Übersetzungsprobe - Martin Schulze Wessel – The Curse of the Empire

Introduction (pp. 7-17)

Since 24 February 2022, Russia's war against Ukraine has evoked horror. After the attempt to quickly seize power in Kyiv failed, the Russian invasion has aimed at the physical destruction and symbolic annihilation of the neighbouring country. Kremlin propaganda denies Ukraine its national identity, calls its political and cultural elites "fascists" and tries to systematically dehumanise the political leadership around President Zelensky. Meanwhile, Russian troops are shelling civilians and civilian infrastructure. Entire cities lie in ruins. The Russian army bombs hospitals, kindergartens and shopping centres far from the front. This violence has a message: no life is safe life anywhere in Ukraine. A few months after the invasion began, a third of the Ukrainian population was on the run, seven million inside Ukraine, and another seven million, mostly women and children, have left the country.

In the first months of the war one million Ukrainians were brought east from the occupied territories via so-called filtration camps and distributed across the Russian Federation, probably in the expectation that they would assimilate into the Russian environment. At the same time, before mobilisation, the Russian army sent members mainly of non-Russian ethnic groups from distant regions into the battle, which resulted in heavy losses. The war of extermination also has the dimension of ethnic cleansing.

In Germany it took a long time to open one's eyes to the full extent of this crime and to draw conclusions from it. One reason for this lies in dealing with German history. The incomparable horrors of the Holocaust and the German war of extermination in Eastern has had an inhibiting effect when it came to naming and shaming Russian violence by name. Only late did the Germans develop an awareness of the fact that the crimes of the Nazi era, from which Ukraine suffered particularly severely, obliged them to show solidarity with those who were attacked.

History also plays a special role in the war itself. Russian President Vladimir Putin's legitimisation of the attack on Ukraine is a historical one. Long before the invasion, he had already used historical narratives to establish Russia's historical mission to deny Ukraine's right to exist. This is also remarkable in comparison with Russia's other military engagements. For the wars in Chechnya, Georgia or Syria, the Kremlin did not use historical but international legal legitimations. The justification of a war of aggression primarily through historical myths is also new in Putin's Russia. The best example of this is Moscow's claim to Crimea. In fact, the peninsula is not "originally Russian", but a conquest that the Tsarist Empire made relatively late in the war against the Ottoman Empire. It only became part of the Russian Empire in 1783, a fact which does not prevent Putin from claiming the peninsula as a legitimate possession. The fact that Crimea was transferred to Ukraine in Soviet times, on the other hand, is "unhistorical" in Putin's view - an error of the course of history that needs correction.

Putin manipulates and instrumentalises history. This observation is correct, but also banal. The Russian president is an amateur historian of the worst kind who thinks he can understand and change history. Putin has, as the Italian historian Mark Galeotti writes, "messed with history", forgetting that it is a river that never flows backwards. Ukraine is no longer the

country that was part of the tsarist empire in the nineteenth century, no longer the Soviet republic of the 1960s and 1970s, nor even the Ukraine of 2014.

The "special operation" that Putin launched is Russia's war. It is a war that cannot be understood solely in terms of the present. For it is not only about rationally tangible interests of the clique that calls the shots in Russia.

This was the cardinal misunderstanding of Western and especially German policy before 24 February 2022. In fact, the Russian decision to invade is based on myths and obsessions. The war rhetoric that is broadcast day after day by state television into the country caters to base instincts, implicitly or explicitly invoking history again and again. It is almost impossible to correct the flood of lies and half-truths. What is necessary, however, is to show that the set pieces of Russian propaganda themselves have a history. This history consists of long-term discourses that are conditioned by certain traditions of Russia's imperial policy. In the war against Ukraine, therefore, Russia's long-term structural problems come to the fore. However, their history does not encompass the entire Russian past.

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion in February 2022, long-forgotten interpretations have resurfaced in the West that speak of a consistently violent tradition in Russian history and locate the roots for the current outbreak of violence as deeply as possible in Russian history. Comparisons are drawn between Putin and Ivan the Terrible, and the cruelty of the Russian Middle Ages is held responsible for Russia's warfare today.

Russian history is thus essentialised. Demonisation, however, is a twin of romanticisation. Russian aggression against Ukraine cannot be explained by models rooted in contemporary ideas of what Western public opinion regards as rational behaviour, but neither is it inherent to the infinite depth of Russian history. The explanatory framework that this book offers has instead a medium historical depth: it is about the history of the modern Russian empire, which began with the reign of Peter I. in 1700.The history of the Russian empire is not a matter of the past, but of the present. A structural problem arose in the beginning of the eighteenth century whose ramifications we are still dealing with today.

