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Reckoning with the past: Soviet communism in postcolonial Australian perspective

Academic workshop

24 November 2023, 9am-5pm, The Australian National University

Expatriate East European writers like Kapka Kassabova and Lea Ypi have portrayed their countries of birth (Bulgaria, Albania) as colonized territories. This perspective on Eastern Europe, however, is not common in Australian life writing in English. There does exist an archive of Australian life narratives in languages other than English, the languages of Eastern Europe, like Polish, Latvian, Ukrainian or Hungarian, which does share this perception of Soviet bloc countries as colonized places. But this archive is not widely known. In fact, the “Soviet story” is largely missing from public narratives and understanding of World War II and its aftermath in Australia. This is in spite of the fact that Australia is the home to many survivors of the Stalinist regime and their descendants: a great number of refugees evacuated from the USSR, from gulags in Siberia, Kazakhstan and Turkestan, were among the over 180,000 displaced persons resettled to Australia under the post-war mass migration scheme.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine brought to the attention of a broader cross-section of Australian society historic events that were previously largely ignored or unknown (such as Stalin’s Holodomor famine of the 1930s). It also brought to the fore instances of Russia’s manipulation of historical memory under Putin’s regime and the long history of Russian imperialism that underpins his war against Ukraine. It might thus be a good time to explore parallels between the (post)colonial and (post)socialist realms, and reflect on questions such as: Where does Siberia feature in an Australian imaginary? Can Australia apply familiar postcolonial paradigms to its approaches to and understandings of Eastern Europe? We acknowledge the ambiguity of the term “Eastern Europe”; here we are using it to refer to Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe – essentially, the countries of the former Soviet bloc and Yugoslavia.

While a post-colonial approach to describing the condition of Eastern European countries is commonly used by academics in the region, Western scholars of postcolonialism have been reluctant to extend the paradigm to include the Soviet empire (e.g. Şandru 2012; Skórczewski 2006). In the 2011 *Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature* (Quayson 2011), “not only is there no chapter dedicated to East-Central European countries, but the editor of the two volumes does not even consider the possibility of including one” (Terian, 2012). The blame for such exclusion is often placed by critics on the Marxist foundations of post-colonial theory and postcolonial scholars’ unwillingness to accuse the Soviet Union of imperial behaviours (Şandru 2013).

We are looking for contributors to this academic workshop and the publication that will follow (a special issue or edited volume), who are working on various forms of life narrative (life writing, oral history, autobiographical fiction, etc.) and are interested in offering a critical reading of cultural productions, a critical response to the existing scholarship on views of Soviet communism in Australia, or a personal, creative response to the debate. Papers can address, among others, topics within broader themes including:

- Memories of Eastern Europe in Australia
- Soviet colonialism in Australian perceptions
- Translating (post)colonialisms
- Multilayered meanings of East European socialism in Australia
- Curating memory
- “Communism in the family” – remembering earlier generations

Please send a 250-word abstract with a short bio by **1 November 2023** to Dr Kasia Williams (ANU Centre for European Studies) kasia.williams@anu.edu.au and Dr Mary Besemeres (ANU School of Literature, Languages and Linguistics) mary.besemeres@anu.edu.au

Location - TBC

The workshop is part of the ANUCES [Jean Monnet Project Remembering Across the Continents](#) delivered with the support of the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union.



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