

CRITICAL FORUM: EMPIRE AND DECOLONIZATION

Emptiness against Decolonization: Reflections from the Imperial Fault Line in Eastern Latvia

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Abstract

With the Russo-Ukrainian war, the language of decolonization has become central to scholarship on eastern Europe. Yet, residents of Lielciems in eastern Latvia find it hard to orient in a political field defined by the binary of colonized and the colonizer. They live in a place that is losing its constitutive elements due to a variety of other “de” processes—deindustrialization, depopulation, and devaluation. They live amidst absences rather than unwanted presences. They wish for someone—the Chinese, NATO, or the European Union—to establish some permanent structure that could bring back life to their place of residence. Otherwise, the place is doomed to empty out completely, and their children are destined to permanently settle abroad. Based on an ethnography of an emptying town, this article outlines the limits of the politics of decolonization and argues for the use of the lens of empire for analyzing the intersecting forms of power that shape Lielciems, Latvia and eastern Europe today.

With the Russo-Ukrainian war, the language of decolonization has become increasingly common in the former socialist world, especially its academic niche. In Latvia, where I have been conducting research for more than twenty years, “decolonization” was not the term widely used in public and political space for dealing with the past before the war. Instead, Latvian publics, politicians, and academics talked about the legacies of Soviet occupation.¹ “Colonization” did not sit well with many Latvians because of the term’s association with western rule over non-western subjects. The Soviet Union was not quite western, and Latvians were not quite non-western, though they were not quite western either.² For much of the post-Soviet period, the language of decolonization was deployed by the far right and was on the brink of being deemed unlawful because it was usually mobilized to argue for the removal of Russians and other Soviet subjects considered to be the foot soldiers

¹ The Estonian scholar Epp Annus has suggested that “occupation” is not the proper term for characterizing the whole Soviet period in the Baltics. She argues that Soviet presence in the Baltics was initially a military occupation, but then came to resemble colonial rule because it lasted so long and because modes of resistance that characterized the early Soviet period, such as guerrilla warfare by units known as forest brothers, “turned into a hybrid co-existence with the new power.” Epp Annus, “The Problem of Soviet Colonialism in the Baltics,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 43, no. 1 (March 2012): 21–45. See also Elena Zubkova, *Pribaltika i kreml’, 1940–1953* (Moscow, 2008) and Kevin Platt, *Border Conditions: Russian Speaking Latvians between World Orders* (Ithaca, 2024), 45–93.

² Annus, “The Problem of Soviet Colonialism in the Baltics”; Dace Dzenovska, *School of Europeanness: Tolerance and Others Lessons in Political Liberalism in Latvia* (Ithaca, 2018).

of occupation.³ Today, reservations about the language of decolonization have dissipated, and it is used in the Baltics, Ukraine, Central Asia, and across eastern Europe to criticize past and present influences of Russia, the presence of the Russian language in public space, and the presence of Russians themselves, regardless of whether they are considered “bad,” that is, supportive of Vladimir Putin, or “good,” that is anti-Putin. On occasion, it is used in academic circles to point to the colonial complicity that comes with being and becoming European, but this use is currently overshadowed by the Russo-Ukrainian war.⁴

Decolonization, a term previously associated with resisting European or western domination in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, has become pluralized, directed at different powers and wielded by different subjects. Yet this pluralized field shares the premise that, after the end of formal foreign rule or in its absence, many people and places continue to be affected by legacies or forms of domination that must be undone. Within this broader frame of decolonization, domination mostly manifests as oppressed or erased identities, contaminated epistemologies, inauthentic or compromised institutions, misguided aspirations, and other distortions of one’s sense of self, forms of life, ways of knowing, and one’s place in the world. Less common, but not unprecedented, is the call to expel populations that are associated with colonial powers. Such is the case in South Africa, where some argue for the expropriation of land belonging to white South Africans, and in Latvia, where citizens of Russia with permanent residence status in Latvia who have not demonstrated the required level of Latvian language skills may become—and informal reports suggest that some already are—subject to deportation.

Anti-imperialism as a frequent companion to decolonization also targets domination, but it tends to represent domination as the economic or political influence of an empire or hegemon in the domestic affairs of another state or people.⁵ In contrast to decolonization, anti-imperialism is not easily pluralized even though imperial power projection has become more pluralized than it was during the Cold War. This is because anti-imperialism pertains to actual or feared forms of domination in the present rather than everlasting legacies of past oppression. Moreover, resisting one empire or imperial power often amounts to aligning with another, sometimes inadvertently so. Therefore, embracing a radical anti-imperialist stance, one that would recognize the imperial nature even of some anti-imperial alliances, would leave many small states and other self-described oppressed subjects without much maneuvering power. For most small states, but also other actors such as ethnic groups, acting in a relational imperial landscape, that is, in a world shaped by multiple and overlapping imperial forces, means referring to some of these influences as imperial, meaning unwanted, and others as non-imperial, or wanted. Put another way, this stance requires not recognizing the imperial nature of the desired ally. Moreover, as many scholars have

³ See the newspaper “DDD” (decolonization, deoccupation, debolshevization) associated with the radical right wing Latvian National Front: <https://fronte.lv/> (accessed January 6, 2025). Calling for the removal of a whole group could be perceived as “incitement to national hatred,” which is a criminal offense.

⁴ See the recent webinar of the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies: <https://aabs-balticstudies.org/2023/09/13/webinar-decolonizing-effects-of-the-war-in-ukraine-baltic-and-ukrainian-perspectives/> (accessed January 6, 2025). See also the theme of the 2023 meetings of the Association for Slavic, Eastern European and Eurasian Studies: <https://www.aseees.org/convention/2023-aseees-convention-theme#:~:text=Theme%3A%20Decolonization&text=The%202023%20ASEEES%20convention%20invites,historical%20force%20within%20the%20region> (accessed January 6, 2025). There have been multiple forums on one or both aspects of decolonization since the start of the 2022 war (the *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, *American Ethnologist*), but there have also been forums following the 2014 phase of the war (*Slavic Review*, no. 4 (Winter 2015)). For a critical discussion, see Dzenovska, *School of Europeanness*.

⁵ For example, Ilya Matveev, “Between Political and Economic Imperialism: Russia’s Shifting Global Strategy,” *Journal of Labour and Society* 25, no. 2 (November 2021): 198–219; Michael Mann, *Incoherent Empire* (London, 2003); Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities of Our Times* (Duke, 2016).

noted, empire is largely a bad word today, and no state would willingly call itself—or its valued ally—an empire.⁶ It seems sensible, then, to distinguish between *unwanted presences and forms of domination* and *desirable presences and forms of subordination*. Today's decolonization and anti-imperialism efforts in Latvia target the unwanted forms of domination and do not think of the desirable forms of subordination as domination. Instead, the latter are thought to be the result of the sovereign decision to make the alliances one wishes to make.⁷

Historically, decolonization and anti-imperialism have been both political tools directed against forms of domination and analytical lenses for understanding them. In the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the analytical dimension has been almost entirely subsumed by politics, thus obscuring the material, social, and political realities of the relational imperial landscape in which multiple political actors and alliances strive to project, consolidate, or resist power. It is imperative, however, to renew the effort of analyzing the relational imperial landscape within which a variety of subjects—empires, nation-states, supra-national entities, nations without states, and people defined otherwise—think and act, the repertoires of power and contention they deploy, and the presents and futures they make possible.⁸ This means treating “empire” not as a derogatory term, but as a descriptive marker and analytical device.⁹ This is difficult, however, after a whole century of relentless “nationalization of modernity.”¹⁰ Today's decolonization in Latvia, but also elsewhere in eastern Europe, is part of this nationalizing trajectory, insofar as it seeks to replace imperial legacies with national form and content. The decolonized subject is imagined as a national subject. However, such a stance does not recognize nationalism's entanglement with empire. The national subject is not only an anti-imperial subject, but can itself be constituted through empire.¹¹ In other words, in many cases, decolonization as nationalization exhibits surprising attachment to empire.¹² It might even become an imperial power device that obscures actually existing configurations of power.

