from the forms of the socialist ‘Second World’ to those of the capitalist ‘First World,’ leapfrogging or sidestepping the incommensurate realities and historical processes of the decolonizing ‘Third World.’ In the halls of power and the academy alike, the formerly state socialist societies appeared radically distinct from the formerly colonized ones, in both historical trajectory and present condition. In the last decade of the century, political discourse in most quarters turned away from the state socialist past, which appeared to be a withered limb that was to be rejected, forgotten or cast off and discarded—either as a traumatic trial that had been



overcome (in much of eastern Europe), or a fatal and possibly shameful historical detour (in the Russian Federation). Momentum towards globalization and effacement of national difference in the framework of the liberal Western order appeared to be as ineluctable as the tides. Despite the eruption of nationalist war in the former Yugoslavia (consistently described in the press as well as by authoritative commentators as historically ‘archaic’) the age of nationalism seemed to be ending—or at least entering a radically distinct new phase—with the formation of the European Union and the rush of Eastern European states to take their place in it.

The reluctance during the initial post-Cold-War era to describe former socialist societies in the same terms as were applied to former colonies of capitalist colonial empires is evident, for instance, in the engaged debates among historians at the start of the 2000s as to whether the term “empire” applied to the USSR at all. As Yuri Slezkine pithily put it then: “The Soviet Union was an empire—in the sense of being very big, bad, asymmetrical, hierarchical, heterogeneous, and doomed. [...] But was it a modern colonial empire? Does it belong on the same trash heap as the Dutch, French, and British imperial states?”<sup>33</sup> Yet by the same token, those debates were symptomatic of the shifting political and critical circumstances as the twentieth century came to a close. Slezkine’s essay arrived at the start of a wave of influential monographs by Western historians of the USSR that promoted empire as a central analytical category, yet sought to inflect the term in order to grasp the particularity of the Soviet experience, as illustrated by their titles: Terry Martin’s *Affirmative Action Empire* (2001), Douglass Northrop’s *Veiled Empire* (2003) and Francine Hirsch’s *Empire of Nations* (2005), among others. Cultural historians and literary scholars turned a related corner in the same years. In 2001, the Africanist and comparatist David Chioni Moore published an emphatic call to apply post-colonial analytical terms to post-Soviet societies, explaining that the non-Russian nations of the USSR “some young

and some quite old, were unquestionably subject to often brutal Russian domination (styled as Soviet from the 1920s on) for anywhere from forty to two hundred years.”<sup>34</sup> His manifesto-article was followed by other prominent discussions and critical forays.<sup>35</sup> Yet while many were coming to describe the USSR as an empire, consensus concerning the full implications of this analytical turn emerged only slowly. Across disciplines, scholars stood on the shoulders of preceding decades of constructivist theory regarding national and collective identities, lending a heightened awareness of the challenges of defining and applying profoundly historically imbricated terms such as empire. In the thick of these debates, Mark Beissinger offered a clarifying intervention, pointing out that, setting aside states that claimed the term in their own nomenclature—largely the stuff of history—if empire is understood to mean “illegitimate relationships of control specifically by one national political society over another,” the imperial character of the USSR or of any other large and multiethnic state (including, of course, the European Union and the USA) is dependent on questions of national identity and assessments of justice and legitimacy that devolve and vary over time and place: “embedded within our contemporary understanding of empires are a politics of national identity and a politics of claims-making.”<sup>36</sup>

With the passage of years, Beissinger’s observation has come to seem prescient. Since the turn of the new century, what Jameson referred to as “local resistances” to globalization have taken shape not only in the former colonies of western empires, but in the former socialist world as well, as echoes of empire have emerged in uneven and conflictual fashion and as national identity has been reinvigorated as a fundamental building block of political discourse in post-socialist lands within and without Europe’s mobile borders. Across these regions, a rising tide of public and political attention to history, memory and commemoration has pitted societies against

one another in ‘memory wars’ over past histories of imperial violence, domination, and subordination. Although many of the most heated conflicts over the past have been staged between the new states of Eastern and Central Europe and the Russian Federation, cast as the insufficiently repentant source of imperial and totalitarian oppression across the region, such struggles for historical accounting have also taken place between the smaller states. In this atmosphere of heightened political implication, critical work on imperial histories and legacies has often driven towards and derived its pathos from attributions of historical guilt and victimhood that cut history and geopolitics apart into localized accounts, divided along national borders. As Dirk Uffelmann has remarked, for instance, of Polish debates over postcolonial analysis, for instance, “strong anti-Russian resentments have seduced some scholars into using postcolonial theory for the analysis of Russian colonialism as a means of anti-Russian politics of memory.”<sup>37</sup>

The turn, inside or outside of the academy, towards national mythmaking predicated on histories of resistance to imperial oppression is hardly unusual in post-imperial societies, yet the particularity of Eastern Europe lies in the intense competition of diverse claims for recognition among new states that all lay claim to a fundamental European identity. Adding to the ideological complexity of the situation, some voices across the region have turned to myths of lost imperial greatness as resources in nation building—paradoxically, at a moment when western European societies were more and more adopting positions of public repentance for imperial pasts. (As demonstrated by the examples offered in the Preface, expressions of this aspect of national mythmaking appear even in Latvia, that lacks much of an imperial past to celebrate.) Further, as public debates over history and memory have intensified, more and more voices have not only recognized the legacies of the socialist world as entwined with histories of

empire and nation, but also have come to challenge contemporary liberal western hegemony in the formerly socialist world as sharing many features of neocolonialism or postcolonial dependence elsewhere. And, in a final turn of the conceptual screws, as geopolitical and military tensions have risen between Russia and the western states over the past decade, Russian political and public discourse has more and more frequently echoed these latter critiques, leveling accusations of imperial historical crimes and present ambitions against the United States, NATO, and most recently the “collective West,” in defense of essentialist conceptions of Russian civilizational identity, often touted as the true representation of ‘Christian’ European values. All of these effects have been horribly expressed in the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has been fought in parallel in warring accounts of history and on the battlefield. The Ukraine conflict is the most extreme example of our current condition: the outcome of developments in political discourse and critical accounts alike that belie Jameson’s vision, from the vantage of the Cold War’s closing decade, of the path back to global political and analytical coherence. As those tragic events demonstrate, although state socialist history and post-socialist realities may and indeed must be thought through the categories of nation and empire, the application of these categories is subject to radical contestation. The hinge between empire and ideology is broken.

### **<A> Post-Soviet Post-Colony**

How may this cleavage be described, in particular in relation to the Latvian case under investigation here? Slezkine’s call to distinguish carefully among diverse historical dustbins has resonated through two decades of scholarly inquiry and critical reflection that has illuminated the commonalities and continuities of Russian and Soviet imperial histories with those of other or older imperial formations that were the chief objects of inquiry of seminal works of imperial

historiography and post-colonial scholarship, as well as the particular features that distinguish these cases. In terms of foundational geographic considerations, land-based, contiguous empires feature far greater economic and social integration between colony and metropole than is typically the case in sea-based empires such as the British Empire. In the Russian Empire, this imbrication of periphery and center was magnified by the mode of imperial conquest, organization and administration that has been recently described by Alexander Etkind as “internal colonization,” by which political and social power extended over the population of the Russian heartland in a manner comparable to, but not identical with, the domination of many non-Russian subject peoples.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, in distinction from many classic western European empires in which domination was consistently legitimated by claims of civilizational superiority, for centuries Russian cultural geography has balanced between Orientalist visions of east and west, attributing high status to regions such as the Baltic, which was identified with Western culture and society in a legacy of its history of participation in European cultural, commercial and political space prior to its conquest by Peter I at the start of the eighteenth century.<sup>39</sup> As I discuss in detail in Chapters Two and Three, this reverse cultural gradient continued to define the place of the Baltic in the regional geographic imaginary up to the end of the Soviet era, rendering dominant collective accounts of post-Soviet independence in the Baltic a story of a ‘return to European civilization’ that is fundamentally dissimilar from the experience of decolonization in other regions of the globe, conceived as ‘emancipation from European empire.’

