

THE OTHER COLONIAL EMPIRE: RECONSIDERING SOVIET RULE IN THE CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA THROUGH A POST-COLONIAL LENS

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that the rule of the Soviet Union (a.k.a. the USSR, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) over the Caucasus and Central Asia represents a significant but overlooked case of colonialism within the development studies literature. Despite extensive postcolonial critiques of Western imperialism, the Soviet Union's role as a colonial power in Eurasia remains largely underestimated. This oversight may stem from the ideological affinity between Marxism and postcolonialism, with many scholars – sympathetic to various strands of Marxist ideology – reluctant to critique the Soviet Union. By applying the postcolonial theoretical framework, this article re-conceptualizes Soviet policies in the Caucasus and Central Asia – encompassing political repression, economic exploitation, and cultural assimilation – as forms of colonial domination. The Soviet Union's practices in these regions mirror those of Western colonial empires, including forced collectivization, resource extraction, and cultural suppression. Through this analysis, the article seeks to fill a crucial gap in the literature, offering a nuanced understanding of Soviet imperialism and contributing to a broader discourse on the nature of colonialism beyond Western contexts.

Keywords: *Colonialism, Soviet Union, Central Asia, Caucasus, Post-Colonialism*

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DİĞER SÖMÜRGE İMPARATORLUĞU: KAFKASYA VE ORTA ASYA'DAKİ SOVYET HAKİMİYETİNİN POST-KOLONYALİZM BAKIŞ AÇISIYLA YENİDEN DEĞERLENDİRİLMESİ

ÖZ

Bu makale, Sovyetler Birliği'nin (resmi adıyla SSCB, Sovyet Sosyalist Cumhuriyetler Birliği) Kafkasya ve Orta Asya üzerindeki hakimiyetinin, kalkınma çalışmaları literatürü içerisinde oldukça önemli ancak göz ardı edilmiş bir sömürgecilik vakasını temsil ettiğini savunmaktadır. Batı emperyalizmine yönelik kapsamlı post-kolonyal eleştirilere rağmen, Sovyetler Birliği'nin Avrasya'da bir sömürgeci güç olarak rolü büyük ölçüde hafife alınmaya devam etmektedir. Bu gözden kaçırma, Marksizm ile post-kolonyalizm arasındaki ideolojik yakınlıktan kaynaklanıyor olabilir; Marksist ideolojinin çeşitli kollarına sempati duyan birçok akademisyen, Sovyetler Birliği'ni eleştirmekten uzak durmaktadır. Post-kolonyal teorik çerçeveyi uygulayarak, bu makale Kafkasya ve Orta Asya'daki Sovyet politikalarını – siyasi baskı, iktisadi sömürü ve kültürel asimilasyonu kapsayan – sömürgeci egemenlik biçimleri olarak yeniden kavramsallaştırmaktadır. Sovyetler Birliği'nin bu bölgelerdeki uygulamaları, zorla kolektifleştirme, doğal kaynak elde etme ve kültürel baskılama dâhil olmak üzere Batılı sömürge imparatorluklarının uygulamalarıyla benzeşmektedir. Makale, bu analiz aracılığıyla literatürdeki önemli bir boşluğu doldurmayı, Sovyet emperyalizmine dair ayrıntılı bir analiz sunmayı ve Batı dünyasının dışında sömürgeciliğin doğasına dair daha nesnel bir kavrayışın gelişimine katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Sömürgecilik, Sovyetler Birliği, Orta Asya, Kafkasya, Post-Kolonyalizm*

INTRODUCTION

The study of colonialism in development studies has mostly concentrated on the economic, political, and cultural effects of Western empires on non-Western areas such as Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, South Asia, and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (e.g. Müller, 2018: 284-289; Rodney, 1972; Go, 2018; Duffield and Hewitt, 2009; Nagarajan, 2015; Chiriyankandath, 2011: 36-52; Langan, 2018). The rise of postcolonial school of thought within the fields of International Relations (IR) and Political Economy has played an important role in exposing Western imperialism's devastating effects, examining how colonial powers exploited and altered the territories and peoples they ruled (Strongman, 2014; Chiriyankandath, 2011). However, one prominent colonial empire has gone largely unexplored in this field: the Soviet Union (a.k.a. the USSR, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics). While the Soviet Union expanded its influence over broad territories in Eurasia, including the Caucasus and Central Asia, it is rarely studied through the lens of colonialism, despite the obvious similarities between Soviet policy in these regions and historical Western colonial practices across the globe. This article seeks to bridge this gap by claiming that the Soviet Union should also be considered as a colonial state, most notably regarding its forceful presence in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

One possible explanation for the exclusion of the Soviet Union within the academic discourse on colonialism could be the ideological overlap between Marxism and postcolonialism. Postcolonial perspective, which frequently criticizes capitalist exploitation and emphasizes oppressed peoples' struggles, is highly influenced by Marxist and neo-Marxist ideas (Strongman, 2014). As a self-proclaimed Marxist state, the Soviet Union depicted itself as an "anti-imperialist" power, backing anti-capitalist national liberation movements in Africa (e.g. Angola, Algeria and Eritrea), Latin America (e.g. Cuba and Colombia), and Asia (e.g. Korea, Vietnam and Cambodia) while also presenting itself as a worldwide champion in the fight against Western colonialism (Drachewych, 2024). This supposedly anti-imperialist discourse of the Soviet Union has affected many postcolonial researchers, who empathize with Marxist critiques of capitalism and may hence be less willing to apply colonial frameworks to the Soviet Union. As a result, mainstream and critical academic discourse on colonialism and neocolonialism frequently excludes the Soviet Union from consideration as a colonial empire.