⁶ Krishan Kumar, *Visions of Empire: How Five Imperial Regimes Shaped the World* (Princeton, 2017): 3; John Agnew, “Taking Back Control? The Myth of Territorial Sovereignty and the Brexit Fiasco,” *Territory, Politics, Governance* 8, no. 2 (April 2020): 259–72.

⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Basingstoke, Eng., 1998): 271–313; Madina Tlostanova, “Can the Post-Soviet Think? On Coloniality of Knowledge, External Imperial and Double Colonial Difference,” *Intersections* 1, no. 2 (2015): 38–58; Dace Dzenovska, “The Clash of Sovereignties: The Latvian Subject and its Russian Imperialism,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 12, no. 3 (Winter 2022): 651–658.

⁸ On repertoires of contention, see Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986). On imperial repertoires of power, see Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, 2010).

⁹ For examples, see Pieter Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge, Mass., 2016), and Jan Zielonka, *Europe as Empire: Nature of the Enlarged European Union* (Oxford, Eng., 2006). See also Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*.

¹⁰ Ilya Gerasimov, Sergey Glebov, Alexander Kaplunovskii, Maria Mogilner and Alexander Semyonov, “In Search of a New Imperial History,” *Ab Imperio*, no. 1 (2005): 33–56.

¹¹ Adom Getachew in *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, 2019) argues that postcolonial nationalism in Africa had a strong worldmaking dimension, that is, it was anti-imperial in the sense that African intellectuals sought alliances to form an international anti-imperial coalition. Many other nationalisms are indeed anti-imperial in the sense that they emerge in opposition to empire. But this does not exclude the fact that many are also formed via imperial alliances and by mimicking political forms supported by empire (for the Latvian case, see Ivars Ijabs “Another Baltic Postcolonialism: Young Latvians, Baltic Germans, and the Emergence of the Latvian National Movement,” *Nationalities Papers* 42, no. 1 [2014]: 88–107). Moreover, many become perpetrators of violence at the moment their anti-imperial stance is institutionalized in the form of a nation-state.

¹² Agnew, “Tacking Back Control?,” 262.

Empires are notoriously difficult to define.¹³ Krishan Kumar goes as far as to suggest that empires and nation-states are “alternative political projects, both of which are available for elites to pursue depending on the circumstances of the moment.”¹⁴ Giovanni Arrighi similarly writes that it is not states that pursue imperial projects, but rather “government-business complexes.”¹⁵ And yet, it is still common to think of empires as states and some states as being more empire-like than others. Few will deny that states like the United States, Russia, and China act like empires and are, in fact, informal empires, empire-like states, or imperial formations.¹⁶ What makes them more empire-like than other states is their ability not only to extend their influence beyond their borders, which most states try to do to some extent, but to shape the world order, whether through military, political, or economic means.¹⁷ However, most concepts and entities are best defined at the boundaries.¹⁸ In what follows, therefore, I reflect on the limits of the politics of decolonization and the possible uses of the lens of empire from a deindustrialized settlement in Latgale, a region in eastern Latvia near the border with Russia, where people describe their worlds as emptying.¹⁹ In the 1970s, people arrived in this settlement—I’ll call it Lielciems—from all over the Soviet Union to work in the newly built clay drainpipe factory. At the end of the Soviet period in 1989, 1469 people lived in Lielciems. Today there are 222 on the books. Current-day residents cite what must have been official Soviet statistics that eighteen nationalities were represented in Lielciems in the 1970s and 1980s. Life was bubbling, and the only way was up.²⁰ But then the factory closed in 1992. The Soviet Union collapsed, and the factory lost its markets and fuel supply. Nothing of equal magnitude replaced the productive unit that had held the place together, and people started leaving. Five of the seven multi-story apartment buildings were shut or dismantled brick by brick, while two remain standing and are partly occupied. With no apartments privatized, the once-coveted and now decaying apartments constitute the district’s housing stock. As a result, Lielciems is turning into a dumping site for the district’s impoverished and indebted who are settled alongside the former factory workers, some equally impoverished and others living on remittances from their children who work abroad.

¹³ Dominic Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals* (New Haven, 2000); Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*; Kumar, *Visions of Empire*; Mann, *Incoherent Empire*, 2005; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000); Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham, NC, 2016); Carol McGranahan and John F. Collins, eds., *Ethnographies of U.S. Empire* (Durham, NC, 2018); David Vine, *The United States of War: A Global History of America’s Endless Conflicts from Columbus to the Islamic State* (Oakland, CA, 2020).

¹⁴ Kumar, *Visions of Empire*, 119.

¹⁵ Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-First Century* (London, 2007): 253.

¹⁶ On informal empires, see John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, “The Imperialism of Free Trade,” *The Economic History Review* 6, no. 1 (1953): 1–15; on empire-like states, Kumar, *Visions of Empire*; on imperial formations, McGranahan and Collins, *Ethnographies of U.S. Empire*, and Carol McGranahan and Peter Perdue, eds., *Imperial Formations* (Santa Fe, 2007).

¹⁷ Mann, *Incoherent Empire*; Hardt & Negri, *Empire*; David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford, Eng., 2003); Matveev, “Between Political and Economic Imperialism”; Gallagher and Robinson, “The Imperialism of Free Trade”; Vine, *The United States of War*; Michael Ignatieff, *Empire Lite: Nation-Building in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan* (New York, 2003).

¹⁸ Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley, 1991); Frederick Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference. Results of a symposium held at the University of Bergen, 23rd to 26th February 1967* (Bergen, Germany, 1969).

¹⁹ Dace Dzenovska, “Emptiness: Capitalism Without People in the Latvian Countryside,” *American Ethnologist* 47, no. 1 (February 2020): 10–26.

²⁰ For a more thorough analysis of the place-based phenomenon of emptying, see Dzenovska, “Emptiness: Capitalism Without People in the Latvian Countryside” (2020), and Dace Dzenovska, Volodymyr Artiuhk, and Dominic Martin, “Between Loss and Opportunity: The Fate of Place After Postsocialism,” *Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*, no. 96 (2023): 1–15.

The remaining residents still trace their roots to various parts of the former Soviet Union, from Siberia and Moldova to Ukraine and Karelia. The national frame is not available to many because they are Latvia's "non-citizens" (individuals who could not or would not naturalize after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and therefore hold social but not political rights).²¹ Most speak Russian at home and in public. The Latvian-speaking residents do not mind switching back and forth between Latgalian, Latvian, and Russian, depending on whom they are talking to.²² Moreover, like the Italian *dietristas*, described by Wolfgang Streeck, most of the Lielciems residents read everything for its double bottom, asking what it really means when commentators and politicians from either side of the Russia-Latvia frontier have something to say.²³ Most of them refuse to articulate positive identifications as pro-Latvian, pro-Ukrainian, pro-Russian or otherwise, instead preferring to pose pregnant questions ("don't you think they will abandon us here, if something happens?") or make skeptical or cynical statements ("now you see why they let everything fall into ruination; they were preparing this place to become a militarized no-man's land"). People refer to political power as "they" without specifying who the "they" are, thus lumping together all of those who have the power to shape their lives. Indeed, most residents—citizens, and non-citizens alike—are resentful of Latvian urban and national elites. The residents of Lielciems are also suspicious of Russian official discourse, though some, on occasion, state or imply that not everything Putin says is wrong. Most importantly, however, they reject the sorting that the Latvian national state demands of them, that is, to differentiate between loyal national subjects and agents of the former empire in their midst. The residents of Lielciems are difficult to decolonize; their lives are too entangled. They have forged a unique form of sociality that they try to keep up at the same time as they complain that it's long gone. They practice a particular kind of "postcolonial estrangement" by disengaging from situations they cannot control and rejecting forms of subjectivity and agency imposed from the outside.²⁴

Lielciems is important for another reason. For the last thirty years, ever since the town-forming factory closed, Lielciems has experienced a variety of "de-processes"—deindustrialization, depopulation, and perhaps even demodernization.²⁵ Instead of unwanted presences (if one brackets, for the time being, the fact that the entire settlement is an unwanted presence from the perspective of the Latvian national public insofar as it is a manifestation of the Soviet industrialization and Russification policy), the place has been characterized by absences—of people that should be there but are not, of a school that should be used but is not, of residential buildings that should be inhabited but are not, of the post office that was there but is no longer, and so forth.²⁶ People go on with life, forge new practices and relations, but they overwhelmingly live in a material reality and frame of meaning of their own making, that of absences. When I was moving out of

²¹ Platt, *Border Conditions*; Dzenovska, *School of Europeanness*.