However, it was not only Russia that has exercised imperial rule. London, Paris, Madrid, Vienna, Berlin, Brussels and other European metropolises were also imperial centres, if one understands an empire according to John M. MacKenzie's well-reasoned definition as an "expansionist polity exercising various forms of sovereignty over a people or peoples whose ethnicity is different from (in some cases the same as) one's own." The empire thus becomes a "politically composite entity, which usually has a ruling centre and both a dominated centre and dominated peripheries". This could lead to different forms of the hegemonic exercise of power.

Russia fits well into this general definition. However, the structural post-imperial problems evident in Russia's attempt at imperial restoration vis-à-vis Ukraine are of a different character than the Western European decolonisation processes, which were also not without complications.

The Russian empire also expanded into Europe, first incorporating the Ukrainian hetmanate in the eighteenth century and then annexing the Baltic countries and parts of Poland.

With the great power position it had gained, Russia exposed itself to intense international competition in Europe and to a transfer of ideas that brought modern concepts, including the

concept of the nation, from the imperially dominated peripheries to the centre of the empire. On the western border of the Russian empire, national questions arose - first the Polish question and then the Ukrainian question, alongside aspirations for Baltic and Finnish autonomy or independence.

Each of these questions had geopolitical implications in the European state system and functioned as a role model for other national movements in the Tsarist Empire and the Soviet Union. This is historically specific to the history of the Russian Empire. And already in the nineteenth century it brought about an East-West ideological antagonism, in which Russia played the role of an autocratic pole. Among the European empires Russia did not stand out for the cruelty of its rule. What distinguished Russia from the other empires was the fact that a great land empire was extended into Europe by annexing territories in north-eastern, east-central and south-eastern Europe or creating spheres of influence there.

France and Germany, too, established spheres of influence in Europe during the Napoleonic period and under National Socialist rule, but they were comparatively short-lived. Russia, however, has exercised domination in its western periphery for more than three hundred years. Repeatedly, Western states have attempted to contain Russia, and since the nineteenth century a liberal discourse critical of Russia has emerged in Europe.

The opposition to the West was thus inscribed in the tradition of Russian imperial self-image. The contradiction between the dominant role Russia played in the eastern half of the continent and the defensive position it found itself in vis-à-vis progressive thinking in Europe, promoted exceptionalist ideas of Russia's historical mission.

Russia should no longer be measured by the European yardstick, Slavophile thinkers demanded. Formed in the nineteenth century, this complex of imperial and nationalist ideas are still with us today. They are having a devastating effect on Ukraine in the current war, and they prevent Russia from taking a place in a multilateral European and global order.

There are certain parallels between Prussian-German and Russian imperial history. Berlin also built an empire characterized by colonial expansion into East-Central Europe and thought in terms of spheres of influence. As in Russia an imperial and nationalist ideology emerged that gained its self-image from its opposition to the West. In this respect, Germany and Russia have parallel intertwined histories. But there are differences: In Germany, a radical racist politics emerged from the combination of power politics and anti-liberal ideas, which did not and does not exist in this form in Russia or the Soviet Union. The unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany to the Allies and the decades-long processes of liberalisation and westernisation made possible a critical reassessment that scrutinized not only the period of National Socialism but also certain traditions of Prussian-German imperial history. In Russia, this fundamental revision is still to come.

The road to this goal is expected to be long and difficult, which is also linked to the fact that the imperial crimes committed by the two countries in the twentieth century are different: The openly inhuman approach of German National Socialism was comparatively easy to delegitimise after the total defeat of the Reich.

In contrast, the Soviet project with its universalist claim also attracted the attention of idealists at home and abroad who remained deluded for an astonishingly long time about the criminal nature of the enterprise. The Soviet Union's decisive contribution to the Allied victory over Nazi Germany and the liberation of Auschwitz by the Red Army created a nimbus that is still

used intensively by Russian history policy today. Therefore, the devaluation of the complex of nationalist and imperial ideas in Russia will hardly be possible without a deep political caesura. A new beginning will have to prevail against numerous resistances and will require a lot of time.

This book attempts to answer the question of what the underlying factors are that led to the Russian war against Ukraine. It sets itself apart from a widespread explanatory scheme that claims to explain Russia's history by means of the opposition between (good) Western influences and (bad) autochthonous traditions. Its allegories are suggestive: the religious and patriarchal Moscow is contrasted with the new European-style capital of St. Petersburg, which Peter I. created as a "window to Europe". But such constructions do not convey any deeper insight, and they are not even suitable as a starting point for analysis.