However, the conceptual similarities between Post-Colonialism and Marxism should not hide the reality of Soviet actions in Eurasia, which in many respects matched those of classical European colonialism. The Soviet Union's authority over the Caucasus and Central Asia was marked by economic exploitation, political repression, and cultural absorption, all of which fulfill the description of colonialism as given by postcolonial researchers (Chiriyankandath, 2011: 42-45). This article contends that Soviet administration in these territories constituted an unlawful occupation, comparable to that of British India, Belgian Congo, and French North and West Africa. In much the same way that Western colonial powers used force to implement exploitative and transformative policies, the Soviet Union used its control over the Caucasus and Central Asia to extract resources, impose political dominance, and reshape local cultures in accordance with imperial interests.

To make this case, the article will first examine the "theory of colonialism" as articulated by postcolonial thinkers such as Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, and Homi Bhabha. These scholars have highlighted the complex character of colonial dominance, which includes not just economic and political power but also cultural hegemony. Accordingly, colonialism is a central force exploiting peripheral territories, subjugating indigenous inhabitants, and imposing a foreign political and cultural order to unwilling "subject peoples" (Williams and Chrisman, 1994). This understanding easily applies to the Soviet Union's policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia, when Moscow concentrated authority over local economy, crushed nationalist movements, and encouraged Russification and other types of cultural uniformity (Yakovlyev, 2022; Annus, 2011; Heinzig, 1983; Caroe, 1953; Bennigsen, 1969; Newton, 1976; Kulski, 1959).

This argument will be shown mostly via case studies of Soviet policies in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Historically, these lands were considered part of the Russian Empire's "civilizing mission", similar to how British colonialism in India and French colonialism in Africa were justified (Bennigsen, 1969: 144-148). Following the 1917 Russian Revolution, the Bolsheviks pledged self-determination to the peoples of these territories, but in fact, the Soviet administration preserved and even exacerbated many of the colonial dynamics created by the hitherto Tsarist Imperial Russia. In Central Asia, for example, the Soviet state imposed a cotton monoculture that decimated indigenous agricultural diversity, exploited workers, and led

to long-term environmental damage, akin to the extraction-based economies established by European colonial powers in their colonies (Annus, 2011; Caroe, 1953). The political and cultural policies of the Caucasus also demonstrate a distinct pattern of colonial dominance. Indigenous elites were frequently replaced by Soviet officials, and nationalist movements were brutally suppressed, while the Soviet authorities enforced Russian as the language of government and education, erasing indigenous languages and identities.

Furthermore, the Soviet use of coercion to maintain control over these territories emphasizes the colonial nature of their authority. The forcible deportation of whole ethnic communities, such as the Crimean Tatars, Chechens, and Ingush, reflects European colonial powers' population displacement techniques for consolidating authority over rebellious territory (Yakovlyev, 2022). These forced relocations, along with economic exploitation and political persecution, clearly indicate a colonial connection, even if they were rationalized by the Soviet authorities as socialist internationalism. Hence, this article seeks to question the prevalent narrative that portrays the Soviet Union only as an anti-imperialist state, suggesting that it actually was a colonial force in Eurasia. By applying postcolonial conceptual tools to Soviet actions in the Caucasus and Central Asia, this article illustrates that the Soviet Union deployed exploitative and transformational methods akin to Western colonial empires. Recognizing the Soviet Union as a colonial empire not only fills a significant vacuum in the scholarly literature on development studies, but also offers a more nuanced perspective of imperialism and colonialism in the 20th century.

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative approach and utilizes existing literature and document analysis methods. In the following section, firstly, the article conceptualizes the term of "colonialism" via relying on the definitions offered by postcolonialism. Secondly, Soviet policies towards the Caucasus and Central Asia are examined as a case study to validate the main hypothesis of the article. In the final section, the article concludes with a summary of the findings and a discussion of implications for the scholarly literature on colonialism within development studies.

COLONIALISM, IMPERIALISM AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Postcolonialism, as an academic movement, arose in reaction to the historical phenomena of colonialism and imperialism that significantly

influenced the contemporary world. Postcolonial theory, grounded on the experiences of formerly colonized populations, aims to examine, critique, and comprehend the enduring effects of colonialism on politics, culture, economics, and development. The notions of “colonialism” and “imperialism” are fundamental to this analytical paradigm. Although closely linked, these phrases possess unique meanings and consequences, especially in the realm of development studies, where they elucidate the exploitation, dominance, and change of the colonized by the colonizers. This article will examine the postcolonial interpretation of colonialism and imperialism, emphasizing significant researchers in the discipline and their contributions to comprehending these phenomena within the wider framework of global development.

Colonialism, in the context of postcolonial thought, denotes the practice of dominance wherein one group asserts authority over another, usually by territorial possession, resource exploitation, and the imposition of political and cultural frameworks (Schwarz and Ray, 2005: 23-52). In contrast to imperialism, which primarily highlights political and economic expansion, colonialism concentrates on the quotidian aspects of domination, encompassing the physical settlement of colonizers in subjugated territories and the alteration of colonized societies to fulfill the objectives of the colonizing authority. Edward Said, a pivotal figure in postcolonial theory, articulated in his seminal work, *Orientalism* (1978), that colonialism is not just a political and economic endeavor but also a cultural initiative. Said (1978) argues that the West, by literary and academic endeavors, fabricated the “Orient” as a regressive, alien, and subordinate counterpart to the “Occident” (the West). This rhetorical framework historically legitimized colonial control by portraying non-Western populations as incapable of self-governance and requiring Western intervention. Said contends that colonialism functions not just via military domination but also through the creation of knowledge that categorizes the colonized as “intrinsically inferior”.

