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Empire, Literature and “Archeology of Ignorance”: (Re-)reading Ewa Thompson’s *Imperial Knowledge* During the War*

Ewa Thompson has probably published her book too early. In 2000, when *Imperial Knowledge. Russian Literature and Colonialism* (Thompson) came out from print, the hopes for a new, democratic Russia still ran high—despite increasingly worrisome signals coming from both Russia and its anxious neighbors. The wishful thinking prevailed in the West and influenced international academia. And vice versa—academia, intoxicated by Russian “imperial knowledge” for centuries, had gullibly supported the illusion of normalcy and insisted on business as usual. Thompson’s book had no chances in this milieu, dominated by Russia-born or Russia-leaning, in either case Russocentric, “Russicists”, to be properly read, understood and appraised. The reviewers pointed out usually at various mistakes and inaccuracies in her book (quite numerous, indeed), and some indulged even in a weird mockery, extending playfully author’s original arguments ad absurdum, so that to thoroughly fool and deride the opponent (Cassidy), or even referred dismissively to Thompson’s Polish origin as a proof of her genetic “Russophobia.”

Another camp that may have appraised the novelty and intellectual courage of Thompson’s study, that of the students of (post)colonialism, had its own

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reasons to ignore the book. Partly because the book was rather decolonial than postcolonial, and typically avoided the fashionable postmodernist jargon. But primarily because it questioned, though indirectly, monopoly of the “Global South” and its students on the broadly defined (post)coloniality, beyond the overseas context and racist exclusion. And, worse, it challenged the role of Russia, a.k.a. “Soviet Union”, as the alleged friend of all the subjugated nations and self-professed leader of the global anti-colonial, anti-imperialist struggle. To butcher this sacred cow, to recognize the rogue imperial essence of this regime still is a difficult task for the most of the “Global South” and left-leaning intellectuals.

Remarkably, nowhere in her book does Ewa Thompson question the artistic value of the “Great Russian literature”. She dares only to point out one of its seemingly obvious, but carefully concealed, features: its fundamentally imperial nature. This refers not only to its prominent role in whitewashing and glorifying the imperial image, but also to the glaring absence of any reflection, intellectual or moral, on Russian colonialism in any of its canonical texts.

“In the Russian case”, Ewa Thompson maintains,

territorial conquests were followed by incorporation into Russia or imposition of the governments subservient of Russian interests. Russian literature mediated this process by imposing on the conquered territories the narrative of Russian presence that elbowed out native concerns and the native story... Russian writers used their privileged positions as spokespersons for the growing empire to overshadow other discourses, and how they imposed their foremeaning... on readers of Russian literature at home and abroad... In conducting the conversation about Russian literature, Russian intellectuals have followed the familiar colonialist route. They consigned to silence cultures that were in some way Russia’s rivals—her colonized neighbors—[and] assisted the ruling class in inventing rhetorical solutions to the empire’s weakness and in concealing the expansionist nature of the Moscow-centered state. (Thompson 1–2, 27)

The reaction of the American “Slavists” paradoxically only confirmed the author’s point, in particular, about the uncritical appropriation by the West of Russian “imperial knowledge”, an extensive system of narratives whose main purpose is to glorify and gentrify the empire, to affirm its “mission civilisatrice” and its allegedly “universal” character that legitimizes that mission, but also to belittle and marginalize subjugated nations, to dismiss or appropriate their

achievements, to mute them and make invisible, to deprive of agency and ultimately of identity. Ewa Thompson insightfully shows the main elements of this “knowledge”, that consists of a whimsical mixture of historical myths and manipulated facts, and is centered specifically on the invented historical continuity between the medieval Kyiv and early-modern Moscow and on a crude equation of the 12th-century Rus’ with the 18th-century “Russia”. “This linguistic appropriation,” Thompson contends, “is one of the great mystifications of European cultural history” (Thompson 17).