²² Latgalian is the language spoken in eastern Latvia. It is considered to be a dialect of Latvian. See Vineta Vilcāne, "Latgalian: How the Language of Eastern Latvia is Being Revitalized," *Deep Baltic*, May 21, 2021, at <https://deepbaltic.com/2021/05/10/latgalian-how-the-language-of-eastern-latvia-is-being-revitalised/> (accessed January 6, 2025).

²³ Wolfgang Streeck, "A Bipolar Order?" *New Left Review's Sidecar*, May 1, 2023, at <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/a-bipolar-order> (accessed January 6, 2025).

²⁴ On postcolonial estrangement, see Sergei Oushakine, "Postcolonial Estrangements: Claiming a Space Between Hitler and Stalin," In *Rites of Place: Public Commemoration in Russia and Eastern Europe*, eds. Julie Buckler and Emily Johnson (Evanston, IL, 2013): 285–313.

²⁵ On demodernization, see Mikhail Minakov, Mikhail and Yakov Rabkin, eds., *Demodernization: A Future in the Past* (Stuttgart, 2018).

²⁶ On a widely accepted interpretation of Soviet industrialization in Latvia, see Ruta Pazdere and Andrejs Cīrulis, eds., *Latvijas rūpniecība pirms un pēc neatkarības atgūšanas* (Riga, 2015).

my apartment at the end of fieldwork in August 2023, the municipal secretary—a Latgalian and a citizen—asked me to sign a petition against the closing of the maternity ward in the next town’s hospital. “Are we supposed to give birth in the fields, like in the old days?” she asked.

What does decolonization as the removal of unwanted presences and influences look like in a place that is characterized by absences? What does it look like in a place where residents have experienced the retreat of the social and modernizing Soviet state and the arrival of the neoliberal and national Latvian state as abandonment? In other words, what does it mean when decolonial efforts are directed eastward, while devaluation and dispossession is associated with becoming western? Which actors are to be thought of as colonial and imperial, or, to quote Ilya Budraitskis, “who is to decolonize whom and from what?”²⁷

Waiting for Capital

Since the 1990s, Latgale has lost more than one third of its population. This is the combined effect of the specificity of “postsocialist transition” in Latvia (deindustrialization, privatization, (neo)liberalization, and Latvianization), the spatial division of labor within the European Union (labor moving from east to west and not much capital moving the other way), specific events (the 2008 financial crisis), and the perpetual reproduction of Latgale as a laggard region (for example, if Latvia has lost about 30% of the population since 1990, Latgale has lost over 40%).²⁸ In the 2010s when I began research there, nobody voiced concerns about Russian imperialism, but about schools that were closing, hospitals and post offices that were “optimizing services,” buses that came once a day, buildings that were abandoned, and social networks that had spread thin. Capitalist relations had taken hold—some people had established small businesses, a few people had become successful mid-sized farmers, and many people transported cheap goods (fuel and cigarettes) from the Russian side of the border to sell on the Latvian side of the border. However, no large-scale labor-intensive enterprises had replaced the socialist farms and factories. Small parcels of agricultural land that had been returned to their pre-Soviet owners or their descendants were being bought up by land speculators and sold to Danish investors (via joint venture companies due to a transitional ban on land purchase that was still in force in 2010), and forested areas were being bought up by Swedish forestry companies.²⁹ Many working-age people were migrating to the UK, Ireland, and later to Germany and Norway.

Those who stayed muddled through by assembling livelihoods from a variety of sources, including a few municipal positions, some shops, some farming and tourism, income from berry picking or seasonal labor, social support, and meagre pensions. The Border Guard was a stable source of employment, but many of the young men and women that took it up worked there for a short time before leaving for work abroad. In the summer of 2023, a staff member of the Border Guard College told me that they had trouble recruiting students because it no longer made sense for young people to live in Latgale due to the closure of schools and hospitals. If some ten years ago young people were applying because they

²⁷ Ilya Budraitskis, “Kakaia dekolonizatsiia nam nuzhna?” *Doxa*, January 26, 2023, at <https://doxa.team/articles/decolonise-budraitskis> (accessed January 6, 2025).

²⁸ Dace Dzenovska, ““Atpalīcība” un Latvijas valsts: Latgolys vaicuojums,” *Satori*, November 1, 2023, at <https://satori.lv/article/atpaliciba-un-latvijas-valsts-latgolys-vaicuojums> (accessed January 9, 2025). For population statistics, see: <https://stat.gov.lv/lv/statistikas-temas/iedzivotaji/iedzivotaju-skaitis/247-iedzivotaju-skaitis-un-ta-izmainas>

²⁹ Dace Dzenovska, “Good Enough Sovereignty, or on Land as Property and Territory in Latvia,” *History and Anthropology* 35, no. 3 (October 2022): 415–33, at <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2022.2139253> (accessed January 9, 2025).

wanted to continue living in the area and working for the Border Guard because it ensured a job close to home, it is no longer the case today. In many places, uninhabited houses line the roadsides. Their owners are either working abroad and keep their inherited properties for a rainy day or for nostalgic reasons, or they have sold the land to farmers who have not yet taken the buildings down (local farmers, for example, are reluctant to do so due to sentimental attachment to the landscape).

In the 2010s, quite a few people in Latgale, but also in other parts of Latvia, talked about how the Danes were taking over “our land,” thus articulating concerns about uneven access to capital in the language of nationalism. Nobody thought that the Danes or Swedes had any sinister plans to extend territorial rule to Latvia, but a good many people suspected that large-scale land ownership increases the power of capital in decision-making. Moreover, the rural residents thought that northern Europeans with more capital were actively encouraged to extract value from Latvia and other places in eastern Europe, leaving behind polluted fields, killed bees, stripped forests, and financial losses (the latter referring to Scandinavian bank involvement in perpetuating the financial crisis, or “Europeanizing Latvia,” depending on the perspective).³⁰ In the 2010s, most everyone in the Latvian countryside (and also some parliamentary deputies) believed that the Danish state was breaking EU law by paying extra subsidies to Danish farmers to take their business abroad. From what I was able to establish, the Danish state had offered tax relief to Danish farmers if they invested abroad, but that only applied during the period prior to Latvia’s accession to the EU. After that, no additional state support or incentive was provided. Instead, it was Scandinavian banks that dominated the banking sector in Latvia and encouraged Danish farmers to mobilize the stagnant capital that they had accumulated at home by taking it to Latvia and elsewhere in eastern Europe. The same banks pushed credit for Latvian clients, which created a rather large segment of indebted population susceptible to the financial crisis that hit in 2008.³¹

At the height of the financial crisis, some talk of “Swedish times” (*zviēdru laiki*) surfaced, thus making references to late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries when Karl XII (who was later defeated by Peter I) ruled Livonia. The term—*zviēdru laiki*—that used to be positive or neutral was now being used to indicate unwanted foreign domination.³² The crisis had reshaped established historical narratives, reordering and reevaluating episodes of domination in the process of articulating a critique of the present.³³ And although no consistent critique of the financial crisis was formulated at that time, there was a sense that the arrival of capital was connected to imperial forms of power that the locals could not affect. And thus *zviēdru laiki* temporarily took their place next to the Soviet occupation and the “700 years of German yoke,” which referred to the Baltic German nobility that mediated Russian—but not Soviet—imperial rule in the Baltic provinces (the Polish nobility that ruled in Latgale which was part of Vitebsk province has not become a reference in Latvian public discourse). Indeed, the arrival of Danish capital very much resembled the spatial fix that characterizes David Harvey’s “new imperialism,” whereby the crisis of overaccumulation of capital (Danish farmers’ money in Danish banks) is resolved by extending capital across

³⁰ On Scandinavian banks as agents of Europeanization, see Kārlis Bukovskis, “Europeanization by Foreign Banks: Latvia from 1994 to 2005,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 54, no. 3 (2023): 491–512.