Said’s work was groundbreaking in expanding the notion of colonialism to encompass cultural imperialism, wherein knowledge production, language, and representation serve as instruments of dominance. This concept has significance for development studies, illustrating how conquerors imposed economic and political institutions on the colonized, as well as cultural norms that devalued indigenous identities and knowledge systems.

Said's notion of cultural hegemony corresponds with the perspectives of Post-Colonial scholars about the developmental hierarchies instituted during colonialism, when the colonized were frequently classified as "underdeveloped" by Western criteria (Frank, 1966).

Frantz Fanon, a Martinican revolutionary philosopher, is another major figure in postcolonial studies. His publications, notably *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), examine the psychological and emotional ramifications of colonialism on both the colonizer and the colonized. Fanon contends that colonialism dehumanizes the colonized, depriving them of their agency, history, and identity. This engenders an internalized sense of inferiority that hampers postcolonial growth. Fanon's scholarship is essential for comprehending the impact of colonialism on both the material circumstances of colonized cultures and the psychological state of colonized persons. He underscores the necessity of revolutionary violence as a method for restoring dignity and humanity. In development studies, Fanon's work has been crucial in demonstrating that development encompasses not just economic progress and institutional transformation but also the restoration of self-worth and cultural identity, both of which were systematically undermined during colonial authority (Gibson, 2003).

Imperialism, although intricately associated with colonialism, is perceived in postcolonial studies as the overarching political and economic framework that propels expansionism (Frank, 2004; Wallerstein, 2004; Amin 1989). Imperialism is the doctrine and execution of augmenting a nation's authority and sway by diplomacy, military might, or economic supremacy, frequently without direct territory governance. Imperialism often precedes or coincides with colonialism, since it establishes the conceptual foundation for the domination and exploitation of other nations. The Marxist framework has been crucial in forming postcolonial interpretations of imperialism, with Vladimir Lenin possessing a pivotal role in this discourse.

In *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917), Lenin contends that imperialism is an inevitable consequence of capitalism. Lenin posits that capitalist economies, in their pursuit of new markets and resources, eventually resort to imperialist expansion. This economic analysis connects imperialism to global capitalism, perceiving colonialism as a means of taking income from peripheral regions and centralizing it in

core capitalist countries. Lenin's perspective has significantly influenced development studies, especially via dependency theory, which interprets underdevelopment in the so-called Global South as a result of imperialist exploitation of resources and labor (Frank, 1966). Lenin's work offers postcolonial researchers a framework to comprehend how imperialism sustains global inequities in the post-World War II era via neo-colonial activities, including multinational businesses and inequitable trade agreements (Schwarz and Ray, 2005: 28-30).

Immanuel Wallerstein (2004, 1974), a distinguished scholar in the study of imperialism within development studies, formulated the world-system theory to explain the workings of global political and economic system. Wallerstein posits that the global economy is stratified into core, semi-periphery, and periphery, wherein the core (affluent/developed nations) exploits the periphery (developing nations) for labor and resources. This global capitalist system, originating from the colonial period, perpetuates inequities via imperialistic mechanisms (Wallerstein, 2004). Wallerstein's contributions are essential for comprehending the ongoing impact of imperialism on development across the globe. Although the legal frameworks of colonialism have been abolished, the legacy of imperialist exploitation persists in the economic and political interdependence that binds peripheral states to the center. This has significant consequences for development strategy, since it contests the notion that progress can transpire within the current global capitalist framework, which is fundamentally inequitable.

Postcolonial scholars contend that colonialism and imperialism persist beyond decolonization, continuing to influence global power relations through neo-colonialism and imperialism. Kwame Nkrumah (1965), the inaugural president of independent Ghana, utilized the term "neo-colonialism" to characterize the manner in which former colonial powers persistently exerted control over newly sovereign states using economic and political pressures. In his publication *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (1965), Nkrumah notes that foreign aid, multinational businesses, and trade agreements serve as instruments employed by Western governments to sustain their power in the postcolonial era. In development studies, neo-colonialism is a fundamental notion for comprehending the persistence of global inequities. The entities of global capitalism, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, frequently

face criticism for sustaining a framework that keeps former colonial states reliant on their former occupiers (Udegbumam, 2022). Scholars like Samir Amin (1989) and Walter Rodney (1972) have expanded upon Nkrumah's concepts, highlighting how development strategies advocated by these organizations frequently perpetuate the exploitative patterns established during the colonial era.

Postcolonialism offers a thorough framework for comprehending the lasting impacts of colonialism and imperialism on global development. Postcolonial theory, as developed by aforementioned intellectuals such as Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Vladimir Lenin, Andre Gunder Frank, Immanuel Wallerstein, Kwame Nkrumah, Samir Amin and Walter Rodney, elucidates the political, economic, cultural, and psychological aspects of colonial and imperial subjugation. These researchers have made substantial contributions to development studies by demonstrating how the legacy of colonialism and imperialism persist in contemporary society, notably through neo-colonialism and global inequality. By seeing colonialism and imperialism as both historical events and continuous processes, Post-Colonialism has become crucial to criticisms of global development and the quest for more fair and equitable futures for humanity.

OVERLOOKING THE “RED EMPIRE”

The classification of the Soviet Union as a “colonial power” is a subject of contention in academic discourse, especially within the fields of development studies, political science, and political economy. The matter pertains to the definition and application of “colonialism” in various situations. Certain researchers, particularly within postcolonial studies and criticisms from Central Asian, Baltic, and Eastern European viewpoints, contend that the Soviet Union practiced internal colonialism (Heinzig, 1983; Caroe, 1953; Bennigsen, 1969; Newton, 1976; Kulski, 1959). This pertains to the subjugation and exploitation of non-Russian ethnic groups and regions inside the USSR.