Indeed, a seemingly minor linguistic manipulation allowed the Muscovites to appropriate the entire history of Rus’, even though their relation to it was quite marginal. It allowed them also to legitimize their claims to Ruthenian, i.e. Ukrainian and Belarusian lands and ultimately to seize them, even though they had never been Moscow’s, and, crucially, the tricky semantic shift allowed them to discursively re-identify Ruthenians, i.e., Ukrainians and Belarusians, as Russians, reducing them thereby to the sub-ethnic level, even though the Ruthenians in the past had little if anything in common with Muscovites.

The notion of “reunification” of the three East Slavic nations advanced by Russian ideologues of the eighteenth century was an invention of the late seventeenth century, not an integral part of Muscovite perception in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.... There is no indication that Ivan the Terrible or his predecessor had ever considered Ukraine or Belarus (then under Polish-Lithuanian rule) as a Muscovite patrimony... [A]t first, Muscovy did not call itself *Rossia*; this term began to be used only in the seventeenth century, coming into official use in the eighteenth. It is also important to remember, as Edward Keenan recently pointed out in a seminal article, that there existed no consciousness in Muscovy of being a continuation of the Kievan state... Muscovy eventually absorbed Ukraine and Belarus not because it craved reunification (there could have been none, because there had never been any unification), but because it was expanding in all directions. (Thompson 16)

The Russian Empire made great efforts to instill, normalize and empower the suitable “imperial knowledge” both on its territory and throughout the world. It was promoted by powerful institutions—educational, cultural, diplomatic, propagandistic and, ultimately, military. At the same time, the imperial institutions actively marginalized, excluded and silenced alternative views and voices, thus making “imperial knowledge” the only available and “correct”, indisputable, a priori “objective”, “scientifically proven” and “self-evident”. In this

regard, the Russian Empire was not unique, inasmuch as all other empires produced similar “knowledge” about themselves and about their colonies, as Edward Said elucidated perfectly in his *Orientalism* (referring to the experience of France and Britain), and in another seminal book of his mentioned by Ewa Thompson, *Culture and Imperialism*.

Actually, even before Said, Michel Foucault (and even earlier, Antonio Gramsci) wrote extensively about “knowledge” as a product of power relations and a means of reproducing and legitimizing them. In the West, intellectual reflection on the discursive mechanisms of the exercise of power and, in particular, on colonial domination, evolved into powerful postcolonial studies that crowned the 20th century process of political decolonization with epistemological decolonization. In Eastern Europe, however, the awareness and theoretical elaboration of those relations (between power and “knowledge”) has always been weaker, so this might be a reason for Polish publishers to change the seemingly esoteric title for a presumably more eloquent *Troubadours of Empire*. Remarkably, both Ukrainian and Belarusian publishers did the same probably for the same reason—replaced the exotic title (and all its complex connotations) with a purely journalistic exposé of imperial “troubadourism.”¹

Ewa Thompson, in fact, does not aim to stigmatize and debunk the “troubadours of the empire,” although some of them certainly deserve to be stigmatized and debunked. Her goal is to show the cumulative effect of literature as a syncretic whole, a system where not only what writers (and their characters) say is meaningful, but also what is silenced, omitted, and consistently ignored. Literature, no matter what artists may say about their allegedly apolitical stance, is always ideological. It reflects (and shapes) a certain worldview, outlines a certain system of values, imposes a normative gauge, and frames, in a specific way, interpretation of events and phenomena. Russian literature has made a powerful contribution to the creation of “imperial knowledge,” to its international dissemination and uncritical adoption. No propaganda can match its effectiveness. Firstly, because culture has an indirect effect, its ideological messages are not obvious, they easily enter the subconscious without provoking resistance from person’s consciousness, with all its inherent critical and

1 Ewa Thompson actually uses the term herself, but only once, at the end of the book, when she seeks (not very successfully) for “contrapuntal voices” able to challenge empire’s authority and show its epistemological flows—“to conduct a different discourse [that] contradicts the troubadours of the empire and allows suppressed persons, spaces, traditions, events, and images to emerge” (Thompson 199).

analytical tools. And secondly, cultural products are performative by their very nature, their messages are suggestive and emotionally engaging, they operate on multiple levels, comprehensively and holistically.