An example of the binary approach is the influential account of Putin's thinking by the French philosopher Michel Eltchaninoff. He asks: "Why did Putin take down the portrait of Peter the Great, the pro-European tsar, which he had hung in his office in St Petersburg's city hall in the early 1990s, ten years later in his office in the Kremlin?" One may ponder this, but an answer to Eltchaninoff's question will do little to explain the present. The sight of the portrait of Peter would certainly not have deterred the Russian president from his war of aggression against Ukraine. On the contrary, Russia's imperial tradition is particularly closely associated with rulers like Peter I and Catherine II, whom we perceive as European. Notorious westernizers and admirers of Peter such as Vissarion Belinskiy and Petr Stroinsky stood out as ardent supporters of imperialist concepts of the Russian nation in the nineteenth century. The division of Russian history into European and non-European strands is misleading.

The specific path that Russia has taken since the beginning of the eighteenth century is inconceivable without the interweaving of traditions thought to be autochthonous and imports of Western ideas. According to MacKenzie's definition of empire, Russia exercised different forms of rule. After the successive elimination of the hetmanate's autonomy, Ukraine became part of the Tsarist Empire, and later—after the brief creation of a Ukrainian nation-state in 1918/19—of the Soviet Union state. It formed part of the imperial core. Poland's relationship to the Russian Empire was more complicated in terms of state law. After the partitions of Poland (1772-1795), Russia annexed a number of Polish territories. After the Congress of Vienna in 1815, the Tsarist Empire annexed further Polish territories without incorporating them. It created a dependent Polish state, which temporarily—between 1815 and 1831—enjoyed a certain autonomy.

This sphere of indirect rule can be called an external empire. Belonging to the empire was thus gradual and fluid, a state of being also applicable to some non-European peripheries of the tsarist empire. Dominance over spheres of influence (outer empire) required cooperation with other European powers. Control of the western regions of the tsarist empire in East Central Europe required cooperation with Prussia-Germany and the Habsburg monarchy. In the Soviet period, Russian-German relations played a corresponding role at times. Russia's imperial expansion to the west thus brought it into a close relationship with the European system of powers. Within only one generation, Russia achieved hegemony in eastern Europe at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Some observers in Western Europe found this transformation fascinating, while others raised voices of warning. They marked the beginning of an intensive Russian-European conflict in which power politics and national or imperial ideologisation could not be separated.

An early warning against the expansion of the tsarist empire was the French Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In 1772, he advised the Poles that if the partition of their country could not be prevented, they should develop a national spirit that would make it impossible for Russia to “digest” Poland. Voltaire had previously spoken in a similar vein about Ukraine and the annexation of its hetmanate to Russia. The history of Russia's imperial expansion westwards can be seen as the history of failed digestions. The annexations gave rise to the "Polish question" and the "Ukrainian question", i.e. agendas of certain Polish and Ukrainian actors that were framed as "questions" in the manner typical of the nineteenth century and placed on the agenda of the international public sphere, where they combined with aspirations from other regions and spheres of life.

Russian discourse found itself challenged by the "questions" in its western empire. What actually constituted Russian identity, whether it should be understood as distinct from the empire or as an imperial nation, was—and still is—undetermined. It had to be clarified where the realm of ethnic Russians ended and where the empire began.

Did the masterminds of a modern Russian identity themselves understand the incongruence of imperial and national mental maps? Russia's identity, which oscillates between empire and nation, emerged not least in confrontation with Polish and Ukrainian conceptions of nationhood. In this respect, Russia's imperial history is to be understood as a product of interconnections, just as the history of the Polish and Ukrainian nations can only be understood with view to these.

Intertwined histories are usually written bilaterally, good examples being Klaus Zernack's history of Poland and Russia as "two paths in European history" and Andreas Kappeler's history of Russia and Ukraine as "unequal brothers". Both books are designed as double biographies of two states or nations. This book takes a different approach: It broadens the view to the modern triple relationship of Russia, Ukraine and Poland, always keeping Germany or German territorial states in mind. It concentrates on the history since the eighteenth century and only considers the medieval beginnings only as a topic of modern historical politics.

Poland and Ukraine experienced a similar fate in the early modern period, as different as the initial conditions of the Rzeczpospolita Poland and the Ukrainian hetmanate were: both lost their statehood in the aftermath of Russian expansion and developed a similar type of liberatory nationalism that retained an awareness of the democratic structures of the lost statehood and at the same time developed universalist, messianic projections of the future.

As Ukrainian historian Yaroslav Hrytsak writes, the West encountered Ukraine in a Polish garb. The development of the modern Polish nation idea was triggered by the Polish November Uprising of 1830, around the same time the ideational framework of the Ukrainian nation also emerged from the transfer of the ideas and practices of Polish nationalism. The Ukrainian aspirations for autonomy were perceived in the imperial centre of Russia through the prism of its previous experience with Poland.

