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## **UKRAINE–RUSSIA RELATIONS: CASE STUDY OR CHALLENGE FOR DECOLONIAL THEORY?**

**Review of: Biedarieva, Svitlana. *Ambicoloniality and War: The Ukrainian-Russian Case*. Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2025.**

The development of postcolonial studies has reached such a potent level as of now, enabling it to answer many difficult questions regarding the relationships between former colonizers and former colonized. At the same time, considerable criticism has been voiced in connection with the postcolonial approach being applied to researching the past and present of Ukraine. Russia's war against Ukraine, in particular its full-scale stage, on the one hand, has reduced some notes of caution regarding the appropriateness of applying postcolonial and decolonial lenses to studying Ukrainian history and contemporary issues, and, on the other hand, raised some methodological questions, challenging some established frameworks. In this context, the release of Svitlana Biedarieva's book is very timely. On the one hand, it clarifies certain issues in the discussion about the colonial status of Ukraine, and, on the other hand, it initiates a completely new discussion – on the concept of ambicoloniality. In my opinion, the dual role of this book is determined by the motives that encouraged the author to write it, their aims, the object of research, and the dynamics of the academic field. In my view, understanding these four points is the key to interpreting the book.

Although the author concludes the book by explaining the motives that prompted her to undertake the writing, it seems important for us to begin with

these motives. As S. Biedarieva points out, “This book was born out of a necessity to deal with trauma—a personal trauma of estrangement from the homeland because of the unjust war ravaging it; a collective trauma of witnessing previously unimaginable atrocities and the deaths of those near and far alike; and a historical trauma of colonial belonging and invisibility, of the denial of agency, and of the lack of presence and subjectivity” (p. 217). According to the author herself, the book does not eliminate these traumas but rather aims to restore justice in what is arguably its most significant contribution – by drawing the attention of international academia to Ukraine as an important object of theoretical analysis. It is worth noting that S. Biedarieva successfully accomplished this task. The aim of the book is “to provide a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of Ukraine’s diverse identities, numerous faces and voices, multiculturalism, and internal hybridity (as opposed to postcolonial hybridity), liberated from the influence of the dominant Russian perspectives” (p. 2). This goal leads to a focus on the identity of contemporary Ukraine, reflected through the analysis of art practices and works against the diachronic prospect of social and political contexts, especially in wartime.

The academic context, or methodological background, of the book requires more clarification. As is commonly known, two theories have been developed around the study of the experience, culture, and social processes in countries with a colonial legacy – postcolonial theory and decolonial theory, which employ slightly different analytical approaches and descriptive frameworks. Some concepts of both theories are able to explain the processes that took place in Ukraine during the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. At the same time, certain fundamental principles of these theories need to be adapted according to the peculiarities of the relations between Ukraine and Russia. But as S. Biedarieva notes, “the notions of the ‘postcolonial’ and the ‘decolonial’ are not interchangeable; rather, they reflect two different stages of liberation from colonial entanglement” (p. 2). And it is precisely this kind of chronotope that she applies to describe the social processes taking place in Ukraine after the collapse of the Soviet Union, distinguishing between the postcolonial and decolonial stages of development. The book seeks to resolve this contradiction by introducing new terminology to describe the specific colonial relations between Ukraine and Russia, as well as new methodological approaches to theorizing their close entanglement within the broader process of dismantling the post-Soviet space.

In outlining the theoretical foundations, S. Biedarieva draws on the works of classical postcolonial and decolonial theorists, while simultaneously engaging in debate with some of them—such as Mignolo—regarding his insufficient understanding of the Ukrainian context. Agreeing with those scholars who argue that the explanatory power of postcolonial theory has become limited, the author proposes a new theoretical framework. This framework encompasses a set of original concepts, developed specifically to explain the relationship between Russia and Ukraine, the specificity of which does not fully fit into the established theoretical models of postcolonial and decolonial studies. Below is a brief outline of these authorial concepts.