Russian “imperial knowledge” owes a lot to Russian literature that contributed substantially to both its creation and international legitimization. But neither structurally nor functionally that knowledge differs much from any other imperial knowledge, be it British or French or Dutch. One feature, however, is missing. In the West, the imperial knowledge came to be the object of criticism as early as nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, it was fundamentally deconstructed and discharged of its inherent toxicity—along with the dismantling of the empires whose needs it served. In Russia, this “knowledge” has never been seriously challenged. Still worse, in the latest decades, it acquired a particularly toxic, aggressive and jingoistic character under Putin’s regime. Throughout the centuries, it provided the basis for Russian (imperial) identity and informed its core elements, something that never has happened in France or Britain where the nations preceded empires and therefore their identities did not depend too much on the “imperial knowledge” developed eventually. Dismantling of the empires was a painstaking process everywhere, and deconstruction of the “imperial knowledge” not always passed smoothly. But only in Russia it was and still is seen as a millenarian catastrophe because it really poses an existential threat to Russian (imperial) identity.

Ukraine had a bad luck to be placed into the very center of the imperial myth, created at the turn of the seventeenth century—the myth of the alleged political continuity between Moscow and Kyiv, between newly invented “Russia” and old Rus’. This myth, by means of a simple semantic trick—renaming Muscovy into “Russia” and identifying it with historical Rus’—allowed Muscovites to appropriate Rus’ history, legitimize the seizure of Ruthenian (i.e., Ukrainian and Belarusian) lands, and, crucially, delegitimize the very existence of Ukrainians and Belarusians, downgraded discursively into a regional brand of “Russians” (remarkably, without renaming Muscovy into “Russia”, it would have been much more difficult to declare Ruthenians, i.e., Ukrainians and Belarusians, a sub-branch of the Muscovites). The Russian imperial identity was constructed in such a way that there was no room for Ukrainians as a separate nation. They had to be assimilated, turned into Little Russians, or, if the assimilation plan fails, they should be physically destroyed, as Putin is actually doing right now, within his genocidal plan B. The very existence of an independent Ukraine is truly an existential challenge for Russia as an empire, a threat to the foundations of Russian imperial identity; without Ukraine, the “Rus’ = Russia” mythology loses any legitimacy and the entire imperial identity collapses.

The revision of “imperial knowledge” in Russia has not taken place because such a revision would inevitably lead to the destruction of the underlying imperial myth of Moscow’s continuity with Kyiv, and of the virtual “sameness” of early modern Muscovy and medieval Rus’ (preventively renamed into “Russia”). Russian society appeared to be not ready yet to abandon its very archaic (and very toxic) imperial identity in favor of a modern national one. Even after losing its colonies in 1989–1991, the Russian Empire did not get rid of imperial ambitions and imperial nostalgia, and Russian intellectuals have never begun any honest and systematic revision of the colonial heritage.

Not a single Russian writer of note has questioned the necessity or wisdom of using the nation’s resources to subjugate more and more territory for the empire or to hold on to the territories that are not Russian, or even Slavic. Not one has questioned the moral ambiguities of colonial violence. The ease with which the great Russian writers of the nineteenth century glided over the realities of the wars that their government was waging finds no parallel in Western European countries. Neither Russian writers nor Russian intellectuals have ever adumbrated the reality of imperial politics in the conquered territories. (Thompson 33)

The refusal of Russian intellectuals to discuss issues of colonialism indicates a lack of a capacity in the Russian tradition for tolerance and experimentation. (Thompson 37)