³¹ For critical analysis of how Latvia handled the financial crisis, see Jeffrey Sommers and Charles Woolfson, eds., *The Contradictions of Austerity: The Socio-economic Costs of the Neoliberal Baltic Model* (London, 2014); Jeffrey Sommers and Michael Hudson, “Latvia’s Fake Economic Model,” *Counterpunch*, June 25, 2012, at <https://www.counterpunch.org/2012/06/25/latvias-fake-economic-model/> (accessed January 9, 2025).

³² For critique, see Gvido Straube and Māris Zanders, *Labie zviēdru laiki: Vai tiešām?* (Rīga, 2021).

³³ Daniel M. Knight and Charles Stewart, “Ethnographies of Austerity: Temporality, Crisis, and Affect in Southern Europe,” *History and Anthropology* 27, no. 1 (February 2016): 1–18.

space in the form of agricultural investments.³⁴ These agricultural investments came without job creation. The few Danish farmers that tried to farm brought their own managers and worked with advanced technology. Overall, people in Latgale, especially in Lielciems, felt that neither land, nor labor, nor remains of Soviet material infrastructure were used properly or to their full potential. And yet, “empty space does not stay empty,” residents would invoke a well-known phrase as a preface to the far-fetched speculation that, surely, it will not be long before someone—for example, the Chinese—come and sort things out.

During the period when the Kremlin was collaborating with big business to extend Russia’s influence in the post-Soviet space, the residents of Latgale had no doubt that all business, Russian or non-Russian, but especially of the kind that could create workplaces, was bypassing them.³⁵ China figured in their imagination as both a site of global production and a state with a global presence (an informal empire or an empire-like state) that expanded by “fixing things in space,” that is, by building roads, railways, and factories that, they imagined based on media reports and local rumor, might benefit them. The Chinese had already been in Lielciems, as residents with several generations of family history in Lielciems told me. Their grandparents had told them that the Chinese built the Russian imperial railway line of Riga-Pytalovo, which was built in 1916 and ran through Lielciems (the railway line has now been physically dismantled). Some of the workers have apparently been buried in the local cemetery in unmarked graves. While I have not yet sought archival evidence for the use of Chinese labor in the building of the Lielciems’ railway, it is entirely plausible because Chinese labor was used in the Russian empire during World War I, especially in the rebuilding of roads and railways near the front line.³⁶

Be that as may, what is important here is the mobilization of stories about previous instances of Chinese presence for articulation of what I will call a “desire for empire.” If Chinese workers in the Russian empire during WWI arrived as citizens of a semi-colonial state subject to the influence of various foreign powers, the residents of Lielciems rendered this episode “culturally proximate” to China’s current-day capacity to extend power across space through infrastructural means and to their own hopes that someone would do that in Lielciems.³⁷ While some of Lielciems’s residents—mostly women—lamented the disappearance of social services and forms of sociality that had been forged by the Soviet state’s investment in the area, thus exhibiting what scholars of postsocialism have called “desire for the state,” others—mostly men—desired the arrival of capital that would establish lasting productive structures around which life could flourish.³⁸ Theirs was not a desire for a providing and caring state, but rather for the type of investment that exceeded the capacity of the nation-state. It seemed clear to them that the nation-state, especially the Latvian state, was neither able nor willing to provide their desired outcomes. Moreover, they did not recognize themselves in the normative public and as political subjects associated with the Latvian state. They were workers, but the normative subject of the Latvian state was a

³⁴ David Harvey’s notion of spatial fix entails two dimensions: extending capital across space and building things (fixing things in space), such as factories or roads, through which the new capital can move (Harvey, *The New Imperialism*). See also Michael Hudson, “Agricultural Imperialism in the EU,” at <https://michael-hudson.com/2024/05/agricultural-imperialism-in-the-eu/> (from *Berliner Wochenende*, May 28, 2024).

³⁵ On Russian forms of imperialism, see Matveev, “Between Political and Economic Imperialism.”

³⁶ Olga V. Alexeeva. “Experiencing War: Chinese Workers in Russia During First World War.” *The Chinese Historical Review* 25, no. 1 (May 2018): 46–66. Alexeeva notes the presence of Chinese labor in loading and unloading docs in the port of Riga, 59.

³⁷ See Knight and Stewart, “Ethnographies of Austerity,” on temporal operations in times of crisis.

³⁸ On state desire, see Stef Jansen, “Hope For/Against the State: Gridding in a Besieged Sarajevo Suburb,” *Social Anthropology* 79, no. 2 (2014): 238–60; Rebecca Bryant and Madeleine Reeves, “Toward an Anthropology of Sovereign Agency,” in *The Everyday Lives of Sovereignty: Political Imagination Beyond the State*, eds. Rebecca Bryant and Madeleine Reeves (Ithaca, 2021): 1–18.

Latvian middle-class professional. Perhaps a larger entity—a formal or informal empire—could offer both some form of recognition and capital? They knew, however, that it could not be Russian capital, if only because the border was closed for that. Yet Russian capital was not absent from Latvia.

Triangulating within a Relational Imperial Landscape

On April 22, 2010, the Latvian Parliament, on the basis of a successful alliance between opposition parties (the Russia-oriented Harmony Center and the business with Russia oriented Latvian First Party/Latvian Way) and the Union of Greens and Farmers, adopted changes in the Immigration Law that stipulated that making a real estate, commercial, or credit investment in the amount of €142,300 (€71,150 outside urban areas) would entitle a “third-country citizen” to a fixed-term extendable residence permit in Latvia and therefore the European Union.³⁹ Even though the law did not name Russian citizens specifically, it was clear from the parliamentary debates and subsequent statistics that Russian citizens were the implicit target and the most active users of this new legal window for establishing residence in the EU.⁴⁰ The parliament was divided on this question, and the law imposed various restrictions. For example, property in strategically important areas was off limits to those buying property to obtain residence permits, effectively limiting Russian real estate purchases to the Riga metropolitan area, Jūrmala, and a few other places. This prevented Russian citizens, mostly middle-class Muscovites, government officials, businessmen and oligarchs, from distributing investment throughout the Latvian territory, while also appealing to their Soviet-era repertoire of leisure, which included spending summers near the Baltic Sea. This repertoire, which quite a few Latvians perceive as imperial, was shared by both pro-Putin and anti-Putin Russians, many of whom carry two passports or secure European visas and can therefore continue to avail themselves of the privileges even as Russian citizens are not currently issued visas to enter Latvia.

This change in the Immigration Law was meant to offset the effects of the 2008 financial crisis that nearly destroyed the construction sector. The idea was that the Russian investors would renovate their property and thus revive the construction sector. Andrejs Šlesers, the initiator of the changes, was accused by his opponents—*Nacionālā Apvienība* (the National Union) and, to a lesser extent, *Vienotība* (Unity)—of endangering state security in an attempt to save his own real estate investments. In effect, a Latvian parliamentarian with close ties to the real estate and construction sectors that, together with the same Scandinavian banks that later got the Danish farmers off their couches, had caused the crisis in the first place, was attempting to offset the crisis by appealing to investments from Russia. When the initiative was evaluated in 2014, it appeared that the investment had indeed been significant, that it was mostly in the real estate sector, that 70% of those taking advantage of it were Russian citizens, including some oligarchs close to Putin, and that, as a result, Jūrmala had become “a Russian enclave” in Latvia.⁴¹ The program’s opponents, similar to Latvia’s rural residents who were concerned about Danes buying “our land,” worried that the formation of such a Russian enclave would facilitate Russia’s ability to extend imperial power into

³⁹ Mudīte Luksa, “Par naudu, valsts drošību un vārtiem bez sētas,” *LV portāls*, October 3, 2014, at <https://lvportals.lv/norises/265831-par-naudu-valsts-drosibu-un-varciem-bez-setas-2014> (accessed January 9, 2025).