According to this perspective, territories such as Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Baltic republics were economically and politically subjugated to the center (Moscow), with their resources exploited and their political and cultural autonomy repressed. This reflects the dynamics of classical European colonization. The enforcement of the Russian language, culture, and political systems upon non-Russian territories has been perceived as a manifestation of cultural imperialism (Annus, 2011). Soviet programs

such as Russification, coerced labor, and mass deportations are analogous to colonial tactics. As such, scholars such as Ronald Suny (2010) and Terry Martin (2001) characterize the Soviet Union as an “empire”, including internal hierarchies predicated on race and geography. Certain Marxist and post-Marxist criticisms characterize the Soviet Union’s involvement in Central Asia as colonial, perceiving the area as “peripheral” – as defined by Wallerstein – in terms of supplying raw materials to the industrialized Russian center (Yakovlyev, 2022).

A counterargument posits that the Soviet Union was ideologically dedicated to anti-colonialism, especially via its backing of national liberation movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Soviet officials contended that their objective was to emancipate subjugated classes rather than to colonize them, and this ideological position confuses comparisons with Western colonialism (Heinzig, 1983; Bennigsen, 1969). Advocates of this perspective contend that the Soviet Union facilitated industry, education, and healthcare throughout its republics, particularly in regions such as Central Asia. These measures supposedly serve as proof that the USSR did not exploit its territory in the manner characteristic of capitalist colonial powers (Thorton, 1964). Soviet leaders, including Lenin, initially advocated “self-determination” for countries, resulting in the Soviet Union being organized as a federation of republics with nominal sovereignty. Although these republics were frequently subjected to stringent central authority, the Soviet system was officially differentiated from the colonial empires of Britain, France, or Belgium, which relied on explicit subjugation and economic exploitation. This may be one of the reasons why postcolonial scholarly literature has not paid enough attention to studying the Soviet Union as a colonial power.

In the context of “Soviet colonization”, some scholars espouse a hybrid perspective – perceiving the Soviet Union as possessing both imperialistic and anti-imperialistic traits (Etkind, 2011; Hirsch, 2005; Khalid, 2021). They contend that although the Soviet Union maintained an exploitative relationship with certain areas, it also facilitated modernization and social growth to some extent. These researchers frequently differentiate between the rhetoric of anti-colonialism and the actuality of central control and repression. Alexander Etkind (2011) elucidates the notion of “internal colonization”, emphasizing the manner in which Russia and subsequently the Soviet Union colonized its own territories and populations. In *Empire*

of Nations, Francine Hirsch (2005) examines the Soviet nationality laws designed to regulate variety inside the USSR, making parallels with colonial tactics. Adeb Khalid's (2021) research on Central Asia investigates Soviet modernization initiatives and "civilizing missions" – which he contends were akin to colonial endeavors, albeit articulated through a Marxist lens. Thus, although the Soviet Union is frequently seen as apart from conventional European colonial powers, a substantial corpus of scholarship interprets its policies, especially in periphery areas, as colonial in essence. The discourse illustrates varying theoretical paradigms – some prioritizing economic exploitation and cultural subjugation, while others underscore ideological allegiances to anti-colonialism and modernity.

The exclusion of the Soviet Union as a colonial state in mainstream postcolonial literature may be ascribed to several interconnected elements, encompassing ideological, historical, and academic processes. A multitude of postcolonial scholars (e.g. Fanon, Nkrumah, Frank and Amin) has extensively utilized Marxist and neo-Marxist frameworks in their criticisms of Western colonialism, capitalism, and imperialism. The Soviet Union, as the pre-eminent Marxist state, established itself as an anti-imperialist entity that actively endorsed anti-colonial movements throughout, especially in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Bennigsen, 1969; Thorton, 1964). The Soviet foreign policy discourse of "proletarian internationalism" and its antagonism to Western capitalism corresponded with the wider postcolonial criticism of imperialism, rendering it improbable for researchers sympathetic to Marxist ideology to criticize the Soviet Union as a colonial state. The Soviet Union's anti-colonial and anti-Western position fostered a perception among most postcolonial scholars of it being an ally against Western imperialism, perhaps obscuring the recognition of the colonial characteristics inherent in Soviet policy inside its own area of influence, especially in Eurasia (Etkind, 2011; Yakovlyev, 2022). The inclination of neo-Marxist postcolonial scholars to underscore economic exploitation via capitalism may have led them to concentrate on capitalist Western empires, rather than critically examining the Soviet Union, which positioned itself as the antithesis of capitalist imperialism.

The ideological narrative and propaganda machine of the Soviet Union defined itself as a rescuer of subjugated nations and ethnic groups, especially following its military victory in World War II (Boer, 2023; Golubev, 2023). Soviet propaganda framed its territorial expansion and dominance

in Central Asia and the Caucasus as a socialist, civilizing endeavor aimed at liberating these areas from feudalism, backwardness, and capitalist exploitation (Boer, 2023). This narrative starkly contrasted with the overtly exploitative objectives of Western colonial powers, facilitating the Soviet Union's evasion of classification as a colonial empire. The Soviet Union's active endorsement of global decolonization movements and provision of material assistance to nations in the Global South (e.g. Cuba, Angola, Vietnam and Algeria) positioned it as a proponent of anti-imperialism, rendering its colonial practices in Eurasia seemingly contradictory to numerous scholars (Golubev, 2023; Bennigsen, 1969).