In the Russian Federation in the late 1990s, neither laws nor societal habits nor language itself could easily accommodate anticolonial voices. The situation still resembles the heyday of Western imperialism, when hardly anyone seriously question the domination of one ethnic or territorial group by another. (Thompson 2)

[T]he Moscow-centered “Russian” Federation remains an imperial entity, and Russian texts continue to assure native and foreign readers that nothing is amiss in that regard. (Thompson 47)

The moral deafness of Russian artists to colonial problems, as well as the general imperial degeneration of Russian society, came conspicuously to the fore nowadays, in the conditions of war unleashed by the Moscow military in Ukraine. “Imperial knowledge,” epitomized quintessentially in Putin’s historical exercises,

in particular in his aggressively obscurantist 2021 opus *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*, became the ideological justification for yet another colonial expansion and yet another genocidal extermination of unruly aborigines. For attentive readers of Ewa Thompson, neither the war itself, nor its shamefully massive support by Russian society, including the throngs of writers and other cultural figures, emerged as something totally unexpected (suffice to recollect Pushkin’s cannibalistic delight at the capture of Warsaw or, say, Dostoevsky’s ravings over “our” Constantinople). More interesting is the uncritical appropriation of Russian “imperial knowledge” by Western societies, its normalization at the both popular and expert-academic level, and its firm persistence, despite the growing array of new facts and arguments that dismiss that “knowledge.”

Ewa Thompson features three peculiarities of Russian imperialism that allowed it to “escape the postcolonial taxonomy,” or, more simply, made its colonial character “invisible” to Western observers. First, it was the absence of overseas colonies, which were a common attribute of imperialism for Western Europeans. Russia colonized neighboring lands in a “creeping” way, annexing them one by one and creating an impression of almost “natural” imperial expansion. The absence of a clear geographical and often racial boundary between the metropolis and the colony blurred the colonial, dominant-subordinate nature of their relationship. Secondly, the vagueness of the concept of “Russia” and, accordingly, of the adjective “Russian” deepened the general ambiguity and uncertainty in the perception of relations between the center and the periphery. And thirdly, unlike the West, where the metropolises’ claims to dominance were based on the concentration of power and “knowledge” (hard and soft power) in imperial centers, Russian colonial rule was based mostly on force, i.e. coercion and violence. “The peoples of the western and southern margins of the Russian Empire perceived themselves as civilizationally superior to the metropolis” (Thompson 45) and refused therefore to internalize the feeling of alleged “inferiority” *vis-à-vis* the colonizers.

To these factors, which facilitated the penetration and smooth adoption of Russian narratives in the Western world, one may add also a banal corruption: the bribery of “useful idiots” by the imperial authorities—starting probably from Voltaire on Catherine II’s payroll to pro-Stalinist leftists and Brezhnevite “pacifists” and today’s “Putinvertesters” who persuade Ukrainians to “negotiate” and “make reasonable compromises” with the aggressor. Finally, one more factor that contributed to the adoption and “normalization” of the Russian view of itself and its colonies in the minds of Westerners was their imperial affinity and therefore willingness to perceive the world as legitimately divided into spheres of influence, where larger states have more rights and sovereignty, while small,

“non-historical” nations play a subordinate role under this or that patronage. Such a view, called “geopolitical realism”, has survived the colonial era and still retains a significant influence in political and academic circles nowadays.