The unusual indistinction of relationships between dominator and dominated in this region, in comparison to the situations of sea-based empires, also pertains to the era of Soviet occupation, although novel cultural and political frameworks added a new level of complexity to the structures that bound Eurasian territory together in the twentieth century. The Soviet Union

was cast from its founding moment in the paradoxical role of an avowedly anti-imperial power that had inherited a colonial empire. Canonical nineteenth-century Marxist theoretical and programmatic writings had evinced a certain ambivalence concerning the role of empire in world history: was it simply a force for extending capitalist oppression or was it additionally a necessary stage in global economic development.<sup>40</sup> This ambivalence was expressed in palpable terms in the policies, structures, and legacies of the USSR. Over the course of the Soviet era, a predominantly Russian metropole and elites balanced continued exercise of power within the USSR over non-Russian territories and peoples against solidarity with colonized peoples across the globe in their revolutionary struggles for independence and subsequent pursuit of modernizing development following decolonization. In a sharp departure from the Russian Empire before it and from other classical imperial formations, the USSR actively sought to formalize and even construct non-Russian national and ethnic identities, alongside intensive projects of economic and social modernization in non-Russian peripheries and an additional layer of socialization of their inhabitants into supervening Soviet categories of identity, partially and unevenly conflated with Russian linguistic and cultural norms.<sup>41</sup> It is these distinctive features in policies towards dominated non-Russian nationalities and territories that have elicited the terminological innovations of scholars—from Martin’s “Affirmative Action Empire,” to, more recently, Epp Annus description of the USSR as “colonialism in camouflage.”<sup>42</sup> In theory, the ultimate aim of the Soviet state was construction of a cosmopolitan order preserving cultural specificity, yet linking all together in socialist modernity. To many across the world, the Soviet multinational state, with its *sui generis* cultural and development policies, appeared as a global anti-imperial power, offering a path to independence and modernity in defiance of the hegemony of the liberal, western world. And yet within the USSR, the instruments used to move history

towards these ends were often indistinguishable from those of those of any other empire, including violence, coercion and the imposition of Russocentric cultural hierarchies.

Latvia is a stark case in point, illustrating the complexity of questions of empire, in light of the Soviet “politics of national identity and politics of claims-making.” The 1940 Soviet annexation of Latvia was indisputably an illegal occupation by force of arms, and was remembered as such in Latvian unofficial discourse and family memory of the many deportees and other victims it left in its wake. Soviet official accounts, however, described those same events as a voluntary, politically regulated accession. During the decades that followed the war, Soviet rule was normalized to the extent that Latvian elites, especially in urban contexts, became participants in the Soviet social and political cosmos. Within that world, Russian language and culture held unquestioned status, enforced by political decision and forceful imposition, as the fundamental matrix for communication and social advancement in “all-union” contexts and institutions. Kremlin policy, especially distrustful of the titular elites of a republic where loss of state independence and armed resistance to Soviet power were a recent memory, consistently ensured the dominance of Russians in the Latvian Communist Party and energetically suppressed opposition to the creeping Russification of Latvian society.<sup>43</sup>

Still, in a refraction of Marxist-Leninist doctrine and the pragmatic decisions of the Soviet ruling elite, the status of Latvian nationality as a marker of identity and political rights was preserved, while also being ideologically eroded. Over the course of Soviet history, nationalities policy swung in successive moments between Lenin’s strategy of *korenizatsiia*—promotion of non-Russian elites and cultures within their historically determined, state-assigned territories—and his successors’ more or less aggressive pursuit of national merging (*sliianie*) or convergence (*sbliizhenie*) into a Russian core.<sup>44</sup> The counterintuitive result was the deferral of the

Marxist dream of a post-national collective identity, coupled with the preservation and development of national cultures and identities within the often violently imposed bounds of Soviet ideological propriety. In Latvia, as elsewhere in the USSR, domination of non-Russian identity and culture was partially obscured beneath a *conceptual* domination of the concepts of national identity *per se*. Famously and controversially, Jameson described how “third-world” novels in general become allegories of nation, as a reflection of the expression of national cultural being in an imported—global or European—modern literary form. Jameson’s (flawed) argument expresses common, Western conceptions of nationality as an essential core of identity that may be inserted in various institutional structures and forms. In contrast, the classic Soviet definition of Socialist Realist cultural expressions as “national in form, socialist in content” casts national being as a kind of formal ornament wrapped around a socialist core of meaning—a superficial national costume worn over a basic, ideologically ensured human commonality.<sup>45</sup> As Slezkine summed up this distinction, as it was articulated by Lenin and Stalin in their foundational theoretical writings, “Insofar as national culture was a reality, it was about language and a few ‘domestic arrangements’: nationality was ‘form.’ ‘National form’ was acceptable because there was no such thing as national content.”<sup>46</sup> Or one might consider the dominant Russian term for Soviet national identities, “national’nost’,” an abstract noun formed from an adjectival root (an awkward, but adequate rendering of it into English could be “nationalness”) that in its very morphology distanced Soviet subjects from the noun “natsiia,” with its implications of objective permanence. Within this Soviet ontology of political being and identity, national identity and particularity appeared for a while to lose potency as an argument for sovereignty—as a basis for claims-making—while imperial rule as “illegitimate relationships of control specifically by one national political society over another” was masked by the demotion



of national identity as an argument for political rights. However, this same demotion, paradoxically, made it possible for Soviet cultural policy, in Latvia and elsewhere, to preserve and even develop the formal and cultural markers of national identification throughout the era of the USSR's existence that would reemerge as markers of essential being in post-Soviet political life.<sup>47</sup>

The distinctive features of socialist economic and social development as they were realized in Latvia present a similarly contradictory case. Governance of the Soviet Union, founded on Marxist-Leninist principles, sought a broad distribution of development activity that aimed to deliver all territories and republics to industrialized socialist modernity. Such efforts continued up to the fall of the Soviet Union, even following Brezhnev's unfounded declaration in 1972 that the "problem of the equalization of development of the national republics has been resolved."<sup>48</sup> As a result, the Soviet era witnessed economic and infrastructural projects in dominated peripheral territories such as Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Baltic, coupled with transfers of resources from center to periphery that have few parallels in capitalist empires. In this regard, however, distinct scales of comparison contribute to vastly differing accounts of the Soviet experience. Russians, their identification with the imperial gaze reinforced by the conceptual legacies of imbrication of center and periphery and dominator and dominated, tend to assess the beneficial outcomes of Soviet development from an imperial perspective that reaches from Kaliningrad to the Far East, encompassing Central Asian republics that arguably derived no little benefit from Soviet investments.<sup>49</sup> Latvians and the peoples of other Baltic societies, in contrast, have since the late Soviet era measured the results of development in their societies against that of close neighbors such as Finland, just across the Baltic sea—comparisons that are difficult to construe as flattering for Soviet achievements. This element of socialist history, too,

has been a subject of heated, cross-border debates that seek to calculate how much Russia owes Latvia as a result of the depredations of the Soviet regime, or vice versa, how much Latvia gained from Soviet development.<sup>50</sup> It resounds in a far more personal manner in the common refrain of Russians in the Baltic today that the dominant Latvian frame of history and memory undervalues the investments of labor and professional expertise in the region of their parents and grandparents, who came to the Baltic to contribute to post-war reconstruction and late-Soviet development. By this same token, however, economic development cannot easily be separated from processes of cultural domination in the Soviet model of empire—we may note, for example, that among the central concerns of Latvian national political mobilizations in the late 1980s was opposition to the Riga metro project, that would have brought a massive new inflow of Russian workers, as had many previous waves of industrialization and development in the republic, threatening to finally tip the republic's population to majority non-Latvian.<sup>51</sup>

The result of these developments was a web of interlocked, opposed forces and entangled, contradictory potentials at the close of the Soviet era in Latvia. On one hand, Gorbachev's emancipation of political expression with his policy of *glasnost'* made possible the founding of nationalist political organizations such as the Latvijas Nacionālās Neatkarības Kustība (Latvian National Independence Movement), the adoption of Latvian as the state language of the republic in 1988, and other expressions of a renewal and expansion of passionate, open investments in national culture and nationalist politics in a reaction against decades of Russian domination and creeping Russification.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, given the near-minority status of Latvians in the republic, mass political organization was impossible without the participation of the Russian population, many of whom identified with common dreams of liberalism and prosperity that sanctioned the turn away from Moscow and towards Europe and

the West. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the central organization for Latvian autonomy and eventually independence was the Latvijas Tautas Fronte (Latvian Popular Front), the membership of which was dominated by ethnic Latvians, yet which offered “vague promises of inclusive citizenship and equal political rights for all inhabitants,” in Nils Muižnieks’ account.<sup>53</sup> It was opposed by the Interfront (Internatsional'nyi front trudiashchikhsia Latviiskoi SSR), that was overwhelmingly made up of ethnic Russians and other non-Latvian nationalities and supported Latvia’s retention within the Soviet Union.

In March, 1990, the first contested, multi-party elections in the history of the Latvian SSR swept the Latvijas Tautas Fronte to a majority in what would be the republic’s last Supreme Soviet, which declared renewed sovereignty on May 5 in defiance of the Kremlin. A year later, in March, 1991, following the clashes with Soviet Interior Ministry troops that left many dead and wounded, widespread opposition to the increasingly delegitimated Soviet state brought 72% of Latvia’s electorate—including significant numbers of ethnic Russians—to support a referendum on independence from the USSR.<sup>54</sup> Undoubtedly, some cast their votes in opposition to Moscow, pure and simple, while others opposed Russians, also pure and simple. However, this moment of apparent coincidence of purpose was not destined to last. The successful transethnic mobilization of the Latvijas Tautas Fronte had ensured a commanding majority of independence-minded ethnic Latvians in the Latvian Supreme Soviet (of 201 members, 139 were ethnic Latvian and 138 were members of the Latvijas Tautas Fronte).<sup>55</sup> This was the moment when Soviet nationality yielded to post-Soviet nation, laying the groundwork for the foundational decisions that articulated independence as liberation of the interwar Latvian Republic from a half century of occupation and the extension of citizenship only to citizens of

that republic and their descendants. It was an outcome that everyone should have seen coming, but, as with the cataclysmic, tipping-point logic of the Soviet collapse as a whole, no one did.