⁴⁰ Latvijas Vēstnesis, “Saeimas 2011. Gada 26. Maija sēdes stenogramma,” no. 84, May 31, 2011, Roberts Zīle, “Vai uzturēšanās atļaujas uzturēs Latviju?” *Nacionālā Apvienība*, September 15, 2014, at <https://www.vestnesis.lv/ta/id/230924> (accessed January 9, 2025), Luksa, “Par naudu, valsts drošību un vārtiem bez sētas.”

⁴¹ Luksa, “Par naudu, valsts drošību un vārtiem bez sētas,” 2014. See also Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Latvia, “Informatīvais ziņojums par Imigrācijas likuma 23.pantā pirmās daļas 3., 28., 29. un 30.punktā paredzēto noteikumu īstenošanas gaitu un rezultātiem” (September 2014), at <https://tap.mk.gov.lv/lv/mk/tap/?pid=4033900&mode=mk&date=2014-09-23> (accessed January 9, 2025).

Latvia and therefore undermine Latvian sovereignty. Debates about the program continued for several years. In 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea, the threshold of investment was raised to €250,000. The program was shut down in March 2022.

By mobilizing investment from Russia, Šlesers and his supporters were engaging in a politics of triangulation.⁴² They were opening doors to one partner—Russian investors—to mitigate the fallout from a relationship with another—Scandinavian banks. The fact that Šlesers was able to mobilize most of Parliament to support his initiative suggests that the political elites were torn between their westward political orientations and eastward economic orientations. They tried to offset the effects of having joined the imperial formation where their sovereignty was politically honored but economically compromised by establishing economic links with the imperial formation that presented dangers to political sovereignty, but, it was hoped, could be used in a controlled manner for economic ends. Even though significant resources did come in because of the investment program, it was hard to discern who benefited from it more: Šlesers' business or the Latvian state. The residents of Lielciems certainly did not benefit from this initiative. None of them worked in or were otherwise connected to the construction sector in Riga. Instead, they suffered from border closures, which cut off one of their sources of income, namely frequent trips to Russia for cheap fuel. They were living in a place that was losing residential value and was of questionable profit value.

It is not entirely clear whether this was because Lielciems was simply of no interest to capital due to its location or unwieldy material legacy, because it suffered from the political decision to prevent the cross-border flow of Russian capital, or because of corrupt dealings: the clay reserves that fed the drain pipe factory were privatized in the early post-Soviet years, separated from the factory infrastructure, and remain flooded. The residents of Lielciems, along with the rest of the residents of Latgale, were encouraged to compensate for the disappearance of workplaces with feverish entrepreneurial activity. Some took the advice, only not in the emptying borderlands, but in the United Kingdom. The neoliberal logic that accompanied the devaluation of the socialist area socio-spatial arrangements was not the doing of a single state or of naturalized market forces, but rather of the imperial reorientation that came with the collapse of the Soviet Union. This reorientation reshaped space in line with changing forms of post-Cold War capitalism, which made Lielciems into a labor-providing "operational hinterland" for new imperial centers.⁴³

It also changed Lielciems as a place. In the absence of productive investment, Lielciems was relegated to a process of slow erasure. The residents of Lielciems did not have much triangulation capacity, for they held no labor value in situ—many of them were retired and quite a few drank heavily. They also did not hold any political value for the urban Latvian elites, who saw them as a political liability due to their potential eastward orientation. They held no labor value for Russia either, though they did hold some political value as potential subjects of *Russkii Mir* (Russian world), Russia's program for promoting Russian culture or extending Russia's geopolitical influence abroad.⁴⁴ Their children had labor value in the UK, where many had emigrated. They retained links with Lielciems in online groups that spanned multiple countries, including Russia, and during summer visits. They formed a peculiar Lielciems diaspora, extending and reproducing the multi-ethnic community of Lielciems across space. Their grandparents, alienated by the Latvian state politically and

⁴² Dace Dzenovska, "Triangulation: An Imperial Mode of Power," Forthcoming in *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*.

⁴³ Neil Brenner and Nikos Katsikis, "Operational Landscapes: Hinterlands of the Capitalocene," *Architectural Design* 90, no. 1 (2020): 22–31.

⁴⁴ Michael Suslov, "'Russian World' Concept: Post-Soviet Geopolitical Ideology and the Logic of 'Spheres of Influence,'" *Geopolitics* 23, no. 2 (2018): 330–53.

economically and bored by Latvian TV channels, readily turned their antennas eastward. Most of the time, however, they watched *Privet, Andrei!* (a talk show about pop and folk music) and other entertainment. This does not mean that they did not watch the news, but it also does not mean that they were “zombified,” as the Latvian public assumes. When asked, they would practice their form of “postcolonial estrangement” by saying that “it’s all propaganda.” That is, until the troops came and it “became clear” to some of the residents of the borderlands that “this is what had been planned all along.”

Watching the Military While Still Waiting for Capital

On September 29, 2023, Kostia, a Russian-speaking man whose family had lived in Lielciems since before the Soviet occupation, sent me photographs and videos depicting some eerie scenes. The square surrounded by two half-inhabited apartment buildings and several empty ones was filled with military personnel. Some were walking at regular intervals while holding rifles, and others were ducking, also at regular intervals, as if in a shooting position. The men walked and ducked in complete silence. “Does this happen in normal countries,” Kostia wrote, “does military training not usually take place at firing ranges?” “I am afraid you will have nowhere to come back to,” he continued, “all that will be left of Lielciems will be ruins.” (Figure 1).⁴⁵ I cannot say that it was unexpected. Since the start of the war in Ukraine, talk of the future arrival of the Chinese had been replaced by a military imaginary. It started with a notice on the entrance doors of the two remaining multi-story apartment buildings in the spring of 2022, informing residents that the Latvian National Guard (*Zemessardze*) will conduct training exercises in the settlement during the following week. During one week in 2022, companies of volunteers occupied the ruins of the factory but never appeared in the residential area. From time to time, one could hear the sound of shooting, but, generally, their presence was felt but not easily seen. Around the same time, municipal and district leaders began to discuss whether the empty school building (where the sports hall alone measures some 300 square meters) would be a good dormitory for military units. They told me that they had approached the Ministry of Defense with some drawings of how the space could be rearranged. Over the next year, I heard more and more street talk of border areas “being emptied for military purposes.” Aleksei, the head of the Lielciems municipality, was particularly eager to suggest a variety of conspiratorial scenarios: “Why do you think they established those nature reserves in southeast Latvia some twenty years ago and did not let farmers use the land? It is those same reserves that are now being turned into training grounds.”⁴⁶

While I was doing fieldwork, no military units established permanent presence in Lielciems. This was not unusual; the residents were used to transience. The ruins of the factory were used by a variety of outsiders, none of whom ever made it to the residential areas. This included weekend “dark tourists” (those seeking adventures in ruins) who usually came at night, a few bikers, a pandemic-era DJ who set up a production studio overnight and filmed a video in the ruins, and a drone flying club from the provincial capital some two hours away. Thus, when the military entered the courtyard in broad daylight and complete silence, it was eerie indeed. They remained in the vicinity for some days and then left.