Postcolonial studies have conventionally concentrated on the European colonial empires that prevailed in Africa, Latin America, South Asia, and the Middle East (Rodney, 1972; Go, 2018; Duffield and Hewitt, 2009; Nagarajan, 2015; Chiriyankandath, 2011; Langan, 2018; Frank, 1966, 2004; Wallerstein, 2004; Amin 1989; Nkrumah 1965). The legacy of Western colonialism in these areas is extensively recorded and serves as the principal case study for postcolonial analyses of exploitation, resource extraction, and cultural dominance. The primary case studies in postcolonial literature—namely British India, French Algeria, and Belgian Congo—concentrate on the enduring impact of European powers in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. This Western-centric emphasis may have unintentionally obscured the Soviet Union's colonial policies in its immediate vicinity (i.e., Eurasia). The emphasis on Western colonialism in postcolonial studies may have resulted in the marginalization of non-Western colonial empires, such as Imperial Japan and the Soviet Union, since the discipline evolved mainly to analyze the repercussions of European powers rather than imperialism on a global scale. The Soviet Union's method of control and administration in its territories diverged in several aspects from traditional Western colonialism, potentially accounting for its omission from colonial criticisms. Soviet policies frequently entailed governmental centralization, cultural uniformity, and economic exploitation; however, they were presented under the pretext of socialist solidarity and class struggle, rather than explicit ethnic or racial subjugation as shown in Western colonies (Boer, 2023). The Soviet Union also lacked a significant settler colonial model in its peripheries (with notable exceptions such as the Baltics and Crimea), in contrast to Western countries who practiced extensive settler colonialism, such as British settlers in Africa and India, which may have rendered its governance appear less blatantly colonial (Suny, 2010).

The Soviet Union's strategy for its non-Russian republics was complex and frequently inconsistent. The Soviet Union advocated for ethnic federalism and granted cultural autonomy to many nations inside the USSR. Conversely, it also implemented measures of enforced collectivization, deportations, and Russification, which demonstrated distinct patterns of imperial dominance (Khalid, 2021; Etkind, 2011). This intricacy may have rendered the classification of the Soviet Union as a conventional colonial power more challenging. The Soviet Union's theoretical endorsement of ethnic federalism, granting nominal sovereignty to separate republics, affected the dynamics of Soviet governance. Although it strengthened Soviet dominance, it also permitted a measure of local administration, perhaps rendering Soviet imperialism less overt than Western colonialism. The Soviet strategy of promoting indigenous languages and cultures during the initial years of its governance, prior to the implementation of Russification, introduces an additional layer of complexity that Post-Colonial researchers may have found challenging to classify under conventional colonial paradigms (Boer, 2023).

Throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union purposefully established itself as a global leader in anti-colonial and anti-imperial movements, notably in opposition to the United States and European nations. The geopolitical landscape of the Cold War solidified the perception of the Soviet Union as a bastion against Western imperialism, therefore concealing its own imperial endeavors throughout Eurasia. The ideological dichotomy of the Cold War, characterized by capitalism against socialism, shaped worldwide academic discourse, leading researchers and politicians to frequently depict the Soviet Union in contrast to Western imperialism, therefore minimizing or neglecting its colonial aspects. The Soviet Union's financial and military aid to notable decolonizing states such as Cuba and Vietnam bolstered its image as an anti-imperialist entity, diverting focus from its colonial activities within its own domain.

To sum up, the omission of the Soviet Union from mainstream Post-Colonial critiques of colonialism and imperialism stems from multiple interconnected factors: the ideological alignment between Marxism and postcolonialism, the Soviet Union's anti-imperialist discourse, the Western-centric orientation of postcolonial studies, and the distinctive intricacies of Soviet governance. The Soviet Union's self-image as a savior of oppressed nations and its advocacy for decolonization in the Global South

fostered the prevalent belief that it was inherently distinct from Western empires. However, a detailed analysis of Soviet programs in areas such as the Caucasus and Central Asia uncovers distinct patterns of colonial dominance, exploitation, and cultural imposition, necessitating further investigation in postcolonial and development studies. By addressing this gap in this study, we might obtain a more nuanced comprehension of imperialism and its varied expressions across distinct historical and ideological settings.

TSARIST AND SOVIET COLONIALISMS IN CAUCASIA

The Tsarist Russian Empire's colonization of the Caucasus is a notable chapter in the larger narrative of European imperialism, exhibiting distinct similarities to the colonial strategies employed by Western powers like the British Empire and France. From the late 18th to the early 20th century, the Russian Empire progressively expanded its dominion over the Caucasus area, encompassing contemporary Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and portions of the North Caucasus. The Russian colonization of this region was marked by political control, economic exploitation, and cultural repression (Glasheva, 2019). In the late 18th century, Tsarist Russia focused on the Caucasus to expand its territory southward and acquire strategic leverage against the Ottoman Empire and Persia. The Treaty of Georgievsk (1783) established Russian protection over the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti (present-day Georgia), marking the commencement of a broader initiative to dominate the whole area. During the 19th century, the North Caucasus witnessed prolonged resistance spearheaded by leaders like Imam Shamil, who sought to maintain local autonomy against encroaching Russian imperial forces. Nevertheless, the Russian military ultimately subdued these resistance organizations by the use of severe measures, which encompassed mass deportations, coerced resettlements, and the annihilation of local communities (Шурхало, 2023). Circassian genocide and many other attempts of elimination of Caucasians can be seen as tragic examples of Russian aggression and colonial aims (Keskin, 2020). The quelling of regional insurrections in the Caucasus resembled the British military operations to subdue rebellions in India and the French endeavors against Algerian resistance.

After the territory was militarily subjugated, Russia established direct governmental control over the Caucasus. The area was restructured into imperial provinces, overseen by officials nominated by St. Petersburg,

responsible for upholding order and implementing imperial directives. This governance model, characterized by the rejection of local autonomy and the enforcement of foreign authority, epitomized colonialism as executed by European empires. The Russian Empire's colonial strategy in the Caucasus involved considerable economic exploitation, as the region was abundant in natural resources that could be taken for the advantage of the imperial core. In a manner akin to the British and French empires' exploitation of their colonies' economic potential, Russia aimed to harvest resources from the Caucasus to further its own growth and imperial aspirations. Agriculture in the productive lowlands of the Caucasus was restructured to meet the empire's demands, with land ownership arrangements modified to benefit Russian newcomers and local elites loyal to the Tsar (Вердиева, 2007). Indigenous communities were frequently uprooted from their native territories, which were allocated to Russian or Cossack immigrants, a procedure analogous to British land policy in India and Africa.