● *Ambicolonality*. Firstly, it is a concept of ambicolonality that is echoed in the title of the book. It is established as an alternative to the dichotomy of ‘coloniality/decoloniality’. Ambicolonality entails considering the interaction between the colonizer and the colonized not through the prism of subject–object but rather subject–subject relations, interpreting power as a form of symbolic exchange rooted in the cultural potency of the parties involved and facilitated by their shared border. As the author emphasizes, “The prefix “ambi-” refers to the symmetrical, mirroring processes of entanglement ongoing in the colonized state and its colonizer” (p. 69). In that way, she denies the basics of postcolonial and decolonial theories as she reconstitutes the colonized from an object of power into an active agent within power relations. This agency manifests itself in the symbolic power of the colonized over the colonizer. Within the framework of ambicolonality, the colonizer exerts economic and political influence on the colonized, while the colonized, in turn, exercises symbolic influence over the colonizer—the influence that is revealed in the latter’s fascination with “the symbolic field of the subordinated country and the desire to appropriate it” (p. 71). In other words, Ukraine’s power over Russia lies in Russia’s desire to appropriate Ukraine.

The concept of ambicolonality was designed to interpret the specific nature of the Ukrainian–Russian relationship and to be applicable to other post-imperial contexts in the post-Soviet space. As Svitlana Biedarieva argues, “In the case of Ukraine—and other now-independent countries of Eastern Europe, such as Belarus, the Baltic states, Kazakhstan, or Georgia, among others, the condition of side-by-side coexistence with the more powerful neighbor resulted in a slow hybridization of mutual impacts. This slow fusion formed a much stronger bond between the colonizer and the colonized, including the impossibility of drawing a divisive line within some of the syncretic forma-

tions and the related inability of identifying one side's agency in the production of these hybrid constructions of culture" (p. 70).

Applying this theoretical framework to the analysis of Ukrainian–Russian relations, the author arrives at a rather unexpected conclusion: the current neo-colonial war waged by Russia and Ukraine's anticolonial resistance are causing the collapse of the ambicolonial condition. The object of desire (Ukraine) becomes unattainable for the colonizer (Russia), and the mutual exchange of influences thus becomes impossible. The author expresses the conviction that "Now, in refusing to be this ghost of colonial daydreaming, Ukraine becomes Russia's symbolic colonizer" (p. 166).

● *Synchronic and diachronic colonization.* Referring to Saussure's distinction between synchronic and diachronic linguistic changes, S. Biedarieva suggests applying this typology to the description of types of colonization in order to capture their temporal logic of development. Synchronic colonization entails the rapid extraction of resources or the swift establishment of political and economic dominance over a specific region or population. Therefore, it often denotes the occupation of a territory through a sequence of events unfolding within a relatively brief period of time. Conversely, diachronic colonization describes a long-term process in which control and influence are consolidated progressively. This process may include the steady implementation of colonial policies and practices, the penetration of colonial culture and values, the emergence of creolized and syncretic narratives, the slow transformation of epistemological frameworks, and the sustained suppression of local languages and cultures. Using these terms, the colonization of Ukraine by both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union exemplifies diachronic colonization, which leads to ambicoloniality of relationships between these countries. Russia's current invasion of Ukraine is can be seen as a break with diachronic colonization and a transition to its synchronic model, thus initiating the disintegration of the ambicoloniality.

● *Swift and slow decolonization.* Slow decolonization can be understood as a gradual postcolonial transformation characterized by the recombination of historically intertwined narratives. In contrast, "swift" decolonization entails a decisive rupture with the colonial entanglement of contested history and their replacement by new forms of epistemological production. At times, this "swift" decolonization manifests itself through acts of anti-colonial resistance. The author traces the process of decolonization in Ukraine from the Euro-maidan and outlines the transition from slow to swift decolonization. In par-

ticular, the full-scale invasion has ultimately shifted all processes into the mode of swift decolonization. The author emphasises, “In response to the synchronic neocolonial attempts, the decolonization process can be only “swift,” induced by decolonial processes that resemble the radicalism of the anti-colonial struggle (in parallel with the actual armed resistance to Russia’s violent invasion)” (p. 73).