The Municipal and district leadership interpret the reluctance of the Ministry of Defense to establish lasting structures in the area as a sign that it is bound to become a zone of sacrifice, a no man’s land. The municipal leadership wants lasting military structures not for reasons of safety, but because they think of them as a form of capital investment, of a

⁴⁵ Kostia, WhatsApp communication, September 29, 2023.

⁴⁶ Aleksei, fieldwork conversation, Lielciems, June 13, 2023.



Figure 1. Military personnel in Lielciems, September 2023. This photo was taken by Kostia, one of my interlocutors, and sent over WhatsApp.

spatial fixing of capital, even if it is security capital. They interpret its absence as part of the territorial logic of a state that is working at cross-purposes with the logic of capital.⁴⁷ “You know, the defense line runs between us and Riga,” Aleksei remarked in the summer of 2023. “I am discussing with my staff [three middle-aged women] how and where to move the elderly in case something happens.”⁴⁸ His statements attest to the prevailing sentiment that the area—and the people—are only good for transient purposes. Indeed, the training coordinator of one of the units of the Latvian National Guard that had expressed an interest in the ruins of the factory told me that the settlement was very good for simulating urban warfare because public buildings, such as the closed-down school and factory, were near what remained of the residential buildings. “Well, it would be better if there were no people here at all,” he said, “but they seem to be quiet, so it’s ok.”⁴⁹

A few days after Kostia sent me the initial image and videos of the military presence in the settlement, he sent more. This time, Kostia was more upset. The soundtrack to one of the videos which depicted bright lights in the school building, surrounded by what looked like quadricycles and military trucks, consisted of him cursing. He wrote: “It’s as if we weren’t here anymore. Nobody told us anything, they just came.” “What do the other people say?” I asked? “What can they say?” Kostia replied, “they pass by, look, and then leave.”⁵⁰ While he was clearly resentful about the unannounced arrival of what he thought were NATO forces, it is hard to gauge whether the municipal and district leaders fear them or desire them. All, however, think that their presence is temporary. It is as if the front was already going through without recognizing the place and people and without establishing any permanent structures.

The logic of capital, then, has been replaced—or supplanted—by the territorial logic of the state driven by security concerns. As a result, the locals think of the area as a

⁴⁷ David Harvey identifies two logics—the territorial logic of the state and the logic of capital—that underlie “new imperialism.” They can work at cross purposes when political decisions prevent capital from moving for reasons that are not related to increasing profit value. For example, a state may prevent cross-border investment for reasons of security, or a state may prevent outflow of capital because it wants to prevent decay of the habitus that has formed around capital investment (Harvey, *The New Imperialism*).

⁴⁸ Aleksei, fieldwork conversation, Lielciems, June 13, 2023.

⁴⁹ Interview with a staff member of the Latvian National Guard, Lielciems, July 18, 2022.

⁵⁰ Kostia, WhatsApp communication, October 1, 2023.

buffer zone, an imperial fault line. This territorial logic of security has led to new forms of expulsion. Three of Lielciems's residents, all women, had taken up Russian citizenship in 2008. Before that, they had been Latvia's non-citizens, meaning that, as Soviet-era migrants, they were not granted automatic citizenship after Latvia restored independence. Instead, they were required to naturalize and, in the process, demonstrate Latvian language skills and knowledge of history. They had not done that, though their children had. The three women had become citizens of Russia, because around 2008, at the same time as Latvian parliamentarians were attempting to offset the financial crisis with the help of the "golden visa" program, they were offsetting their own personal financial crises by taking advantage of the opportunity to retire early, at the age of 55, which came with Russian citizenship. This meant that they could start collecting a pension at 55, which they thought would be a financial asset. This offer was part of Russia's "compatriots abroad" strategy, which, according to Mikhail Suslov, was an explicit attempt to extend Russia's sphere of influence.⁵¹ The women, however, had taken advantage of it for pragmatic reasons. It was a tactic in their repertoire of assembling livelihoods—they thought that the early pension, however meagre, could help the family in tough times. Today, one of them—Sonia—is preparing to leave, for she does not even want to attempt the Latvian language test required of Russia's citizens with residence permits in Latvia (the other two women are over seventy-five and therefore exempt from this requirement). Sonia does not think she can pass it and has decided to leave before she is made to leave. "I am suffering because of my greed," Sonia told me, though it's clear that the €135 per month pension did not propel her into prosperity.⁵² Her children are Latvian and therefore European Union citizens, some working in Ireland, others in Riga. She and her Latvian husband will go live in Russia. In the process of decolonization, Latvia was expelling its citizens whose lives were too entangled with objects of decolonization. Sonia's household was being torn apart. Latvia was spitting her family out, scattering it across the relational imperial landscape, with some family members working in Europe, and others residing in Russia.

Lielciems plays no role in how capital moves today. Its Soviet-era infrastructure has been devalued, and no new infrastructure to move capital is put in place: the railway has been dismantled, the roads have potholes, no large production or logistics facilities exist anywhere nearby. In the last few years, broadband internet infrastructure has been laid in the settlement because funding was available to meet the European Union commitment to provide broadband access to most households. The infrastructure has not been connected to a service provider, however, because nobody in the settlement needs it. They barely use internet on their phones. Things and people pass by, through and over Lielciems without creating any permanent structures. Even the securitization and militarization of the area have not resulted in permanent structures, but the hope is there, especially since a refugee center was opened in a former boarding school in another borderland village. Yet at the same time as desiring empire, Lielciems residents value their subaltern form of sociality and fear they might lose it. Aleksei was reluctant to settle Ukrainian refugees in the empty apartments (few wanted to come anyway). He said: "Can you imagine if we had an influx of women with kids and no husbands? And I have these idle drinking men living here with their mothers? All kinds of things could happen. And then the husbands will come, and what will I do then?"⁵³ For now, in the absence of other options, he works on maintaining the social structure of the community, the same community that from the perspective of national urban elites is the object par excellence of decolonization.

⁵¹ Suslov, "'Russian World' Concept."

⁵² Sonia, phone conversation, September 15, 2023.

⁵³ Aleksei, fieldwork conversation, Lielciems, July 11, 2022.

Not Having a Choice

My interlocutors in the borderlands, as well as Latvia's urban and national elites, are aware that their agency is shaped and constrained by more powerful actors. They differ, however, in how they talk about these influences, what they think can and should be done about them, if anything at all, and to what extent they can act upon them. In the mainstream public discourse, which is linguistically and culturally Latvian, out of the external influences that shape or attempt to shape the lives of Latvia's residents, including those in Lielciems, Russia is clearly marked as imperial, while others are not. The European Union has been criticized by many for imposing various things, from institutions to standards to attitudes, but it has not been referred to as an empire.⁵⁴ Indeed, in and of itself it does not come across as imperial, because it does not have an army and extends its influence through bureaucratic governance. Moreover, its influence is regarded as desirable and its civilizational gift as welcome.⁵⁵ The United States features similarly. It has military prowess and is widely understood to be the decision-maker of NATO, but there are no qualms in the Latvian mainstream public about having to be on the right side of the US to make sure that NATO is present and ready to protect should something happen. NATO military presence is not perceived as imperial by most Latvians, because it is wanted, or, as my students at the University of Latvia put it, "we have no choice." Theoretically, they understand that they navigate a constrained terrain, and that the US is more likely than not an empire, but, politically, they are convinced that "empire" is bad and that it is Russia, and that an alliance with Europe and the US—or the west more broadly—is the only way forward.