All these factors together have contributed to the global spread and adoption of Russian “imperial knowledge”; the world has internalized and normalized it through multiple institutions, while dismissing and marginalizing attempts to revise it as allegedly “nationalistic” and “Russophobic”. The world and the West in particular have learned to look at Russia and its subalterns through Russian glasses. This is the primary reason for the fatal misunderstanding of many processes both in Russia itself and in its “spheres of influence” by Western experts, politicians and intellectuals. With self-imposed ignorance of the colonial character of the Russian empire (a.k.a. the Soviet Union), Western powers persistently overlooked, underestimated, or completely ignored the national movements in that Empire—either after the fall of the tsar, or collapse of the USSR (nobody actually dared to call the USSR an empire during its lifetime). For decades, they persistently tried to downplay Russian aggressiveness, and remarkably framed Russian war with Ukraine since 2014 as “Ukraine crisis.” In 2022, Ukraine’s resilience came as a great surprise to both Western and Russian pundits, and for the same reason: both the latter and the former watched Ukraine through the same lenses, analyzed it in the same categories and within the same framework imposed by Moscow. Despite the different political approaches (and interests), their epistemological approach was practically the same.

Russia, as Thompson aptly observed,

has successfully superimposed portions of its own narrative on the Western one, either blending the two or including its own voice as a kind of universally acknowledged commentary or footnote. Entering Western discourse through a side door, as it were, reinforced Russia’s invisibility as a third voice. (Thompson 18)

An amalgam of Russian interpretations, references, and characteristics (and the accompanying predispositions, sympathies, and biases) has been internalized by Western writers to such a degree as to make Russia’s aggressive self-assertion nearly invisible. The very fact that the discourse about Russian imperialism has been virtually non-existent at Western universities, even in postcolonial times, shows the success of Russia’s rhetorical success. Central and Eastern Europe, Siberia, Central Asia, the area of the Black and Caspian Seas are thus virtually blank spots on the postcolonial map of the world, their geographies

and cultures subordinated in the designation of “the Russian Empire”, “the Soviet Union”, “the Soviet bloc”, or “the Russian sphere of influence.” (Thompson 24)

In this context, it is worth mentioning another factor that makes it difficult to recognize Russian literature as imperial and implicitly colonizing. Most of its works contain a significant dose of social criticism, and many of them are gloomy in their depiction of Russian reality and the Russians themselves (“there is no other literature in which there are so many alcoholics, neuropaths, psychopaths, hypochondriacs, and hungry hysterics with a distorted sense of life and reality,” quipped Lev Gumilev sarcastically). Many writers encountered problems with censorship and quite a few were persecuted by the authorities. It is difficult, indeed, to see them as “troubadours of the empire,” just as difficult to recognize ardent imperialists in Russian political migrants of the early or late Soviet era. After all, most of them were anti-regime and anti-Soviet, broadly considered “good Russians” as opposed to the pro-regime Soviets, and thus the “knowledge” they brought to the West could be also accepted uncritically, as the binary (and therefore truthful) opposition to the Soviet lie. Few people thought then, and even now, that the opponents of the Soviets (like Brodsky or Solzhenitsyn) could be as imperialistic as the Soviets themselves.

Ewa Thompson touches on this problem to some extent when she draws attention to the surprising combination of Russian writers’ sensitivity to social problems with absolute insensitivity to ethno-national issues associated with imperial domination and colonial expansion:

The experience of characters in that literature is viewed in terms of general human experience, with the element of imperialism neatly blotted out. In interpreting Russian literary texts as essentially free of involvement with Russia’s military posture, Russian and Western commentators have yielded to these texts’ spectacular ability to avoid the gaze of a critic capable of highlighting their services to the empire. Russian literature has been spectacularly successful in conducting, fostering and managing a discourse about itself in such a way as to avoid the stringent inspection that postcolonial critics have imposed on British, French, and other Western literatures. (Thompson 29)

She calls such readings Kafkaesque because “they ignore the connection between Russian literature and the Russian empire and instead place characters in a kind of no-man’s land, not unlike that in which Kafka’s heroes live”:

At first glance, the distinctly Russian décor of the great Russian novels makes them very different from Kafka's colorless and nameless place of action. They do, however, share with Kafka's works that existential innocence and helplessness that makes the interpretation center on fate rather than on space between Power and its reluctant subjects. (Thompson 29)

The tone of "humble innocence" (Thompson 22) that permeates so much of Russian literature, made a priori inappropriate to ask it the questions that Western intellectuals have increasingly put to themselves: In what ways does an empire keep the Others in its domain? How does it conceal or mystify its actions? What in imperial history is really the history of the Others? Almost none of the Russian writers asked these questions, tacitly or overtly accepting the official version of the empire's civilizing mission and the voluntary accession of all subordinate peoples to it. But no foreign scholar of Russian literature has dared to formulate these questions either, even though in the West, self-awareness of one's own imperial misdeeds and a detailed analysis of colonial oppression and discrimination of others have long become a norm.