● *Anachronic colonialism and anachronic anti-colonialism.* The scholar refers to contemporary attempts to restore colonial relations and neocolonial ambitions – emerging in a world where empires as political entities no longer exist and all former colonies hold the status of independent states – as “anachronic colonialism”. Accordingly, Ukraine’s anti-colonial resistance, which is both natural and justified within the global postcolonial stage of development, appears as an anachronic phenomenon. At the same time, however, it constitutes an integral element of Ukraine’s decolonial condition. The immediate need for Ukraine’s anti-colonial struggle – as the only means to counter violence – has generated corresponding anti-colonial manifestations in culture. This situation, defined by the tension between an anti-colonial stance and a decolonial situation, is described by the author as *anachronic* in relation to the conventional logic of how formerly subordinate nations evolve after liberation from colonial rule (pp. 45–46).

Evidently, another concept – the term *recurrent colonialism* – may be seen as a synonym for this phenomenon. According to the author, this form of coloniality tends to occur more frequently in countries sharing a common border than in those whose colonial relations developed across distances. This, she argues, explains the recurrence of anti-colonial discourse in Ukrainian culture and determines the specificity of Ukrainian coloniality as a condition that is recurrently postcolonial (p. 47).

● *Syncretic polarization.* This process occurs when two elements, once regarded as similar, become divided by a newly constructed boundary that highlights their differences. Phenomena that had previously been perceived as “neutral” variations are, through syncretic polarization, reoriented into binary oppositions, marked as either “plus” or “minus.” As a result of this syncretic polarization, Ukraine’s decolonial processes assume the features of anti-colonial resistance. The scholar defines two stages of syncretic polarization: radical (anti-colonial) and stabilizing (decolonial). In the context of war, the aim of syncretic polarization is to accentuate differences while leaving similarities in a grey zone. As the author notes, syncretic polarization serves

as an instrument of self-decolonization. One of its most striking manifestations is the switching to the Ukrainian language. Since S. Biedarieva regards the Russian language primarily as a channel of colonial influence, the switching to Ukrainian is interpreted both as an act of self-decolonization and as a collective turn toward the homogenization of the informational sphere – an integral part of the broader, intensive anti-colonial process. Thus, language becomes, on the one hand, the principal domain of syncretic polarization and, on the other, a simultaneous instrument of both decolonization and anti-colonial resistance.

In addition to the concepts specifically designed for the proposed theory, S. Biedarieva also modifies several well-known notions, adapting them to the theoretical framework of ambicoloniality and to the interpretation of the processes taking place in Ukraine and Russia, as well as their mutual relations: abyssal line (from Boaventura de Sousa Santos), zero-point epistemology/knowledge (from Walter Mignolo), necropolitics (from Achille Mbembe), and morphology of domination (from Sheldon Pollock). It is worth noting that the book's terminology is not imposed on the reader all at once but rather introduced gradually, step by step, so that each new chapter establishes connections between previously presented concepts, forming a coherent system for understanding complex processes.

Beyond its methodological dimension, the book also clearly reveals a narrative aspect that can be described as the story of Ukraine's transition from a postcolonial condition to a decolonial situation. As the analysis of social processes and artistic practices demonstrates, this transition is not instantaneous, but irreversible. It begins with Euromaidan and culminates in the full-scale invasion, marking the start of an accelerated decolonization movement. According to the author, the goal of decolonization in Ukraine is to replace postcolonial ambivalence with an internal hybridity, understood as the unity of regional and ethnonational cultural features. The tendencies observed in Ukraine's artistic life suggest that the country is successfully moving in this direction, a process further facilitated by the internal displacement of many citizens. Ultimately, the complete decolonization of Ukraine also signifies its liberation from the web of ambicolonial relations.

These outcomes are also grounded in the author's reflections on key events in Ukraine that have already become part of history. Among them are: the celebration of the anniversary of the Baptism of Rus' in Kyiv in 2023; the "yolka" – the unfinished New Year's tree on Independence Square in 2014 that

became a symbol of Euromaidan; the destruction of the Hryhorii Skovoroda Museum by a direct Russian missile strike in May 2022; the shooting of civilians in Irpin during their evacuation; and the explosion of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant in June 2023.