In view of the enormous burdens that Russia had placed on itself with its rule over Poland, it was a question of how to prevent separatism from spreading from the external empire (Poland) to the internal empire (Ukraine). Polish geopolitical thinkers and politicians, on the other hand, had been developing strategies since the middle of the nineteenth century that saw the realisation of national independence from the tsarist empire or Soviet power to be best

achieved and secured in conjunction with Ukraine. The relationship between Ukraine and Poland goes back to the Soviet period and Stalin's decision to exacerbate the famine of the Holodomor in Ukraine in the early 1930s, at the same time campaign against Ukrainian national culture, was also intended to prevent Polish influence on Ukraine. The history of Russian-Polish and Russian-Ukrainian relations has played and continues to play out within the framework of an East-West antagonism in which, from the Russian perspective, Poles and Ukrainians appear as the spearhead of the West. In the current war, Putin emphasises this view again and again.

Larry Wolff, in his groundbreaking book *Inventing Eastern Europe* (Stanford 1994), traced the emergence of the East-West difference to a construction of the French and German Enlightenment. The "invention of Eastern Europe" by the Western European intellectuals of the eighteenth century thus created the epistemologies that later shaped the power-politics of East-West antagonism at the time of Napoleon and then materialised during the Cold War in a wall and barbed wire.

This book proceeds the other way round, it turns "Inventing Eastern Europe" upside down: In the beginning, there was a political polarisation between East and West, which was connected with the rise of Russia as a hegemonic power in Eastern Europe. This East-West opposition, which emerged at the beginning of the eighteenth century, was later 6strengthened into a strong ideological framework in the nineteenth century. It was not the politics of European powers that followed the ideological constructions, but the discourses that reproduced a cartography shaped by power politics. In this process, the partitions of Poland between 1772 and 1795 and the accompanying demarcation of imperial spheres of influence in Eastern Europe played a decisive role. Between 1815 and the 1860s, it was these decisions that created an East-West political antagonism that was taken up, ideologised and essentialised by political thought over the course of the nineteenth century, long before the opposition of the blocs in the twentieth century.

This encounter with Western Europe in terms of power politics and ideas had drastic consequences for Russia. In the last third of the nineteenth century, cognitive dissonance arose in the Tsarist empire between its own imperial hegemonic claims on the one hand and the repeated setbacks in international politics and its experiences of marginalisation vis-à-vis a progressive European discourse on the other. This led to a complex of Russian exceptionalism and anti-European ideas that became relevant to the history of Poland and Ukraine in a fundamental way.

For the idea of a special Russian mission arose in the conflict with Poland and Ukraine and had a particularly momentous effect in the relationship with these countries. The ideologists of the Russian empire saw Poland, which was striving for independence, as the extended arm of the West, while they suspected Polish intrigues behind the Ukrainian demand for autonomy to be thus indirectly again the influence of the West. The imperial-nationalist and anti-European ideas not only influenced relations between the centre of the empire and its peripheries, but also had an impact on the level of international politics. Thus, ideas about Russia's strategic foreign policy goals were directly related to the imperial and national concept. Anti-European discourses and ideas of Russian exceptionalism had a direct effect on Russian alliance policies. They determined the style and often the content of Russia's international appearance.

The dialectic of the structures of power-politics and imperially-impregnated ideas has effects up to the present. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine can only be understood against the background of a set of ideas that emerged in the late nineteenth century and in which certain power-political experiences have been inscribed since the eighteenth century. This connection between foreign policy and the constructions of collective identity has so far received only sporadic attention in the historiography of Russia. In political science it is a matter of a reciprocal influence. On the one hand, as Ilya Prizel points out, national identity is constantly being redefined through foreign policy. On the other hand, "every foreign-policy action is identity-driven", as z. Ursula Stark Urrestarazu emphasises. In relation to Russia this means: Power politics generated imperial ideology, which in turn generated power politics. None of this was inevitable. How to grasp the connections between the past of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the present has been the challenge in writing this book. There are outstanding historical studies that introduce us to a past world all of its own, with its logics that differ from the present. The attraction of such books is that they dissolve the self-evidence of the here and now through the encounter with a past that is as foreign as a distant land. If one delves into the history of the Russian-Polish-Ukrainian-German network of relations since the beginning of the eighteenth century, a completely different impression emerges: the past and the present are related to each other in many ways, again and again one encounters the present in the past.

The references between the layers of time are created in various ways: through invocation of history by the historical actors (1), through analogies that impose themselves on the viewer (2), and through path dependencies that can be identified for certain areas (3).

(c) Historisches Kolleg - Stefan Obermeier

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Published March, 16th 2023

352 pages with 22 illustrations

Hardcover