It was also an outcome beset with historical ironies: post-Soviet policies regarding citizenship in Latvia are the result not simply of the political impulse of national mobilization, but rather of the Soviet nationalities policy that created the contradictory matrix of political forces and institutions of the late 1980s, mixing the Latvian national awakening with anti-Soviet dither, and obscuring the hard edges of the nation beneath the fuzzy abstractions of nationality. As Michele Commercio sums up this situation, Soviet nationalities policy and nationally defined federalism exacerbated national resentment and legitimate anxiety over demographic trends, yet also endowed Latvian elites with “institutional and psychological tools required to implement extensive nationalization projects.”<sup>56</sup> Or in Nils Muižnieks’ words, “the past cast a long shadow on ethnopolitics in Latvia.”<sup>57</sup> This was the shadow of empire, and its proper name is the Russian border condition. For paradoxically, at the moment of rejecting the Soviet era as one of illegal occupation, the Latvian Republic inherited the tools of empire, creating for the population that was to become the noncitizens, to return to Beissinger’s formula, “illegitimate relationships of control specifically by one national political society over another.”<sup>58</sup> Other descriptions of empire are also ironically applicable here—such as that of Ann Stoler, who has written that:

Ambiguous zones, partial sovereignty, temporary suspensions of what Hannah Arendt was to call ‘the right to have rights,’ provisional impositions of states of emergency, promissory notes for elections, deferred or contingent independence, and ‘temporary’ occupations—these are conditions at the heart of imperial projects and present in a broad range of them.<sup>59</sup>

These features sum up well the partial and ill-defined situation of Latvia's non-citizens, subject to mismatched regimes of belonging originating in Riga, Moscow, and Brussels, suspended between a defunct past and a deferred future, rendered stateless, non-citizens of their native land, compatriots of a foreign one. Rather than engage in a scholastic debate as to whether Latvia, or, following its accession to the EU, Europe is 'really an empire,' let us instead observe that the post-Soviet settlement in Latvia laid the table for a multifarious and contentious "politics of claims-making" that has only grown more intense as transnational polarization and enmity has returned to this territory. Like many other post-colonies, Latvia is haunted by ghosts of empire. Here, these ghosts are present in the form of a sizable portion of the population, and spectrality seems to afflict even the historical and analytical terms that might describe their existence. Are Russians in Latvia representatives of past imperial domination, agents of continued Russian cultural imperialism, resources for renewed neo-imperial aggression from the Russian Federation? Are they victims of an imperial inheritance of national exclusions, ramified by the Eurocentric, Orientalizing gaze that leaves them always just beyond the borders of European belonging?

Wrangling and "claims-making" regarding the status of Russian Latvians refracts, and is fueled by, larger force fields of contestation over history and memory across Eastern Europe that over and over again test the broken hinge between ideology and empire. The frayed nature of the connection is perhaps most evident in clashes over monuments and memorials. When, following the defeat of the 1991 Putsch, the monument to Lenin at the intersection of Ul. Lenina (now Brīvības iela) and Ul. Kirova (now Elizabetes iela) in central Riga was taken down, was this a rejection of Lenin as a communist, as a symbol of empire (with attendant historical irony, given his anti-imperialism, as noted in the Preface), or as a Russian? Whereas the latter possibility may

have been obscured at the time by the anti-Soviet political conjuncture of the day, the explicit anti-imperialism and potential anti-Russian implications of cognate episodes across the region have become more and more prominent as the decades have passed—as when in 2007 the Estonian authorities relocated the so-called “Bronze Soldier” — a Soviet war memorial in central Tallinn; when Ukrainians carried out the mass demontage of Soviet-era monuments, the “Lenin-fall” (“Leninopad”) in 2014, following Russia’s annexation of Crimea and instigation of separatist violence in Donbas; and most recently when Latvia demolished the city’s central Monument to the Liberators of Soviet Latvia and Riga from the German Fascist Invaders in the summer of 2022, in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In this last case, Latvians perceived the very name of the monument—its personalized heroization of Red Army soldiers, rather than glorification of ‘victory’ *per se*—as a cruel joke, given that these “liberators” had brought merely a different form of unfreedom for the Latvian population.<sup>60</sup> In the shadow of the Russian Federation’s ongoing invasion and brutal occupation of Eastern Ukraine, few likely imagined the occupiers of 1945 as anything other than Russians. In contrast, but just as surely as a result of the monument’s personalized meaning, many Russian Latvians saw the monument as one to their own families and even to themselves. On either side no one, perhaps, recalled that the initial post-Soviet politicization of the monument was instigated by the Socialist Party of Latvia, when it organized a Victory Day demonstration at the monument on May 9, 1994 (for a detailed discussion of Victory Day commemorations, see Chapter Two). Here, the post-Soviet rejection of state socialism has over the years morphed into or been overwritten, as a palimpsest, by post-colonial rejection of empire and assertion of national difference and rivalry.

Yet this transformation or proliferation of meanings has not emerged out of nowhere. Category confusions and substitutions of this sort present actors on all sides with openings and

opportunities for political mobilization—largely at the expense of those who are fated to live in the border zone. Since the Soviet collapse, right and nationalist voices across Eastern Europe have instrumentalized national passions and post-imperial memory as a convenient tool to demonize left political positions more generally. The Russian Federation, for its part, has weaponized clashes over memory and monuments, protesting Eastern European anti-imperialism as an efflorescence of anti-Russian national discrimination, and accusing Eastern European societies of apologetic positions towards Nazism. Let us observe, in both tendencies, the constriction of ideological possibilities wrought first by the rupture with the Soviet past and then by the turn towards national and imperial terms. In the Baltic, as elsewhere in the world, the post-Soviet era has brought the ascendancy of neoliberal political economy that has led to significant economic growth, but also a vast increase in social and economic inequality and the displacement of left ideologies geared to its amelioration. The ‘patriotic’ politics and military aggression of the Russian Federation is legitimated as a defense of the rights of co-nationals, or critiqued as an expression of post-imperial regret, while resistance to this politics is oriented on the struggle for self-determination and independence and resistance to old and new Russian imperialism, in Ukraine and elsewhere. All positions in this discursive field are articulated in national terms. Conveniently for elites on both sides of the battle lines, in projections of history and memory, nationalism has more and more come to overwhelm or overwrite the socialist component of the region’s past. Critique of past empire and of neo-imperial ambitions, in this region, preserves in its belly, mostly unreflected upon at the start of the fourth decade since the fall of the USSR, a rejection of left politics. Whereas in the middle twentieth century, socialist internationalism suppressed national identities and solidarities, it is now national difference that precludes socialist mobilization and transnational solidarity.

### **III. White Skin, Black Masks, Global Positioning**

In the summer of 2021, after a hiatus of two years in my visits to Latvia, I found myself once again in conversation with Valentina Nikolaevna in the dusty dimness of the Russkaia biblioteka. These had been years of significant events across the globe, and Valentina Nikolaevna showed that she was attentive to news from all quarters. Topics of conversation ranged from the effects of the pandemic, to polarized conflict over the US presidency, to constitutional changes in Russia, yet somehow came to rest on the Black Lives Matter protests in the USA and George Floyd. My interlocutor categorically condemned the protests. In her opinion: George Floyd had been a “drug addict” and his fate was hardly worth protesting; it was wrong that White people in the United States were “kissing the feet of Black people”; it was an outrage that Floyd had been buried in a gold-plated casket. Such views, which echo—perhaps raise the ante on—talking points from American right-wing media, were common in Russian and Russophone coverage of the BLM movements of 2020. Strikingly, such positions united voices from Russia’s liberal opposition (who could have been expected, perhaps, to identify with protests against police brutality, given the recent history of political protest in Russia), with those aligned with the Kremlin’s police state, offering an object lesson in the gravitation of many Russians, of all political stripes, towards racist and Eurocentric social imaginaries.<sup>61</sup> I was taken aback by Valentina Nikolavna’s views—herself a target of institutionalized discrimination, where was her empathy for others who faced oppression because of their identity? So I asked her to tell me her views on racial discrimination in the United States and the long social aftermaths of Black slavery. Suddenly, I seemed to be talking with a different woman. Yes, she told me, racial discrimination was wrong and a disgraceful legacy, a hallmark of the injustices and hypocrisy of



American society. Valentina Nikolaevna vividly recalled marching in her younger years in support of Angela Davis, who was unjustly persecuted and imprisoned.