The inability or even unwillingness to look at Russia in all its reincarnations as a colonial empire not only made all the peoples it enslaved invisible and unheard, but also, according to Thompson, facilitated the discursive presentation of that empire as an innocent victim:

The Russian historians whose books have shaped the American vision of Russia have focused their narratives not on the problems of conquest and aggression but on the price that the ordinary Russians have paid for the conquest. Some of these historians have bought into the idea that Russia has suffered in an unprecedented fashion from foreign invasions and that these invasions have been an unfortunate constant of Russian history. The invasion myth has shaped the Russian vision of life and Russian political behavior, and it also has been brought to bear on Western interpretations. (Thompson 30)

"The post-World War II Russian literature has reinforced the perception of an unprecedented victimhood, and, with few exceptions, Western scholars have unquestioningly accepted it" (Thompson 31).

The image of victimhood has become so strongly associated with the perception of Russia in the English-speaking world that to dislodge it

appears almost impossible. While Russia’s territorial growth is taken for granted, almost as if it were bound to occur, a reverse process is interpreted as a disaster of major proportions. (Thompson 30)²

The myth of Russia as a victim still reverberates in the statements of pro-Russian politicians and publicists about the legitimacy of Russian “security concerns” and the need for preventive measures in response to the alleged threat of NATO enlargement. The much more reasonable and legitimate security concerns of Russia’s neighbors seem not to bother them at all. Russian literature has contributed in various ways to imperial mythmaking and, accordingly, to its laundering and legitimization in the West. Its main fault, however, is not the imperial lie (“troubadourism”), even though some texts like Pushkin’s anti-Polish pamphlets or Brodsky’s anti-Ukrainian scolding can be qualified this way. Its main fault lies in half-truths, in concealment, in feigned “innocence”, which, in fact, makes the great imperial lie possible, normalizes and whitewashes it. There is not much outright glorification of the empire and apologetics for colonial conquests in the works of major Russian writers. There is much more apologetics expressed indirectly, hidden under the cover of ostensible objectivism and novelistic (“dialogic”, according to Bakhtin) polyphony. The most graphic example in this regard is Tolstoy’s famous novel *War and Peace*, a novel by an author who was quite skeptical of all kinds of nationalism (he is often credited, though incorrectly, with the phrase about patriotism as “the last refuge of scoundrels,” coined actually by Samuel Johnson in the context of pseudo-patriotic, chauvinistic hysteria, but Tolstoy should be really credited with one of a very few anti-imperial works in Russian literature, novella *Haji Murat*, published, alas, posthumously).

In a separate chapter, Ewa Thompson shows in detail how the writer with mythological creativity “refashions for us the actual Russia of the early nineteenth century into a representation of mythological Russia, a country of eternal beauty inhabited by almost unblemished people” (Thompson 88), obliterates “the reality of strict class divisions” (Thompson 98) for the sake of the myth of transcendent national solidarity, depicts the exceptionally comfortable life of several aristocratic families as if it were typical of the whole society (“the icons of ordinary Russianness”), a kind of “Potemkinized version of daily culture” (Thompson 96) that readers of the novel, especially foreign readers, could not help but admire, taking it at face value, much like the life of Holland or England

2 Putin’s assessment of the end of the Soviet Union as “the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century” perfectly illustrate this imperialistic mindset (Bigg).

depicted in Dutch realist painting or English realist prose. There is no hint of the sources of the depicted prosperity, whether related to the colonial wars in the Caucasus, the exploitation of the conquered Ukrainian or Polish lands, or enslavement of Russian peasants. There is no hint in the novel of the true causes of the war, which had deep economic roots and was aggressive on both sides. Tolstoy clearly portrays Russia as a victim, not as a predator, thus reinforcing the idea of sacrifice in Russian political mythology.