For the residents of the borderlands, it makes no difference. They think they live in a zone of sacrifice. To them, there are empires on both sides, and their relationship to them is mediated by national elites, which they cannot bypass. What we see when we look from Lielciems, situated on the imperial fault line between Russia and the west, is that people's imaginaries of life possibilities and the future of the place in which they reside recognize how outside forces shape their lives: the factory was built by the Soviet Union and its destruction was linked to post-Soviet Latvia's reorientation towards the EU and NATO and the associated deindustrialization and border closure politics. Their imagination about how their place of residence could come back to life is linked to actors other than the Latvian nation-state bringing investment. Ten years ago, it was the Chinese, as far-fetched as such imagination may have been. Today, it is NATO, for, without NATO support, Latvia would not be able to consider boosting military infrastructure near, but not too close, to the border. And it is the EU that financed the broadband internet infrastructure that sits unused, and it is also the EU that provides labor migration pathways. In the summer, there are kids in Lielciems visiting grandmothers from various places in Europe. They are referred to as Germans, the Irish, the English, Norwegians, and Danes. The cross-border imaginary of Lielciems's residents is not simply globalized. It is explicitly imperial, as it recognizes that it is only by some greater powers extending their influence, whether through military or economic means, that their place of residence can come back to life, and it is only by having access to other parts of the empire that their children can survive. Russia remains a living

⁵⁴ Guntra Aistara, "Maps from Space: Latvian Organic Farmers Negotiate their Place in the European Union," *Sociologia Ruralis* 49, no. 2 (2009): 132–50; Zsuzsa Gille, *Paprika, Foie Grass and Red Mud: The Politics of Materiality in the European Union* (Bloomington, IN, 2016); Dzenovska, *School of Europeanness*. See Zielonka, *Europe as Empire*, for an argument that the European Union can be thought of as an empire. See also Ignatieff, *Empire Lite*, for an argument that contemporary humanitarianism is backed by an imperial alliance of the US and Europe, where the US comes with military power and the European Union provides legitimacy.

⁵⁵ See Bruce Grant, *The Captive and the Gift: Cultural Histories of Sovereignty in Russia and the Caucasus* (Ithaca, 2009) on the gift of civilization in the context of Caucasus, and Platt, *Border Conditions*, in the context of Latvia.

presence for Lielciems residents, Latvians and Russians alike. It is only 25km away but no longer easily accessible. It is an object of nostalgia—the places where one has been, but can no longer go, a source of entertainment—*Privet, Andrei!*, a place of cultural identification—shared history, and home to various kin—siblings, parents, extended family, and friends. “Russia is our neighbor,” said Juris, the Latvian boiler room worker who had come back to work after retirement, because there was nobody else to do the work. “But you know who our boss is?” he asked, leaving me to ponder in meaningful silence.⁵⁶

The lens of decolonization is not sufficient for understanding contemporary configurations of power in Lielciems, and the dispossession and devaluation that they produce.⁵⁷ Moreover, it obscures how power works in a relational imperial landscape. In Latvia, the rise of the decolonial discourse has lent new life to the already familiar use of the Soviet crutch, namely the attribution of most of the ills of the present to the legacy of Soviet occupation.⁵⁸ In a recent essay, the economist Edmunds Krastiņš finds mainstream economic theories insufficient for explaining why Latvia falls behind most of Europe with regard to a variety of economic indicators.⁵⁹ He suggests moving towards interdisciplinary analysis by which he understands replacing economic determinism with a cultural one. He concludes that the Latvian society was more affected by colonization than Estonia and Lithuania because more of the “intellectual elites,” including Baltic Germans and Jews, were expelled, killed, deported, or went into exile, while more Russian-speaking Soviet people were brought in. In a section entitled “What is to be done?,” which may or may not be a reference to Vladimir Lenin, Krastiņš writes that the explanation he offers might be paralyzing—indeed, if the problem is the past, what is to be done in the present? Krastiņš suggests consolidation of a political nation, by which he means elimination of the risks of bi-national society. Since Latvia is constitutionally a national state, one can only conclude that the political nation cannot but be modeled on the state-forming nation, namely Latvians. In other words, the answer to economic troubles is Latvianization or, to put it another way, homogenization. One might also call it decolonization.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to fully engage with Krastiņš’s argument, but it has proved to be enormously popular with Latvian political and scholarly elites. It is perhaps because what can actually be done is quite restricted in the relational imperial landscape in which Latvia maneuvers. How much of Latvia’s economic or financial policy can be radically changed? In such conditions, talk of decolonization is a godsend. It takes off the pressure to analyze the ills of the present. If Soviet legacy is to blame, then all one needs to do is further decolonize by getting rid of any remnants, which today consist of monuments, street names and, on occasion, Russians themselves. It takes away the need to figure out, for example, which part of one’s subjectivity is Soviet legacy and which part is not. Which decisions of the Central Bank’s leaders were the result of their “captive minds,” and which were the result of their attempt to follow neoliberal prescriptions?⁶⁰ It would be a mistake, of course, to blame it all on neoliberalism, just as it would be a mistake to blame it all on history without taking a close look at how the past and the future intersect to produce the present. With decolonization as the only tool, such analysis is foreclosed.

⁵⁶ Juris, fieldwork conversation, Lielciems, May 23, 2022.

⁵⁷ Don Kalb, “Double Devaluations: Class, Value, and the Rise of the Right in the Global North,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 23, no. 1 (January 2023): 1–16; Dzenovska, Artiukh, and Martin, “Between Loss and Opportunity.”

⁵⁸ Liviu Chelchea and Oana Druță, “Zombie Socialism and the Rise of Neoliberalism in Post-Socialist Central and Eastern Europe,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 57, no. 4–5 (December 2016): 521–44.

⁵⁹ Krastiņš, Edmunds, “*Kāpēc Latvija nevar labāk?*” [www.ekonomisti.lv](https://www.ekonomisti.lv/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Kapēc-Latvija-nevar-labak.pdf), October 2, 2023, at <https://www.ekonomisti.lv/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Kapēc-Latvija-nevar-labak.pdf> (accessed January 9, 2025).

⁶⁰ Juliet Johnson, *Priests of Prosperity: How Central Bankers Transformed the Postcommunist World* (Ithaca, 2016).

Beyond Decolonization

Since the 1990s, the language of decolonization (and decoloniality) has been largely associated with Latin America and dependency theory. It developed in response to the Marxist-inspired World-systems theory and posited the Spanish conquest of the Americas as the constitutive moment of colonial modernity and as a condition of possibility for European philosophy and social theory, including its critical Marxist strands.⁶¹ Decolonial thinkers from Latin America argued that the World-systems theory, which was crucial for understanding global capitalism, was Eurocentric and therefore not able to explain the perpetuation of dependency in Latin America. They argued that it was necessary to analyze capitalist domination together with racial division of labor, that is, “to think from colonial difference.”⁶² Once identified, the colonial difference came to dominate decolonial thinking. Colonial difference became the point of departure for developing alternatives to colonial modernity and capitalism.⁶³ With its focus on difference, decolonial theory moved closer to postcolonial theory, which originated in South Asian and African studies, exhibited affinities with poststructuralism, and was concerned with race, subjectivity, Eurocentrism, and history. Postcolonial theory, too, was influenced by Marxist thought and, like the decolonial tradition, grappled with its Eurocentrism.⁶⁴ After the end of the Cold War, when socialism as a possible future horizon was definitively discredited, decolonial and postcolonial theory converged in a focus on knowledge production and subject formation in lieu of sustained analysis of changing forms of capitalism and political authority.⁶⁵

While during the Cold War some form of socialism was present in the hoped-for future implied by postcolonial theory, after the end of the Cold War, postcolonial and decolonial theories did not seem to have been much informed by postsocialism, as argued by Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery.⁶⁶ Instead, it was scholars from the former socialist world that engaged with postcolonial and decolonial theory in order to take a fresh look at the societies they studied or in which they lived.⁶⁷ They picked up on postcolonial and decolonial

⁶¹ Gurinder Bhambra, “Postcolonial and Decolonial Dialogues,” *Postcolonial Studies* 17, no. 2 (December 2014): 115–22; Boaventura de Sousa Santos, “Postcolonialism, Decoloniality, and Epistemologies of the South,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia*, November 29, 2021, at <https://oxfordre.com/literature/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-1262> (accessed January 12, 2025); Walter Dignolo, “The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference,” in Mabel Moraña, Enrique Dussel and Carlos Jáuregui, eds., *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate*, (Durham, NC, 2008): 225–58; Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” in Moraña, Dussel and Jáuregui, eds., *Coloniality at Large*, 181–224. In the second half of the twentieth century, South Asia and Africa-based subaltern and postcolonial studies came to dominate in western academia. Postcolonial studies succeeded mid-twentieth century anti-colonialism and decolonization, then understood as a struggle against formal colonial arrangements, which, in turn, had succeeded early twentieth century Marxist anti-imperialism. Decoloniality emerged in late twentieth century in Latin America.