Artistic interpretations of these events – such as Anna Zvyagintseva’s photo series *from the Event (Gap)* (2014), depicting paving stones dismantled during Euromaidan; Zhanna Kadyrova’s installation *Palianytsia* (2022); Yevgenia Belorusets’s *The War Diary* (2022) and her photo series documenting the first 42 days of the invasion in Kyiv between February and April 2022; and the opera *Gaia-24: Opera del Mondo* (2024) by Roman Grygoriv and Illia Razumeiko, which focuses on the devastating consequences of the destruction of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant by the Russian army. Together, these works illustrate how contemporary Ukrainian artists reflect how Ukraine resists Russia’s neocolonial attempts while simultaneously enacting a decolonial turn. At the same time, the analysis of these artistic practices and works contributes to the broader exploration of the epistemology of violence.

Another advantage of the reviewed book lies in the author’s explanation of how, within the Ukrainian context, the epistemology of the oppressed coexists with the aspiration toward modernity and the orientation toward European values. On the one hand, this presents unique challenges for the application of decolonial theory, and on the other, constitute a unique case study for rethinking and expanding the concept of decoloniality.

While acknowledging the considerable merits of the reviewed work and its substantial contribution to the study of colonial relations in general – and to the inclusion of the Ukrainian case into this theoretical paradigm in particular – it is nevertheless important to highlight several contentious points whose critical discussion may contribute to development of the theory proposed in the book.

The first of these is related to the interpretation of the concept of ambicoloniality. The author repeatedly emphasizes that “the ambicoloniality of Russia vis-à-vis Ukraine manifested in the visual culture and literature of both countries” (p. 74) and that “cultural proximity and the continuous exchange of influences between Ukraine and Russia across their shared border” (p. 88) are defining features of their relationship. She even employs the notion of *fusion* when discussing the interaction of the two cultural spheres. The book provides numerous examples of Ukrainian social processes, cultural products, and practices characterized by hybridity resulting from Russian influence, for instance,

*surzhyk*, political movements advocating two state languages, the Ukrainian Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, and artworks such as David Burliuk's *Man with Two Faces* (1912), Oleh Tistol's *Reunification* (1988), etc. At the same time, we are not offered corresponding examples hybridity within Russian cultural space shaped by Ukraine's influence. This imbalance, if addressed, could further strengthen the conceptual foundation of the proposed theory of ambicoloniality.

Throughout the text, there are two occurrences where S. Biedarieva offers an illustration of the embodiment of ambicolonialism in the Russian cultural field. The first is Joseph Brodsky's poem 'On the Independence of Ukraine'. I fully agree with the author that it is an eloquent illustration of the Russian imperialist vision of Ukraine, however, it appears somewhat overrated to me to consider it a manifestation of the hybridity of Russian culture due to the influence of Ukrainian culture. The second example is the visit of St. Petersburg artist Piotr Pavlensky and his speech in front of Euromaidan, which S. Biedarieva interprets as "a manifestation of ambicolonial relations in the form of an idea of exchange of revolutionary impulses" (p. 128). Yet, again, if we are talking about exchange and penetration at the societal level, this is a penetration of Russian impulses into the Ukrainian sociocultural field. The fact that individual Russian citizens were inspired by Euromaidan provides little basis for extrapolating this to Russian society as a whole or for suggesting the emergence of broader movements capable of reshaping its sociocultural landscape.

The book devotes considerable attention to Russia's appropriation of Ukrainian artists (e.g., Skovoroda, Gogol, Kuindzhi, Malevich) within its exploration of the cultural interpenetration characteristic of ambicolonial relations. In my opinion, however, appropriation should not be equated with mutual exchange, since in such cases, the movement of cultural products and their creators occur in only one direction – from the colonized culture toward the imperial one. The presentation of Ukrainian artists as Russian, both within the empire and to the outside world, may therefore be interpreted not as a *fusion* leading to the hybridization of the colonizer's culture, but rather as the incorporation of Ukrainian elements into Russian culture. It seems that an analysis of how the legacy of these appropriated artists influenced the subsequent development of Russian artistic practices and cultural production would have strengthened the author's argument.