In 2001, Chioni Moore proposed a possible explanation for the slow formation of political solidarities and intellectual aggregations linking post-socialist situations in Europe and post-colonial ones elsewhere: “Because of this discursive line between the ‘East’ and ‘West,’ the post-Soviet region’s European peoples may be convinced that something radically, even ‘racially,’ differentiates them from the postcolonial Filipinos and Ghanaians who might otherwise claim to share their situation.”<sup>62</sup> Similar observations of an implicit racist logic underlying this resistance to global post-imperial solidarity have been offered by other commentators, such as Tomasz Zarycki, who explains Polish intellectuals’ reluctance to apply post-colonial terms to the era of Soviet domination with the remark that “colonial states seem to be identified first of all with ‘black’ African nations perceived as submissive victims of their ‘white’ superior masters.”<sup>63</sup> So what, then, are we to make of this curious case: the non-citizen of Latvia and compatriot of the Russian Federation who refers to herself with the Russian n-word, and who somehow combines solidarity with the targets of racial oppression—possibly only a memory of solidarity—with overt racism that expresses the coincidence of Russian aspirations for European modernity with legacies and realities of Eurocentric White supremacy? This seeming exception allows us to explore the specificity of post-Soviet, postcolonial relations in Latvia not at the level of the synthetic historical account, but in the concrete particular of an individual utterance in the border zone.

The overlap and coincidence of “non-citizen” with “compatriot abroad” is an incomplete one. This is to say, being a non-citizen does not automatically make one a compatriot abroad. That, one imagines, is the fantasy of nationally inclined political actors on either side of the

border, who dream of a world in which unequal national collectivities are coextensive with their legitimate political territories, making possible a final reckoning of historical debts and civilizational differences. Rather, these are two half-way statuses that do not add up to a whole, and that cover the populations they describe unevenly and raggedly by means of terms of negation and partiality—non-citizens, like compatriots, are defined by their exclusion from European belonging, from Latvian, Russian or any other citizenship (one cannot retain Latvian non-citizenship while holding any other), yet by their partial correspondence in location, rights, culture or identity to these seemingly stable and definable categories. One may compare this bordered condition to the hybrid identities of subaltern postcolonial subjects, as influentially described by Homi Bhabha in the *Location of Culture*:

The subaltern or metonymic are neither empty nor full, neither part nor whole. Their compensatory and vicarious processes of signification are a spur to social translation, the production of something else besides which is not only the cut or gap of the subject but also the intercut across social sites and disciplines. This hybridity initiates the project of political thinking by continually facing it with the strategic and the contingent, with the countervailing thought of its own ‘unthought.’ It has to negotiate its goals through an acknowledgement of differential objects and discursive levels articulated not simply as contents but in their address as forms of textual or narrative subjections — be they governmental, judicial or artistic.<sup>64</sup>

The categories of social belonging available in the intertidal zone between Latvia and Russia are hybrid in just this sense. Yet they do not always initiate the project of political thinking in the manner described by Bhabha. Some Russian speakers in Latvia—poets like Khanin, for instance, as is more completely investigated in Chapter Five of this study—do articulate a cosmopolitan

project that bridges between spaces, languages and societies by means of the critical investigation of the interstitial position and the construction of something novel, acute and beautiful out of its complexities. Yet the political thinking involved in Valentina Nikolaevna's use of the Russian n-word is something else entirely.

As a foreign speaker of Russian, one is often informed in Moscow or St. Petersburg that the Russian n-word is a neutral term describing a dark-skinned person. "No offense intended." Be that as it may, this is a word that sits uncomfortably on the border between East and West. Borrowed from French in the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, it came pre-loaded with conceptions of racial hierarchy and colonial subjugation, the persistence of which is evident in the range of Russian idiomatic expressions in which it is still commonly found: "to work like a *negr*," "find yourself another *negr*," "I'm not a *negr* for you," and so on. Certainly, speakers of English hear this word in a particular fashion, as a result of the racial slur that it is near homophone. However, one suspects that Russians' protestations that the Russian n-word is not a derogatory term reflect not the "neutrality" of the term but the absence of any broadly accepted critique of racism or colonialism in Russian society. Furthermore, in the usage of Valentina Nikolaevna and other non-citizens in Latvia, we are self-evidently no longer in Russia. Here, as a result of the historical injustices and contingencies that delivered a half-million Russians into a European country, the Russian n-word found itself returned as well—or half-returned—into the Western discursive regimes where it originated. And Europe took notice. From 2003 onwards, in preparation for and then as a consequence of Latvian accession to the European Union in 2004, the Latvian state and a range of supporting NGOs pursued projects intended to increase social tolerance in Latvia under the auspices of the Special Tasks Minister for Social Integration as well as the EU funded National Project for Social Integration, bringing

social and official scrutiny to bear on categories of racial, gender, ethnic and religious identity and terms associated with them, including the Russian and Latvian n-words.

As Dace Dzenovska has explained on the basis of field research among tolerance workers in Latvia during those years, these social education projects were fraught with category confusions and breakdowns in translation. Tolerance work exposed the ill-fit of programs designed to ameliorate the injustices of Western European imperialism in a society where that context was entwined with the traumas of a different history. Among the pressure points that laid plain this category mismatch were the Latvian and Russian n-words. One of Dzenovska's informants, an activist for social tolerance, recounted an exchange with a member of the African Latvian Association that is paradigmatic in this regard: "I was talking about something, perhaps telling a joke, I do not remember, and I said the word *nēģeris* (negro) and John's eyes get big and he tells me that I cannot say that word in front of people. And you know that in Latvian and Russian language the word *nēģeris* is not a bad word, it has no negative connotations. It is rather the word 'black' that has negative connotations. He says, I will understand, but my friends will not understand. I was terrified and was afraid to speak from being all shook up."<sup>65</sup> In this exchange, as in the tolerance project as a whole, the interdiction of racist terms was a mechanism for policing the boundaries of Europe. To be precise, and blunt, regardless of the economic and political legacies of colonialism that continue to define Western and Eurocentric hegemony and global inequality, and regardless of the unfinished business of institutionalized and everyday racism in Europe, 'proper' speech regarding race determines European belonging. Yet ironically enough, the Russian and Latvian words that serve to demarcate the boundary in question are themselves borrow-words from Europe. In the ongoing return of Latvian society to Europe, those earlier lessons in European belonging must be forgotten or submerged. In the case of the activist,

interpellation into this new regime of social life—in which a word that formerly was thought to have “no negative connotations” is declared unspeakable—rendered her unable to speak at all.

Valentina Nikolaevna, in contrast, uses this word with no reluctance: “Look, *negr* is written right there in my passport.” The locution articulates a muddled set of claims and refusals, voicing aloud the contradictions lost in the activist’s silence. Valentina Nikolavna’s use of the Russian n-word proposes that non-citizens are subject to a regime of discrimination comparable to that directed against dark-skinned people. Submerged in the depths of her pun lie memories of Valentina Nikolaevna’s march in solidarity with Angela Davis. In other words, here we have found someone who boldly articulates the relationship between post-colonial and post-Soviet conditions. Yet it’s not nearly so neat as it sounds. For one thing, Valentina Nikolaevna is not the victim of past imperial injustice, but a representative of a former imperial metropole. And hers is a fishy sort of negative solidarity—for the pun reproduces the regime of discrimination that it otherwise critiques. Is this really an expression of solidarity among the oppressed, or is Valentina Nikolaevna just another aspirational European, policing the boundaries of White modernity? In distinction, at least, from intellectual debates that politely disavow questions of racism (even critiques of the resistance to postcolonial analysis such as Zarycki’s delicately sidestep this term), Valentina Nikolaevna is brazen in her own, suggesting that abjection has been misplaced. “*Negr* is written right there in my passport” revises the Russian idiomatic expression “I’m not a *negr* for you” (“ia tebe ne *negr*”).<sup>66</sup> The implication is that the actual dark-skinned people—they deserve their lot. Perhaps, generously, we might comprehend Valentina Nikolaevna’s negativity as a protest against the mismatch of Latvian programs for social justice with her own experience: why is everyone concerned with legacies of Western empire, when I am right here, the subaltern resulting from a different history? Where is social tolerance for me? Still, our sympathy faces an

uphill battle against the loathing evoked by her racism. Yet the screw can be turned yet again: in condemning Valentina Nikolaevna as a racist, are we rejecting her application for European belonging on the basis of failings that, ironically, turn out to be second-hand versions of our own? Are we policing Europe and the West, too—and in queasily similar terms?