Education served as a pivotal instrument of Russification, with the establishment of Russian-language schools across the area to supplant native institutions. Indigenous languages, including Georgian, Armenian, and many North Caucasian languages, were sidelined, while Russian was established as the official language for government, education, and public life (ABN, 2023). The suppression of indigenous languages resembled British practices in India, which favored English as the medium of administration and education, as well as the French enforcement of their language in Algeria and West Africa. The Russian Empire aimed to exert control over religion as well. The Caucasus had several religious populations, including Muslims, Christians, and Pagans, however the Russian government endorsed the Russian Orthodox Church as the pre-eminent religion. Conversion to Orthodoxy was promoted, and the establishment of Orthodox churches was preferred, whilst Islamic institutions were frequently repressed (Вердиева, 2007). All of the above Tsarist colonial policies were sustained and many of them (e.g. repression of local religious identities) further intensified during the subsequent rule of the Soviet Union over the Caucasus.

The Soviet Union's hegemony over the Caucasus was characterized by a series of political, economic, and cultural programs that methodically transformed the region to conform to Soviet principles and Moscow's centralized authority. The Caucasus, inhabited by a variety of ethnic groups

and cultures, posed considerable problems to the Soviet state. Through a combination of coercion, suppression, and strategic administration, the Soviet Union aimed to assimilate this intricate territory into its overarching political and economic structure (Saparov, 2015; Drolet-Duguay, 2023; Tlostanova, 2011; Michaels, 2004; Breyfogle, 2005; Koplataдзе, 2019; George, 2009; Shafiyev, 2015). Although Soviet rhetoric highlighted equality, fraternity, and socialist progress, its tactics in the Caucasus closely resembled the colonial practices of Western empires. Soviet political dominance was established via coerced collectivization, consolidation of authority, and suppression of nationalist groups. The region was economically converted into a provider of raw materials for the Soviet industrial apparatus, while culturally, a systematic strategy of Russification and the repression of local identities aimed to incorporate various ethnic groups into the Soviet framework (Koplataдзе, 2019; George, 2009). This article examines the political, economic, and cultural policies implemented by the Soviet Union in the Caucasus, contending that these measures might be seen as a manifestation of colonialism.

The Caucasus, located at the intersection of Europe and Asia, has a protracted history of foreign rule. In the 19th century, the Russian Empire pushed into the region, subjugating Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, as well as ethnic groups such as the Chechens, Ingush, and Circassians. The Russian Empire utilized a combination of military might and settlement strategies to reinforce its dominance in the region. Following the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Caucasus temporarily had a phase of autonomy. By the early 1920s, the newly formed Soviet Union re-established dominance over the region, integrating it into the USSR as part of its expansive imperial objectives. Despite the Soviet Union's portrayal as a liberating entity, its actions in the next decades reflected the imperialism of the Russian Empire, with the Caucasus evolving into a colonial peripheral that catered to the political and economic interests of the Soviet state (Etkind, 2011; Golubev, 2023; Saparov, 2015; Shafiyev, 2015).

A defining element of Soviet governance in the Caucasus was the establishment of a highly centralized political structure that suppressed local autonomy and nationalist sentiments. Despite the Soviet Union's formal acknowledgment of the region's ethnic diversity and the establishment of republics like the Georgian SSR (Soviet Socialist Republic), Armenian SSR, and Azerbaijani SSR, these entities were rigorously governed by

Moscow, with leaders often appointed from outside the region to guarantee allegiance to the central authority. Initially, the Soviet Union harbored profound suspicion towards nationalist groups in the Caucasus, perceiving them as a menace to the cohesion of the USSR (Shafiyev, 2015).

Nationalist leaders involved in the ephemeral independence of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan following World War I were ruthlessly eliminated or banished (Shafiyev, 2015: 252-261). Georgian nationalists advocating for further autonomy or independence faced severe persecution, exemplified by the violent suppression of the August Uprising in 1924, resulting in the execution or imprisonment of hundreds of Georgian nationalists (Koplatadze, 2019). During the Soviet era, any manifestation of nationalism was promptly suppressed. In Azerbaijan, groups advocating for Azerbaijani identity in preference to Soviet nationality faced severe persecution, and cultural personalities attempting to advance indigenous languages and customs outside Soviet-sanctioned parameters were frequently detained or vanished (Shafiyev, 2015: 252-330). The political tactics of the Soviet Union were intended to undermine regional identities that would contest Soviet authority, mirroring colonial techniques utilized by Western empires to dominate subjugated populations (Etkind, 2011).

The Soviet collectivization strategy, enforced throughout the USSR in the late 1920s and early 1930s, had especially catastrophic consequences in the Caucasus. The region's agricultural communities were compelled to transition into collective farms, disrupting traditional lifestyles and enabling greater state control over the populace (Saparov, 2015; George, 2009). Peasants who opposed collectivization were labeled as "kulaks" (affluent peasants) and frequently faced deportation to Siberia or execution (Michaels, 2004; Breyfogle, 2005). This practice, observed in areas such as Georgia and Armenia, paralleled the forceful land policies enacted by European colonial powers to reinforce economic and political dominance over their colonies (Drolet-Duguay, 2023).