Moreover, the appropriation of Ukrainian artists entails the deprivation of Ukraine's cultural agency, rendering it invisible and voiceless on the global



stage. This brings us to another problematic aspect of the suggested theory – namely, the treatment of Ukraine as Russia's *inner West*, its more culturally developed component. While this idea is not new and has often been cited by critics opposing the application of postcolonial and decolonial methodologies to the study of Ukrainian–Russian relations – since, in classical cases, the more culturally developed country colonizes the less developed one – the author uses it as an argument in favor of interpreting these relations as ambicolonial. According to this reasoning, a less culturally developed country colonizes a more developed one, thereby colonizing itself internally. However, in my opinion, for this dynamic to function as a mechanism of self-colonization, Russia would have to acknowledge Ukraine's cultural superiority – something for which there is no evidence throughout the three-century history of their relationship. On the contrary, there exists an abundance of literature, often presented by Russian scholars as academic research, asserting Ukraine's supposed civilizational inferiority and cultural backwardness. A telling selection of such statements can be found in M. Nayem's recent work (Nayem, 2025, pp. 85-89). Apropos of this, among other aspects, she highlights the construction of Ukrainians' 'asianness' in 19th-century Russian ethnographic discourse (Nayem, 2025, pp. 99-103). In the absence of any representation within the imperial sociocultural sphere that portrays the conquered nation as culturally superior, the thesis of Ukraine's "inner West" reads more as a form of self-consolation on the part of the colonized.

Another concern of mine is related to clarifying the concept of ambicoloniality. Given that the concept of ambicoloniality proposed in the book presupposes an examination of the mutual influences between the parties engaged in colonial relations, it would have been logical to include a more detailed analysis of recent cultural and social processes within Russia. Chapter 5 addresses this issue by examining the implications of the full-scale invasion for Russia itself and its potential internal transformations; however, these observations remain preliminary, suggesting directions for future research rather than a fully developed analysis.

Another aspect of the book that I cannot fail to mention is the underestimation of the role of language in colonial relationships. In S. Biedarieva's theory, language is presented merely as a means of communication, while its symbolic and identificational functions appear to be neutralized. In particular, the author argues, "While ambicoloniality relies on linguistic channels to make colonial intentions operative, language per se cannot be included

among the tools of colonial domination” (p. 84). This interpretation is difficult to accept, since both lived experience and numerous scholarly studies – of which there are too many to enumerate here – demonstrate that language, and specifically the Russian language, has been and remains one of the principal instruments for constructing a sense of inferiority and for establishing and maintaining social and cultural hierarchies. For instance, Ye. Kuznietsova has recently provided an insightful account of the mechanisms and tools employed by the Soviet Union to eradicate minority languages, elevate Russian above others, and consolidate its dominance across all aspects of social life (Kuznietsova, 2023). According to Biedarieva, the growing use of Ukrainian in recent years has been driven by the need to resist and protect against disinformation disseminated by Russian media channels – an explanation that lies within the field of rational reasoning. Yet, at the beginning of the full-scale invasion, for most people the decision to switch to Ukrainian was motivated by emotional factors, as evidenced by a growing body of recent research (Renchka, 2023; Kiss, 2024; Kulyk, 2024; Kudriavtseva, 2025; Sokolova, 2025).

Despite the reservations and certain disagreement with some of the conceptual aspects, I regard the publication of this book – especially in English – as an important event for both global academic community and Ukrainian scientific thought. Firstly, it does not only speak about Ukraine in a Ukrainian voice to the world, but also weaves the country’s history into the broader narrative of colonial relations. The book does more than simply question the declining explanatory power of decolonial theories in relation to Ukraine and the need for a modified methodology; it offers a new analytical framework. Secondly, addressing Ukrainian readers as well, the book offers answers to a number of difficult and often sensitive questions, presenting certain phenomena from a new perspective while also provoking further reflection. This, ultimately, convinces us that the book should be translated into Ukrainian as soon as possible – so that the discussion may continue and, perhaps, lead to the emergence of truth.

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