How are we to bridge analytically between the local space of conversations in a dusty library in Riga and the matrices of historical and geopolitical imagination that animate them? One might be tempted to dismiss Valentina Nikolaevna, other bordered Russian Latvians, and their bad jokes as anomalous. In fact, they are allegorical—in precisely the manner that borders are always allegorical, as Balibar has explained:

State borders, understood equally as the borders of a culture and an at-least-*fictive* identity, have always been immediately endowed with a global signification. They have always served not only to separate particularities, but always also at the same time, *in order* to fulfil this ‘local’ function, to ‘partition the world,’ to *configure* it [...] in the modality [...] of the historical distribution of the regions of space, which would work like the instantaneous projection of the progresses and processes of its history. Every *map* in this sense is also a world map, for it represents ‘a part of the world,’ it locally projects the *universitas* that is *omnitudo compartium absoluta*.<sup>67</sup>

At present, the processes of world history intersect, yet cohere only in joke, contradiction, or tragedy, in the Russian border zones of Eastern Europe. Over the past two decades, the shift towards views of state socialism as a form of empire has been subtended by often obscure ideological implications. The Marxist intellectual genealogy of postcolonial theory undoubtedly was one of the factors underwriting the disavowal by the first generation of postcolonial scholars of the imperial nature of the socialist world, which was collapsing precisely during the years

Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Partha Chatterjee, and others were writing their seminal works. By the same token, the growing volume of work applying post-colonial categories to post-socialist cases has been slow to make a significant mark among broader communities of post-colonial scholars or to be assembled in global histories of empire—likely in a reflection of the resonance or explicit alignment of this work with anti-socialist positions, as Tlostanova has observed.<sup>68</sup> However, as memory war erupts into neo-imperial warfare in Eastern Europe, it's clear enough that empire is a necessary term of description for the history and present reality of Eurasia. Yet this should hardly be a surprise. The postcolonial is best conceived not as an exclusive condition, but as a set of relations inscribed into the present by global histories of empire and domination. It makes little sense to think in terms of 'this is a postcolonial subject' or 'this is a postcolonial territory,' in distinction from some other subjects or territory. The globe as a whole is postcolonial. To name it as such is to make it analytically available for the articulation of a critique of the form of modernity associated with colonial domination and exclusion as productive of polity and identity, and for the imagination of a world in which this will no longer be the case. Yet something similar can be said concerning post-socialism. Susan Buck-Morss noted nearly two decades ago that "the end of the Soviet era was not limited spatially to the territory of the Soviet Union."<sup>69</sup> This is to say, the entire globe is post-socialist—shaped by legacies of the vanished global hegemon of the left and the vision of global history and futurity it supported, as well as by the difficult and largely marginalized project of resurrecting leftist internationalist politics in the face of triumphant neoliberal anti-socialism. It is the coincidence of these two mappings of the globe, each endowed with their own distinct global significances, configuring space as segments of the *omnitudo compartium absoluta*, that is productive of our peculiar moment of global incoherence.

This is to say, since the conclusion of the Cold War, the global map has been configured simultaneously by axiological oppositions deriving from the two great historical processes of the twentieth century: on the one hand, those associated with decolonization, the dismantling of empires into independent nation states, and the persistent pathologies of neocolonial relations and global inequality, and, on the other, those relating to ideological conflict between the socialist and capitalist world systems, projections of global history and human fate. Ultimately, however, while both meaning-making grids extend across the globe, inflecting every national border and every boundary between world zones or civilizations, their intersections at the level of the particular, especially in the border zones of Eastern Europe, reveal the impossibility to map global history or actuality in a universally coherent or portable manner. For as scholars, intellectuals, politicians, generals and armies impose the categories of empire on the past and present boundaries of the former socialist world, the heterogeneous outcomes bear witness to an actuality of global historical and ideological partiality and fragmentation.

The confluence of two important recent books, each of which boldly reaches toward a global scale of analysis in treatment of the history of the socialist world, efficiently cuts to the core of this problematic: Monica Popescu's *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War* and Rossen Djagalov's *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism: Literature and Cinema Between the Second and Third Worlds*. As their titles indicate, each of these works takes up aspects of the transnational history of the imbrication of the state socialist world with the formerly colonized world in the key of postcolonial analysis, building on a slowly building wave of scholarship on the global Cold War, ramified by significant original research, and compellingly integrating these with larger critical and theoretical debates.<sup>70</sup> In what we might see as a partial fulfilment of Jameson's forecasts in the 1980s that a post-imperial "global



capitalism,” would eventually reinvigorate Marxist analysis and mobilization, both Popescu and Djagalov found their works on the classics of post-colonial analysis that emerged from Marxist analytical traditions—and each has quickly garnered accolades from the broader community of post-colonial scholars, breaking down the firewall between post-colonial scholarship and the study of the state socialist world in decisive fashion. Yet regardless of the shared ideological sympathies and *esprit de corps* of their authors, the intersection of these two works illuminates the impasse facing global history and world politics at present in the face of “unequal, fragmented, or local resistances” to global capitalist logics.

Both Djagalov and Popescu focus their studies on the orientation of many in formerly colonized societies during the Cold War, from the masses to the intellectuals and elites, towards state socialism or an incipient transnational socialist globality as an emancipatory model, counterposed to capitalist empire, neocolonialism, and post-colonial dependence. Yet the two scholars significantly diverge in their accounts of these important yet understudied problems of global twentieth-century political history. Djagalov’s work traces a genealogy connecting and identifying leftist internationalism and anti-imperialism of the middle twentieth century, often but not exclusively aligned with the USSR, with postcolonial critiques of global capitalism in the present. He begins with the observation that “for all the problems and limitations of Soviet anti-colonialism, which only grew under Stalinism, it is worth remembering that the interwar Bolshevik state was the one (major power) state that not only fought racism and imperialism at home but also took this fight internationally, a fact appreciated by anti-colonial and racial justice activists worldwide.”<sup>71</sup> In his conclusion, he explains that: “As *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism* has shown, [the application of postcolonial analysis to post-socialist contexts] represents only the latest stage of a cycle begun a century ago, when the former Russian empire

(newly reconfigured as the USSR) emerged as a gigantic experiment in understanding and contesting the political, economic, and cultural hierarchies among societies, within the USSR as well as globally.”<sup>72</sup> In distinction, Popescu’s approach largely describes the USSR and its projections of power into the developing world as a form of “state socialist empire,” comparable to the imperialism and neo-colonialism of its capitalist opponents, and calling for an expanded analysis of the polarized cultural and ideological forcefield of the Cold War, as it was experienced in decolonizing territories: “If the neocolonial ambitions of the United States are well documented, new research on the USSR has pointed out that the help this superpower extended to countries emerging out of colonial rule was [...] meant to augment or strengthen the Soviet sphere of influence. [...] Couched in internationalist terms, this much-avowed communist solidarity with oppressed peoples (‘the brotherhood of nations’) often camouflaged racial typecasting as well as neo- Orientalist discourses that formulated yet another ‘civilizing mission.’”<sup>73</sup> These brief citations cannot capture the nuance and subtlety of Djagalov’s and Popescu’s works, both of which recognize and brilliantly manage the complexity of their subject matter. Further, I have no intention of judging the relative adequacy of these two key interventions. My point is rather that their parallel reading leads to recognition of the challenges that face all current attempts to write world history from a perspective out of Eastern Europe.

It is, perhaps, no coincidence that the appearance of Popescu’s and Djagalov’s interventions has closely coincided with the outbreak of war in Eastern Europe. Their works, both in their extraordinary depth of erudition and breadth of vision and in their divergent results, present a scholarly crystallization of a real-world dialectic that remains without synthesis. Out of their divergence, we may formulate the cacophony of global questions that shape local borders on all sides: were transnational state socialist projects a competing and more just version of

globalization or a competing form of empire? What remains of the emancipatory impulses of anti-imperialism and decolonization and how may they be reintegrated with ideological distinctions, past and present? Were socialist and capitalist globalizations in fact simply competing varieties of neo-imperialism?<sup>74</sup> Is contemporary Russian aggression in Ukraine an echo of socialist empire, or a pathology of Russian nationalism and capitalist greed? To what extent has the dominance of neoliberal capitalism in the formerly socialist world itself constituted a form of neo-colonial subordination of those territories? These are questions that the past insistently poses to the present, yet they are questions without satisfactory answers, at least not answers that can bridge between one local scene of history and politics and the many others who offer their own, locally inflected resolutions. This is not to say that these terms cannot be marshalled into coherent accounts, as they are in Djagalov's and Popescu's works, but rather that there is a surfeit of such accounts, each of which proves compelling for a discrete population and geography. Among the roots of our current predicament, both within the academy and beyond its walls, is the reality that despite the broadly felt insistence of these questions—the drive to explain our moment via a deployment of these shared terms—terms that history throws up at politicians and publics no less forcefully than at scholars—no global explanatory framework can decisively reconcile histories of empire with histories of ideology. The matrices of both post-socialist and post-colonial being extend across the globe. Yet everywhere they intersect and refract in differential manner, leading to a surfeit of localized accounts of the ideological implication of empire and anti-imperialism or the relationship of the socialist past to accounts of imperial history. These multivarious divergences between the post-colonial vision and the post-socialist lay bare one of the fundamental factors (undoubtedly, there are others) subtending the current impasse for global transnational solidarity—an impasse that is forcibly expressed at the

interstices between hegemonic orders in Eastern Europe. It is one of the key factors that animates agonistic division within and among societies—and that undergirds the work of those who profit from such division.