Furthermore, collectivization was accompanied by extensive political persecution, especially during the Stalinist purges of the 1930s. Political figures in the Caucasus accused of nationalist inclinations or deviation from the mainstream Soviet doctrine were systematically purged. Notable individuals like Lavrentiy Beria, the leader of the Georgian NKVD, administered mass murders and incarcerations, solidifying Soviet dominance via intimidation (Perović, 2015; Mccauley, 2009; Shafiyev,

2015: 252-330. The methods of political repression exhibit notable parallels to colonial administrations in Africa and Asia, when colonial authorities employed violence and intimidation to subjugate native people and suppress opposition.

The Soviet economic strategies in the Caucasus also reflected Western colonial methods, wherein the colonial periphery was predominantly seen as a resource reservoir for the industrial core (Saparov, 2015; Tlostanova, 2011; Etkind, 2011; Wallerstein, 2004). The region's plentiful natural resources, especially oil in Azerbaijan, were extensively utilized to power the Soviet industrial apparatus (Bolukbasi, 2011: 45-76; Brinegar, 2017; Sicotte, 2017; Mir-Babayev, 2017; Dasgupta, 1975; Nazaroff, 1941). Soviet propaganda highlighted the union's overall progress; yet the economic advantages of resource exploitation in the Caucasus mostly benefited the Russian heartland, resulting in local populations' socio-economic deprivation and over-reliance on Russia proper for economic survival (Brinegar, 2017; Mir-Babayev, 2017; Nazaroff, 1941). Azerbaijan, especially the city of Baku, emerged as a pivotal hub for Soviet oil production from the early 1930s onwards. The Baku oil resources were developed throughout the late Russian Empire, but under Soviet governance, output significantly increased to satisfy the demands of the Soviet military and industrial complex (Sicotte, 2017). During World War II, Baku's oil was crucial to the Soviet war effort, and the city emerged as one of the most industrialized locations in the USSR (Dasgupta, 1975; Nazaroff, 1941). In this context, it is noted that the oil industry of Azerbaijan SSR in 1942 produced 15.7-million-ton petroleum that constituted %71.7 of the total 21.9-million-ton petroleum produced in the entire USSR (Ibragimova, 2019: 123). Nonetheless, although Azerbaijan's oil riches were exploited and transported to Moscow, the local populace reaped few advantages from this exploitation in terms of enhanced human development standards (Brinegar, 2017; Bolukbasi, 2011: 45-76). The Soviet government regulated the revenues from oil extraction, leaving local Azerbaijani administrators with no influence over the management or allocation of these resources (Sicotte, 2017; Mir-Babayev, 2017).

This economic exploitation pattern, wherein resources are plundered from a peripheral for the advantage of a metropolitan core, epitomizes colonialism (Wallerstein, 2004; Frank, 1966; Rodney, 1972). The Soviet Union's exploitation of Azerbaijan as an oil colony parallels the British

Empire's appropriation of Indian cotton and Belgian dominance over Congolese rubber. The colonial periphery was systematically exploited for its natural resources to support the industrial expansion of the colonizing entity, while the indigenous populace endured persistent poverty and underdevelopment. Alongside resource exploitation, the Soviet Union enforced programs of coerced industrialization in the Caucasus, intending to assimilate the region more fully into the Soviet economic framework (Nazaroff, 1941; Shafiyev, 2015). Factories were constructed, and labor was recruited extensively to further Soviet economic objectives. Nonetheless, similar to colonial situations, this industrialization was sometimes enforced without consideration for local requirements or customs (Etkind, 2011).

In Armenia and Georgia, Soviet industrial policy prioritized heavy sectors such as mining and metallurgy, which had no significance to the local economy or traditional lifestyles (Saparov, 2015; Michaels, 2004). The establishment of these businesses resulted in the displacement of rural inhabitants, compelled urbanization, and the degradation of traditional livelihoods, akin to the experiences in colonial areas of Africa or South Asia. Furthermore, a significant portion of the industrial production from these areas was directed to Russia or other Soviet republics, therefore strengthening the colonial dynamic wherein the Caucasus functioned as a perimeter to Moscow's center (Shafiyev, 2015; Brinegar, 2017; Sicotte, 2017).

Cultural policies in the Caucasus sought to assimilate the region's different ethnic groups into the Soviet cultural and ideological paradigm. The cultural colonization process was propelled by two main mechanisms: Russification and the repression of local identity. Russification, the advancement of the Russian language and culture at the detriment of indigenous languages and customs, was a fundamental aspect of Soviet cultural policy. During the early Soviet era, there was a degree of tolerance for local languages and cultures, especially under Lenin's "korenizatsiya" (indigenization) policy; however, this approach was overturned under Stalin, leading to the predominance of the Russian language in all facets of public life (Hirsch, 2005; Drolet-Duguay, 2023). Russian was established as the official language for administration, education, and commerce, and proficiency in Russian became essential for social advancement (see Table 1). The enforced adoption of Russian culture and language parallels the cultural strategies employed by Western colonial powers, such as the

British in India and the French in North Africa, where the imposition of the colonial language functioned as a mechanism of control and assimilation. The prevalence of the Russian language in the Caucasus diminished indigenous cultures and established a social hierarchy, wherein ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking elites held positions of authority, while non-Russian communities were relegated to the periphery (Saparov, 2015; Breyfogle, 2005; Shafiyev, 2015; Hirsch, 2005).