⁶² Quijano, “Coloniality of Power;” Dignolo, “The Geopolitics of Knowledge;” Enrique Dussel, “Philosophy of Liberation, the Postmodern Debate, and Latin American Studies,” in Moraña, Dussel and Jáuregui, eds., *Coloniality at Large*, 335–49.

⁶³ Dignolo, “The Geopolitics of Knowledge.”

⁶⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2000).

⁶⁵ David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC, 2004).

⁶⁶ Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery, “Thinking Between the Posts: Postcolonialism, Postsocialism, and Ethnography after the Cold War,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51, no. 1 (January 2009): 6–34.

⁶⁷ Ilya Gerasimov, Sergey Glebov, and Marina Mogilner, “The Postimperial Meets the Postcolonial: Russian Historical Experience and the Postcolonial Moment,” *Ab Imperio*, no. 2 (August 2013): 97–135; Maria Todorova, “On Public Intellectuals and their Conceptual Frameworks,” *Slavic Review* 74, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 708–14; Todorova, “The Trap of Backwardness: Modernity, Temporality, and the Study of Eastern European Nationalism,” *Slavic Review* 64, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 140–64; Yaroslav Hrytsak, “The Postcolonial is Not Enough,” *Slavic Review* 74, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 732–37; Annus, “The Problem of Soviet Colonialism in the Baltics”; Oushakine, “Postcolonial Estrangement”; Madina Tlostanova, “Can the Post-Soviet Speak.”

theories' concerns with knowledge production, subject formation, nation, race, and gender, but they did not build on the Marxist critique of capitalism that had been central to the genealogies of both postcolonial and decolonial theories. However, they did enrich the field by questioning the stability of the colonizer/colonized binary and by pointing to the complexity of imperial landscapes, where subjects of empire can transform into empire's agents as they move across space, and where some imperial powers, including Russia, are in a position of subordination in relation to other more powerful or influential empires.⁶⁸ Considerations of postcolonial and decolonial theories in former socialist contexts often led to considerations of empire, if only because scholars were forced to examine what, if anything, was colonial in socialism and socialist in post-colonialism, and whether the Soviet Union was to be considered imperial or colonial in any way that resembled Britain, France, the Ottoman empire, or US.

Some Baltic scholars examined Baltic subjectivities as shaped by multiple colonial arrangements, from Baltic German feudalism to Soviet socialism.⁶⁹ Very few picked up postcolonial theory to criticize post-Soviet nationalism, that is, the political repertoire that compensates for Soviet occupation by performing its own violence in relation to minorities.⁷⁰ This is noteworthy, considering that critique of postcolonial nationalism is central to postcolonial theory.⁷¹ At the same time, postcolonial and decolonial theories did force Latvians and other east Europeans who claimed Europeaness to turn a critical lens onto themselves, because by becoming European they transformed from subjects of decolonization (that is victims of colonization that engage in decolonization) into objects of decolonization. That is, they became associated with European colonialism—by virtue of claiming Europeaness or Latvianness as Europeaness, and were urged to recognize their complicity and relate to it in a morally and politically correct way.⁷²

With the onset of the Russo-Ukrainian war, there has been a re-drawing of the field. A frontier has emerged between a clear imperial aggressor and its victims. The relational imperial landscape has become simplified. The resulting politicization of decolonization has also sidelined questions of subject formation or, more specifically, the question of how the subject of decolonization is formed and what forms of dispossession and devaluation

⁶⁸ Gerasimov, Glebov and Mogilner, "The Post-Imperial Meets the Post-Colonial"; Gerasimov, "Ukraine 2014: The First Postcolonial Revolution, Introduction to the Forum," *Ab Imperio* 2014, no. 3 (January 2014): 22–44; Madina Tlostanova, "Can the Post-Soviet Speak."

⁶⁹ Imants Frederiks Ozols, "Kolonialisms un koloniālā situācija Latvijā kā potenciāla vēstures pētniecības un literatūrzinātnes problēma," *Latvijas Vēstures institūta žurnāls* 118, no. 1 (2023): 63–87; Ivars Ijabs, "Another Baltic Postcolonialism: Young Latvians, Baltic Germans, and the Emergence of Latvian National Movement," *Nationalities Papers* 42, no. 1 (January 2014): 88–107; Violeta Kelertas, ed., *Baltic Postcolonialism* (Leiden, 2006).

⁷⁰ Deniss Hanovs, "Can Postcolonial Theory Help Explain Latvians Politics of Integration? Reflections on Contemporary Latvia as a Postcolonial Society," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 47, no. 1 (March 2016): 133–53; Platt, *Border Conditions*.

⁷¹ For example, Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (London, 1986). See also Gyatri Chakravorty Spivak's keynote lecture at the conference organized by the Lviv Media Forum in May 2024: <https://lvivmediaforum.com/en/page/oleksandra-matviichuk-and-gayatri-chakravorty-spivak-will-become-the-keynote-speakers-at-x-lmf> (accessed January 13, 2025).

⁷² Ema Hrešanová, "Comrades and Spies: From Socialist Scholarship to Claims of Colonial Innocence in the Czech Republic," *American Ethnologist* 50, no. 3 (August 2023): 419–30; Baloji Balogun; Eastern Europe: The 'Other' Geographies in the Colonial Global Economy," *Area* 54, no. 3 (September 2022): 460–67; Marius Turda and Baloji Balogun, "Colonialism, Eugenics, and 'Race' in Central Eastern Europe," *Global Social Challenges Journal* 2, no. 2 (February 2023): 168–78; Aivita Putniņa, "Race, Innocence, and the Objectification of Nation in Latvia," *East European Politics, Societies, and Cultures* 38, no. 1 (February 2024): 197–217; Ivan Kalmar, "Race, Racialization, and the East of the European Union: An Introduction," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 49, no. 6 (March 2023): 1465–80.

this has entailed.⁷³ It is imperative, however, not to lose sight of the relationality of imperial landscape where there is more than one imperial power and where most national subjects are formed through a complex set of relations of autonomy and dependency, if not subordination. It is also imperative to be attentive to postsocialism's "colonial difference," that is, spaces and subjects that cannot be reduced to alliances with one or another imperial formation (which does not mean that they have not been shaped by them), but that have produced something new and/or of their own, such as the sociality valued by Lielciems residents and perhaps other social and political forms that have stayed beyond the scope of this article.⁷⁴ This requires "thinking between the posts," that is, joining the forces of post-socialism and postcoloniality to analyze the intersecting forms of power that structure the world today.⁷⁵ Most importantly, it means paying close attention to the lives of people on imperial fault lines, where these intersecting forms of power have gone on a rampage of devaluation, dispossession, displacement, destruction, and now, decolonization.

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⁷³ The responses in the 2015 *Slavic Review* forum on Timothy Garton Ash's essay is an exception: See also Gerasimov, "Ukraine 2014."

⁷⁴ Kevin Platt's "lyrical cosmopolitans" are another example here, but their class status is radically different from that of Lielciems's residents (Platt, *Border Conditions*). On colonial difference, see Mignolo. "The Geopolitics of Knowledge"; Gerasimov and Mogilner, "Deconstructing Integration: Ukraine's Postcolonial Subjectivity," *Slavic Review* 74, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 715–22; Gerasimov, "Ukraine 2014."

⁷⁵ Chari and Verdery, "Thinking Between the Posts."