In the face of the contradictions of the border zone, one might well be moved simply to reject all legacies of imperial power, whether rooted in capitalist or socialist projections of global domination and visions of development. This is the stance often adopted in decolonial thought, which, like the present inquiry, takes its origin in a perspective on the impasses of universal history as viewed from the borders of modernity and empire. Most commonly, decolonial thinkers resolve the geographically distributed contradictions of imperial/post-colonial and ideological distinctions by means of a rejection of the inherited ideological matrix as simply one more negative legacy of empire. Here, “Christianity, liberalism, Marxism, Islamism,” and much else are all assigned to a common dust bin of history.<sup>75</sup> As Tlostanova and Mignolo write:

Border thinkers dwell in *the difference* (colonial and/or imperial) [...]. Consequently, decolonial intellectuals do not believe in the universality of statements made from any local history. And there is nothing but local history. [...] The array of possibilities for border thinking is indeed vast, but they all have one thing in common: How do people in the world deal with Western economic, political, and epistemic expansion if they do not want to assimilate or remain passive and if they/we choose to imagine a future that is their/our own invention and not the invention of the empires, hegemonic or subaltern?<sup>76</sup>

Yet in distinction from these thinkers, and in sympathy for the varied and urgent undertakings associated with their work, a vantage out of Eastern Europe suggests the practical and theoretical difficulty of deriving totalizing solutions—even those founded on a wholesale negation of “Western economic, political, and epistemic expansion”—from within the partiality of local

conditions. Border zones are not exterior to global projections of hegemony and ideology. Rather, they are produced by the variegated history of their intersections. Refusal of these entanglements is imaginable in discrete local circumstances, yet such local refusals offer no path towards solidarities shared broadly across borders, let alone towards global amity. The negative dialectic does not result in a synthesis called “negation.” A pragmatic corollary to such theoretical impediments to the “decolonial option” is the actual imbrication of each local scene with the unceasing and contradictory impulses of contemporary economic development and geopolitical contestation. As others, including Arjun Appadurai and Olúfemi Táíwò, have recently argued, the utopian turn away from the imperial and ideological legacies of modernity offers no path to a desperately needed, yet persistently absent common global futurity.<sup>77</sup>

The implications of this imbrication are exposed in the Eastern European border zone under investigation in the present study, where distinct renditions of the intersection of imperial and ideological categories drive multiple scenes of contestation of twentieth century history. They are evident in conflicts over the demontage of monuments to Lenin and Soviet WWII memorials—and in the tensions between distinct enactments of these memory conflicts over the years, as the anti-communist, anti-imperialist, nationalist, socialist, and even European imperialist (in Ventspils) connotations of these episodes have surfaced in differential fashion for distinct populations. Discordant intersections of these two grids of historical meaning-making are present as well in divergent conceptions of the identities and fates of extraterritorial Russians across Eastern Europe—an echo of this fundamental contradiction provides the armature for Valentina Nikolaevna’s bad joke, “*Negr* is written right there in my passport,” which toggles in meaning between solidarity with the oppressed and racist claims to Eurocentric White belonging—between legacies of socialist anti-imperialism and evocation of histories of European

imperialism. In a different way, the lack of congruence between ideological and imperial conceptual grids underlies the ontological divergence and current geopolitical conflict between Europe and the Russian Federation—for, notwithstanding the cynicism and instrumentalism of Kremlin slogans about imperialist Western encroachments on Russian territory, the extremes of the war in Ukraine demonstrate the purchase that these terms have on a great many Russian minds. In these extremes, as in Valentina Nikolaevna’s joke, contradiction’s full force as destroyer of meaning comes to the fore in cruel ironies: “in order to resist your imperial aggression, we will forcibly impose our own”; “in order to save and unify the Russian world, we will bomb cities of Russians and divide the world’s Russians as never before”; “in order to prove our enemy’s alliance with extreme nationalism and Nazism, we will ourselves don the garb of authoritarian dictatorship and reenact WWII”; “we will reenact WWII so that it will never be repeated.”

The horrors of war, compounded by the absurdity and folly of this war in particular, demonstrate the bad faith, self-delusion, and inhumanity that lie barely concealed in the claim to know the movements of the world spirit in our times. To cite Adorno’s discussion of Hegel once more: “The world spirit, a worthy object of definition, would have to be defined as permanent catastrophe.”<sup>78</sup> While recognizing this folly and resisting it with all means, we may also, with Adorno, take up negative dialectics as an avenue towards comprehension of the impasse of historical understanding and political actuality today. At the present moment, it is for some perhaps a difficult thing to acknowledge that Valentina Nikolaevna is in fact a member of a minority that has been subjected to illegitimate discrimination, especially given how easy she makes it condemn her as a Russian racist thirsting for a “Russian spring” in Latvia. It is therefore perhaps hardest of all to recognize one’s own participation, in writing her off in this manner, in

reasserting the Eurocentric mapping of the world that underlies, in different ways, both her own alienation from the Europe of today and the imperial imagination that she sets in opposition to it. It is easy to join Latvia's president in dividing Russian Latvians into the loyal, who are aligned on the right side of history, and the "disloyal," alien to Europe, who see the world through the eyes of Russian state television's Channel One and must therefore be "isolated from society." Here, we not only risk reproducing the Orientalist rhetoric of my Latvian interlocutors concerning the Russian "horde," but also miss an opportunity to critically exhume the tissue of historical contradictions, visible in the tortured joints of these formulations, that have led the world to the present impasse. That is the task of the chapters that follow, which through attention to the social experience and cultural lives of people who, like Valentina Nikolaevna, were cast into the Russian border condition in 1991, seek to extract from beneath the rubble of clashing hegemonies—and out of echoes of the failed peace plans of capitalism and socialism alike—some remainder of the aspiration of a just and equitable future. In the face of contradictions seemingly insurmountably embedded in our lifeworlds, negative dialectics may be one of the few tools available to realize if not a synthesis or a resolution, then at least clearer recognition of the knotted contradictions of past histories, as well as humility in the search for a path forward: "It lies in the definition of negative dialectics that it will not come to rest in itself, as if it were total. This is its form of hope."<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Levits: Kopš kara Ukrainā esam kļuvoši patriotiskāki un nacionālāki."

<sup>2</sup> Gorbachev, "Address given by Mikhail Gorbachev to the Council of Europe."

<sup>3</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 300-360, esp. 319-20.

<sup>4</sup> The claim that Marxism-Leninism is animated by faith in that history would come to its proper end through the violent instances of dialectical conflict needs no special support. Francis Fukuyama's debts to Hegel in his influential tract *The End of History and the Last Man* are also well known. On the inheritances of Hegelian thought, via Leo Strauss, in the administration of George W. Bush, see: Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire*, 118-120.

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- <sup>5</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 406.
- <sup>6</sup> David Laitin, *Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998); Rogers Brubaker, “Accidental diasporas and external ‘homelands’ in central and eastern Europe: past and present,” Institute for Advanced Studies, Vienna, Political Science Series no. 71 (2000).
- <sup>7</sup> Natalya Kosmarskaya and Artyom Kosmarsky, “‘Russian Culture’ in Central Asia as a Trans-Ethnic Phenomenon,” forthcoming in *Global Russian Cultures*, edited by Kevin M. F. Platt.
- <sup>8</sup> Other chapters of regional history that contributed significantly to the twentieth-century reshaping of Latvia’s demographic composition include the forced emigration of the Baltic Germans in 1939-40, the Holocaust, in which the majority of Latvia’s prewar Jewish population perished, and wartime death and dislocation. “Vsesoiuznyi perepis' naseleniia 1989 goda: Natsional'nyi sostav naseleniia po respublikam SSSR,” *Demoskop Weekly* 703/704-31 (October 13-November 13, 2016), [demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng\\_nac\\_89.php?reg=0](http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng_nac_89.php?reg=0) (accessed October 20, 2022); Nils Muižnieks, “Government Policy and the Russian Minority,” in: Nils Muižnieks, ed., *Latvian-Russian Relations: Domestic and International Dimensions* (Riga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds, 2006), 9-21.
- <sup>9</sup> Laitin, *Identity in Formation*, 95-98; Michele E. Commercio, *Russian Minority Politics in Post-Soviet Latvia and Kyrgyzstan: The Transformative Power of Informal Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 55-57.
- <sup>10</sup> Marina Germane provides a balanced recent discussion of citizenship policies and matters of social integration in the final, epilogue-chapter of *The History of the Idea of Latvians as a Civic Nation, 1850-1940*, dissertation, University of Glasgow, 2013, 338-64. The Latvian category of non-citizen is not without historical precedent. My own awareness of relevant prehistories dates to a conversation with my colleague Gerry Prince early in my work on this project: in response to my explanation of the Latvian noncitizen category, which I presented as entirely historically anomalous, he told me of his own early biography as a Jewish noncitizen of Egypt. On the history of state documentation and passportization, see John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State* (Cambridge University Press, 2000). On Jewish noncitizens of Egypt, see Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics, and the Formation of Modern Diaspora* (Berkeley Cal.: University of California Press, 1998).
- <sup>11</sup> Dimitry Kochenov and Aleksejs Dimitrovs, “EU Citizenship for Latvian ‘Non-Citizens’: A Concrete Proposal,” *Houston Journal of International Law* 38:1 (2016): 55-97.
- <sup>12</sup> For an extended account of the non-citizen category, its history and significance in Latvian and European political discourse, see: Kudaibergenova, *Toward Nationalizing Regimes*, 119-55.
- <sup>13</sup> “Society integration in Latvia,” June 29, 2022, on site: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Latvia, <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/society-integration-latvia> (accessed August 25, 2022).
- <sup>14</sup> Anna Stroj, “Rossiia priznala pasport negrazhdanina Latvii v kachestve proezdno go dokumenta,” *Diena*, July 7, 1997, 2.
- <sup>15</sup> “O gosudarstvennoi politike RF v otnoshenii sootchestvennikov za rubezhom,” 2013, on site “Konsul'tant Plius,” [www.consultant.ru/online/base/?req=doc;base=LAW;n=102935](http://www.consultant.ru/online/base/?req=doc;base=LAW;n=102935) (accessed August 28, 2022). For detailed discussion of Russian Federation policies towards Russian “compatriots” in Latvia, see: Cheskin, *Russian Speakers in Post-Soviet Latvia*, 169-95.
- <sup>16</sup> Vladimir Putin, “Poslanie Federal'nomy sobraniuu,” April 25, 2005, on site: “Prezident Rossii,” [www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931](http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931) (accessed November 7, 2015).
- <sup>17</sup> Putin, “Obrashchenie Prezidenta.”
- <sup>18</sup> “O gosudarstvennoi politike RF,” stat'ia 1.