“As retold by Tolstoi,” Ewa Thompson contends,

the French invasion consolidated the myth of Russian imperial innocence and helped to legitimize Russia’s imperial activities. *War and Peace* treats the main theater of war against Napoleon—Eastern Europe—as rightfully Russian. The novel delayed in Russia the realization that the Russian empire was not the same as ethnic Russia. (Thompson 87)

Of all the peoples between Germany and Russia, only the Poles are mentioned in the novel, and not as Napoleon’s allies (which they actually were, as they hoped to restore their state), but as those who allegedly welcomed the Russian “liberators” in Vilna. Not every reader will understand that Austerlitz is Czech Slavkov and Brün is Brno; there is simply no place for Czechs, like all other “non-historical” peoples, in the novel. They do not exist on geographical, and therefore on mental maps.

Tolstoy, Ewa Thompson argues, “superimposed on the history of Central and Eastern Europe a vision that corresponded to Russian political mythology” (Thompson 103),

created a symbolic structure within which Russia’s imperial nationhood could comfortably reside... articulated a flattering version of Russian history in a mode that was comprehensible to domestic and Western readers. Owing largely to *War and Peace*, Russia’s core national myth has as its centerpiece the foreign incursion and Russian self-defense. (Thompson 91)

Like every colonial novel, it not only expresses Russia’s self-confidence as a colonial empire, but also suppresses the narratives of the conquered peoples.

In this sense, all Russian culture that does not deny the legitimacy of the empire and does not question its colonial narratives is imperial, because all its soft power *volens-nolens* works to ennoble the rogue state, to put a human face

on its werewolf’s body, to add symbolic value to a criminal structure based on lies and violence. In times of war, “soft power” clearly becomes an instrument of hard, military, and in the Russian case, genocidal power. Culture, to put it straight, becomes a weapon. This is not always understood by the kind-hearted Western admirers of Pushkin and Dostoevsky, but it is perfectly understood by Putin’s ideologues. One of them, who is also the director of the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, explained this crystal-clearly in a recent interview: “Our recent exhibitions abroad are just a powerful cultural offensive. If you want, a kind of ‘special operation,’ which a lot of people don’t like. But we are coming. And no one can be allowed to interfere with our offensive” (Kishkovsky).

That is why we must set aside this entire culture—not to abolish it, but simply put it into the fridge or, better yet, into the freezer for the duration of the war, so that after the war we can read it in a new way, in a new context, with new accents and commentaries, textbooks and syllabi, and the new postcolonial experience.

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| Abstract

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Empire, literature and “archeology of ignorance”: (Re-)reading Ewa Thompson’s *Imperial Knowledge* During the War

The article draws on Ewa Thompson’s concept of *Imperial Knowledge* as developed in her seminal book on Russian Literature and Colonialism, and understood here as a system of narratives developed by imperial ideologues (including cultural activists) with two intertwined goals: to glorify the empire, its supposedly great, “universal” culture and “unique” historical role, and, on the other hand, to undermine and depreciate the cultures of subordinate nations, deprive them of any agency and visibility. The author argues that Thompson’s book, despite some minor flaws and inaccuracies, remains highly topical, and her critical approach to imperial tenets in the most prominent works of Russian literature paves a way for much-needed deconstruction of “imperial knowledge”, that heavily influenced the West and its (mis)perceptions of Russia and Russia’s colonies.

Keywords: (re-)reading, Thompson, Imperial Knowledge, Russia, (mis)perception

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