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<sup>19</sup> “O gosudarstvennoi politike RF,” stat’ia 3.

<sup>20</sup> On the “Russian card,” see, for instance: Tamara Miodushevskaiia, “‘Karta russkogo’: novyi proekt pomoshchi sootchestvennikov za rubezhem,” *Argumenty i fakty* (June 8, 2008), [www.aif.ru/society/article/19172](http://www.aif.ru/society/article/19172) (accessed April 9, 2012); “MID Rossii nazval provokatsiei ‘kartu russkogo’ dlia Pribaltiki, Ukrainy, Kazakhstana i Moldavii,” Regnum Informatsionnoe Agenstvo (July 21, 2009), [regnum.ru/news/polit/1188613.html](http://regnum.ru/news/polit/1188613.html) (accessed August 1, 2017).

<sup>21</sup> Seyla Benhabib, *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents and Citizens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>22</sup> A number of Russian Latvians have pursued suits against the Latvian state contesting transcriptions of their names in identity documents. See: Mentzen v. Latvia, European Court of Human Rights, 2004; Raihman v. Latvia, UN Human Rights Committee, 2007. See also: Michael Newcity, “International Law, Minority Language Rights, and Russian(s) in the ‘Near Abroad,’” in Lara Ryazanova-Clarke, ed., *The Russian Language Outside the Nation* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2014), 33-55, esp. 47-48.

<sup>23</sup> Laitin, *Identity in Formation*, 342. See also: Daniel A. Kronenfeld, “Ethnogenesis Without the Entrepreneurs: The Emergence of a Baltic Russian Identity in Latvia,” in Karsten Brüggemann (ed.), *Narva und die Ostseeregion* (Narva, Estonia: Narva College Press, 2004), pp. 339-63; Daniel A. Kronenfeld, “The Effects of Interethnic Contact on Ethnic Identity: Evidence from Latvia,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 21/3 (2005): 247-77;

<sup>24</sup> Kaprāns and Mieriņa, “Minority Reconsidered”; Cheskin, *Russian Speakers in Post-Soviet Latvia*, 7-9, 103-28.

<sup>25</sup> L. Ling-Chi Wang, “The Structure of Dual Domination: Toward a Paradigm for the Study of the Chinese Diaspora in the United States,” *Amerasia* 21:1 & 2 (1995): 149-69; Shu-mei Shih, “The Concept of the Sinophone,” *PMLA* 126:3 (2011): 709-18.

<sup>26</sup> Wang, “The Structure of Dual Domination,” 158.

<sup>27</sup> The question of the interrelationship of these frames of inquiry was initially posed most forcefully in: David Chioni Moore, “Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique,” *PMLA* 116:1 (2001): 111-128. Other considerations of the problem of postcolonial analysis of post-Soviet and post-socialist situations include: Gayatri Spivak, “In Memoriam: Edward W. Said,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 23 (2003): 6-7, 111-128; Vitaly Chernetsky, “Postcolonialism, Russia and Ukraine,” *Ulbandus* 7 (2003): 32-62; Gayatri Spivak, Nancy Condee, Harsha Ram, and Vitaly Chernetsky, “Conference Debates: Are We Postcolonial? Post-Soviet Space,” *PMLA* 121 (2006): 828-36; Adrian Otoiu, “An Exercise in Fictional Liminality: The Postcolonial, the Postcommunist, and Romania’s Threshold Generation,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 23 (2003): 87-105; Monica Popescu, “Translations: Lenin’s Statues, Post-communism and Post-apartheid,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 16 (2003): 406-23; Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery, “Thinking Between the Posts: Postcolonialism, Postsocialism and Ethnography after the Cold War,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51 (2009): 6-34.

<sup>28</sup> Zakharov, *Race and Racism in Russia*, esp. 109-33.

<sup>29</sup> See, among others: Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain*; Lee, *The Ethnic Avant-Garde*; Glaser and Lee: *Comintern Aesthetics*; Milstein and Yankelevich, eds. *The Wayland Rudd Collection*.

<sup>30</sup> Frederic Jameson, “Periodizing the 60s,” *Social Text* 9/10, special issue on “The 60's without Apology,” (1984): 178-209, cit. on 178, 180.

<sup>31</sup> Jameson, “Periodizing the 60s,” 181.

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<sup>32</sup> Jameson, “Periodizing the 60s,” 208-9. Jameson’s vision of universal political solidarity as emergent from processes of global economic integration under hegemonic western late capitalism and postmodernity is a distant echo of Marx’s writings on British rule in India, discussed in Chapter Two, that offer recognition of British brutality, yet conclude with the rhetorical question: “Can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution.” Karl Marx, “The British Rule in India,” in his *Political Writings*, ed. by David Fernbach, 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1974), ii: 301-7, cit. on 306-7.

<sup>33</sup> Yuri Slezkine, “Imperialism as the Highest Stage of Socialism,” *Russian Review* 59 (2000): 227-34, cited on 227. For other contributions to historiographical debate concerning the “imperial” nature of the USSR, see: Terry Martin, “The Soviet Union as Empire: Salvaging a Dubious Analytical Category,” *Ab Imperio* 2 (2002): 91–105; Mark von Hagen, “Empires, Borderlands, and Diasporas: Eurasia as Anti-Paradigm for the Post-Soviet Era,” *American Historical Review* 109.2 (2004): 445-68; Mark Beissinger, “Rethinking Empire in the Wake of Soviet Collapse,” in *Ethnic Politics After Communism*, edited by Zoltan Dennis Barany and Robert G. Moser (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 14–45; Adeeb Khalid, “Locating the (post-) colonial in Soviet history,” *Central Asian Survey* 26.4 (2007): 465–473.

<sup>34</sup> Chioni Moore, “Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet?” 116.

<sup>35</sup> Gayatri Spivak, “In Memoriam: Edward W. Said,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 23 (2003): 6-7, 111-128; Vitaly Chernetsky, “Postcolonialism, Russia and Ukraine,” *Ulbandus* 7 (2003): 32-62; Gayatri Spivak, Nancy Condee, Harsha Ram, and Vitaly Chernetsky, “Conference Debates: Are We Postcolonial? Post-Soviet Space,” *PMLA* 121 (2006): 828-36; Adrian Otoiu, “An Exercise in Fictional Liminality: The Postcolonial, the Postcommunist, and Romania’s Threshold Generation,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 23 (2003): 87-105; Monica Popescu, “Translations: Lenin’s Statues, Post-communism and Post-apartheid,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 16 (2003): 406-23; Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery, “Thinking Between the Posts: Postcolonialism, Postsocialism and Ethnography after the Cold War,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51 (2009): 6-34.

<sup>36</sup> Mark Beissinger, “Rethinking Empire in the Wake of Soviet Collapse,” in *Ethnic Politics After Communism*, edited by Zoltan Dennis Barany and Robert G. Moser (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 14–45, cit. on 33.

<sup>37</sup> Perhaps the most prominent, and frequently critiqued example of this tendency is the work of Ewa Thompson, scholar of Russian and Polish literature and early and prominent proponent of postcolonial analysis in work on the region. Her monograph, *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000) has been both widely read and cited, especially in its Polish context, and also widely critiqued for its reductive nationalism. Dirk Uffelmann, “Theory as Memory Practice: The Divided Discourse on Poland’s Postcoloniality,” in: Uilleam Blacker, Alexander Etkind, and Julie Fedor, eds., *Memory and Theory in Eastern Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 103-24, cited on 118.

Tomasz Zarycki, “Debating Soviet Imperialism in Contemporary Poland: On the Polish Uses of Postcolonial Theory and Their Contexts,” in *Empire De/Centered: New Spatial Histories of Russia*, edited by Sanna Turoma and Maxim Waldstein (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2013), 191-215, esp. 202-4.

<sup>38</sup> Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia’s Imperial Experience* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011).

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<sup>39</sup> As the members of the *Ab Imperio* historiographic school have argued, the fundamental conceptual basis of the imperial political and social regime in Russia consisted in the multiplicity of distinct registers of difference that defined the identities and governance of distinct territories and populations. In this light, it would be a nearly empty academic exercise to debate “relative degrees of oppression” in the Russian Empire—forms of domination, too, were distinct in each region and for each population. One might, for instance, point out that serfdom was abolished in Latvia in 1817, decades earlier than in the Russian heartland, where emancipation was decreed in 1861. By the same token, though, Russian populations were of course never subjected to “Russification” policies such as those that were applied in the late nineteenth century in various regions of the empire, including the Baltic provinces. For conceptual critique of the concept of “empire” in general and in relation to Russian history, see: Ilya Gerasimov, Sergey Glebov, Jan Kusber, Marina Mogilner and Alexander Semyonov, “New Imperial History and the Challenges of Empire,” in *Empire Speaks Out: Languages of Rationalization and Self-Description in the Russian Empire* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2009), 3-32.

<sup>40</sup> See: Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 101-109.

<sup>41</sup> On the construction of Soviet nationalities, see: Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and The Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005).

<sup>42</sup> As Northrop writes, “The Soviet empire was no less real and no less important for being (in every sense) veiled.” See Douglas Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004), 29; Annus, *Soviet Post-Colonial Studies*, 14.

<sup>43</sup> Commercio, *Russian Minority Politics*, 12, 27-50.

<sup>44</sup> See, for instance, Suny, *The Revenge of the Past*, 128-30.

<sup>45</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” *Social Text* 15 (1986): 65-88. The most prominent critique of Jameson’s argument is Aijaz Ahmad, “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory,’” *Social Text* 17 (1987): 3-25. For a reading of Jameson’s conception of “third-world literature” against Socialist Realist doctrines, see: Emily Laskin, “Four Perspectives on the Second World, Tajik Realism, and Soviet Socialism,” paper delivered at the conference Princeton Conjunction VI—Imperial Reverb: Exploring the Postcolonies of Communism, Princeton University, May 13-15, 2016.

<sup>46</sup> Yuri Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism,” *Slavic Review*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (Summer, 1994), pp. 414-52, cit. on 418.

<sup>47</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1993); Terry Martin, Terry, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

<sup>48</sup> Schroeder, “Nationalities and the Soviet Economy,” 44. See also: Ericson, “Soviet Economic Structure and the National Question”; Kalinovsky, “Numbers in Space.”

<sup>49</sup> One may note that Central Asian intellectuals during the perestroika period converged with Latvians, to some degree, in describing center-periphery relations in the USSR as imperial in nature. Yet in more recent decades, such conceptions have been pushed into the background, as history and memory projects have come to represent the Soviet period as one of (albeit constrained) development of national consciousness and social progress, fueled by the Soviet “decolonization” of the subaltern populations of the Russian Empire. See: Artemii Kalinovskii

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[Artemy Kalinovsky], “Prizyvniky sotsializma: tadzhikskaja intelligentsia i dekolonizatsiia posovetski,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 161 (1/2020), 140-156; Sergei Abashin, *Sovetskii kishlak: Mezhdur kolonializmom i modernizatsiei* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2015), 44. More generally on Soviet development in Central Asia, see: Artemy Kalinovsky, *Laboratory of Socialist Development: Cold War Politics and Decolonization in Soviet Tajikistan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

<sup>50</sup> Ivars Ijabs, “The Issue of Compensations in Latvian–Russian Relations,” in *The Geopolitics of History in Latvian-Russian Relations*, edited by Nils Muižnieks (Riga: Academic Press of the University of Latvia, 2011), 176-90.

<sup>51</sup> Northrop’s study of modernization campaigns in Uzbekistan presents a case study of the imbrication of modernization with nigh insoluble questions of cultural imperialism. See his: *Veiled Empire*.

<sup>52</sup> Annus, “The Ghost of Essentialism and the Trap of Binarism,” 603-4.

<sup>53</sup> Muižnieks, “Government Policy and the Russian Minority,” 15.

<sup>54</sup> John Ginkel, “Identity Construction in Latvia’s ‘Singing Revolution’: Why Inter-ethnic Conflict Failed to Occur,” *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 30:3 (2002): 403-33, esp. 422–26. See also Oxana Shevel, “The Politics of Citizenship Policy in New States,” *Comparative Politics* 41:3 (April 2009): 273–91.

<sup>55</sup> See: “History of the legislature,” on site Latvijas Republikas Saeima, [www.saeima.lv/en/about-saeima/history-of-the-legislature](http://www.saeima.lv/en/about-saeima/history-of-the-legislature) (accessed May 5, 2016).

<sup>56</sup> Commercio, *Russian Minority Politics*, 29.

<sup>57</sup> Muižnieks, “Government Policy and the Russian Minority,” 14.

<sup>58</sup> Beissinger, “Rethinking Empire in the Wake of Soviet Collapse,” 17.

<sup>59</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, “Considerations on Imperial Comparisons,” in *Empire Speaks Out: Languages of Rationalization and Self-Description in the Russian Empire*, edited by Ilya Gerasimov, Jan Kusber, and Alexander Semyonov (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 33–55, cit. on 42.

<sup>60</sup> See, for instance, the interview of Ekaterina Kotrikadze with Mārtiņš Staķis, mayor of Riga, originally for TV Rain on August 10, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ym7F3-gDCMk> (accessed September 26, 2022).

<sup>61</sup> Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon, “George Floyd, ‘Brat 2’ and Russian Depictions of African Americans,” *The Moscow Times*, June 17, 2020 (<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/06/17/george-floyd-brat-2-and-russian-depictions-of-african-americans-a70603> (accessed September 11, 2022)); Ilya Budraitskis, “Russia, George Floyd, and the end of the imaginary West,” *OpenDemocracy*, 12 June 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russia-floyd-imaginary-west/> (accessed September 11, 2022).

<sup>62</sup> Chioni Moore, “Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet?” 117.

<sup>63</sup> Zarycki, “Debating Soviet Imperialism in Contemporary Poland,” 197. See also: Uffelmann, “Theory as Memory Practice,” 109-15; Etkind, *Internal Colonization*, 25-6.

<sup>64</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York, Routledge, 1994), 64-65.

<sup>65</sup> Dace Dzenovska, *School of Europeanness: Tolerance and Other Lessons in Political Liberalism in Latvia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2018), 162.

<sup>66</sup> Exceptionally, Nancy Condee has identified the racist foundations of much resistance to postcolonial terms in post-socialist Eastern Europe, with the provocative question, “How white must one be to be occupied?” Spivak, Condee, Ram, and Chernetsky, “Conference Debates,” 830.

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- <sup>67</sup> Étienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene* (London: Verso, 2002), 93.
- <sup>68</sup> Madina Tlostanova, “Postkolonial’nyi udel i dekolonial’nyi vybor: postsotsialisticheskaia mediatsiia,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 161 (1/2020), ??-??.
- <sup>69</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2000), 68.
- <sup>70</sup> Cite various works on the global cold war that set up Rossen and Monica.
- <sup>71</sup> Rossen Djagalov, *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism: Literature and Cinema Between the Second and Third Worlds* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019), 12.
- <sup>72</sup> Djagalov, *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism*, 226.
- <sup>73</sup> Monica Popescu, *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2020), 10-11.
- <sup>74</sup> As Popescu’s discussion of Césaire reminds us, the critique of Soviet internationalism and professed solidarity with decolonizing nations as neocolonial in nature is not especially novel. Nor was it limited historically to Marxist intellectuals such as he. Critique of the USSR for its “imperialism under the banner of socialism” was a staple of official Chinese critiques of Soviet foreign policy following the sino-Soviet split. See: Peter Vamos, “The Soviet Bloc and China’s Global Opening-Up Policy During the Last Years of Mao Zedong,” in James Mark, Artemy M. Kalinovsky, and Steffi Marung, *Alternative Globalizations: Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020), 80-99. On socialist globalizations more generally, see the editor’s fine introduction to this same volume.
- <sup>75</sup> Tlostanova and Mignolo, *Learning to Unlearn*, 224.
- <sup>76</sup> Tlostanova and Mignolo, *Learning to Unlearn*, 64.
- <sup>77</sup> Appadurai, “Beyond Domination”; Táiwò, *Against Decolonisation*.
- <sup>78</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 320.
- <sup>79</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 406.