Alongside language Russification, the Soviet Union aimed to repress religious and cultural activities it considered incompatible with Soviet ideology. Islam, widely prevalent in Azerbaijan and the North Caucasus, was specifically targeted. Mosques were shuttered, religious leaders were oppressed, and Islamic education faced significant limitations (Anderson, 1994; Bennigsen, 1988, 1979; Bethmann, 1958; Coşkun, 2008). In Georgia and Armenia, the Soviet regime suppressed the Orthodox Church, perceiving religion as a possible catalyst for nationalist fervor (Christensen, 2017; Erdozain, 2017). The Soviet administration prohibited or restricted cultural festivals, traditional attire, and other manifestations of ethnic identification in its pursuit of a homogenized Soviet identity that transcended local ethnic or religious attachments (Coşkun, 2008; Fagan, 2014). This cultural suppression exemplifies colonialism, as colonial authorities frequently endeavored to obliterate or diminish indigenous traditions in favor of the colonizer's prevailing culture.

Table 1. Russian Language Fluency of USSR Population

Latvian	%64.4
Kazakh	%60.5
Ukrainian	%56.2
Belarussian	%54.7
Moldavian	%53.8
Armenian	%47.1
Lithuanian	%37.9
Kirgiz	%35.2
Azerbaijani	%34.4
Estonian	%33.9
Georgian	%33.1
Tajik	%27.7
Turkmen	%27.7
Uzbek	%23.8

Source: Kommersant (2023) – based on 1989 USSR Census Data.

The Soviet Union's political, economic, and cultural policies in the Caucasus closely resemble the control and exploitation techniques utilized by Western colonial powers. The Soviet Union aimed to convert the Caucasus into a submissive periphery that catered to its interests through political repression, enforced economic integration, and cultural absorption. Although Soviet rhetoric highlighted independence and equality, the actual conditions were characterized by dominance, coercion, and exploitation, akin to those in the colonies of the British, French, and Belgian empires. Consequently, the acts of the Soviet Union in the Caucasus should be seen as a manifestation of colonialism, albeit being veiled in the rhetoric of socialist advancement and solidarity.

TSARIST AND SOVIET COLONIALISMS IN CENTRAL ASIA

Although Tsarist Russia is frequently analyzed as an isolated imperial state, its techniques for subjugating and exploiting Central Asia exhibit notable parallels to those utilized by Britain in India and France in North and West Africa. During the 19th century, Russia systematically annexed the Central Asian khanates of Khiva, Bukhara, and Kokand, using military force to quell local opposition. These missions were portrayed as essential to “civilize” and “pacify” the area, reflecting the discourse of European empires that rationalized colonization as a method of imparting order and enlightenment to ostensibly “backward” countries (Loring, 2014; Vasilyev, 2022). The Russian Empire's strategy of political control encompassed more than simple administration. It aimed to quell any manifestation of local opposition or nationalist feeling by oppressive tactics, including exile, death, and the coerced relocation of dissenting populations (Keskin, 2020). Comparable strategies were employed by the British in India, exemplified by the suppression of the Indian Rebellion of 1857, and by the French in Algeria, where resistance organizations were ruthlessly extinguished.

Similar to Western colonial powers, Russia aimed to use the economic riches of Central Asia for its own advantage. Cotton emerged as a principal commodity harvested from Central Asia, with extensive areas dedicated to cotton monoculture to supply the Russian textile industry (Weinerman, 1993; Schorkowitz, 2019). This strategy was analogous to the British exploitation of Indian cotton and the French harvest of rubber and other resources from Africa. The transition to monoculture had catastrophic consequences for Central Asia's economy and society, compelling local inhabitants to forsake traditional agricultural methods in favor of cash crop

cultivation. The allocation of resources for Russian industrial requirements resulted in extensive poverty and food scarcity among the local populace, a trend that closely resembles the famines and economic disruption encountered in British India during colonial governance (Вердиева, 2007). Moreover, Russian economic strategies in Central Asia aimed to assimilate the region into the larger imperial economy. Infrastructure initiatives, such as the development of the Trans-Caspian Railway, enhanced the transportation of commodities from Central Asia to Russia, allowing the empire to procure resources more effectively. These initiatives, although enhancing connectivity, mostly advanced Russian economic goals, akin to the railways constructed by the British in India for the transportation of raw resources and merchandise for export to Britain.

Education served as a fundamental instrument of Russification. Russian-language educational institutions were built across the area, and initiatives were undertaken to supplant Islamic religious schools with secular Russian establishments. This reflects the educational strategies of the British in India, which pushed English-language education to cultivate a class of educated Indians loyal to the British Empire, akin to the French mission civilisatrice that aimed to disseminate French culture and language in its colonies. Religion became another domain in which Russian colonial administrations aimed to exert influence. The Russian Empire, although officially endorsing Orthodoxy, predominantly permitted Islam in Central Asia, provided it did not contest Russian authority. Nonetheless, religious leaders who resisted Russian authority were frequently repressed, and indigenous Islamic customs were controlled (Vasilyev, 2022). The Tsarist colonialism experience illustrates that colonialism extended beyond Western European powers, revealing that the mechanisms of political subjugation, economic exploitation, and cultural repression were prevalent throughout several empires, irrespective of their geographic origins. Post-1917 Soviet policies in the region continued many aspects of Tsarist colonial regime over Central Asia.

The Soviet Union's tactics in Central Asia, ostensibly aimed at modernization and socialist development, were in reality oppressive and profoundly exploitative, closely resembling the practices of European colonial powers. Central Asia, comprising contemporary Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, underwent various political, economic, and cultural policies that transformed the area to align

with Soviet values, mostly serving the interests of the Soviet state rather than that of the local populace (Khalid, 2021; Teichmann, 2009; Pipes, 1983; Clem, 1992; Stringer, 2003; Florin, 2017; Loring, 2014; Caroe, 1953). These measures not only curtailed local autonomy and identities but also appropriated resources and altered the region's economy to predominantly benefit Soviet industrial and political aims. Initially, Soviet governance in Central Asia was marked by the establishment of a highly centralized administrative framework aimed at assimilating the region into the larger Soviet political system. Central Asia was partitioned into Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs) that were ostensibly autonomous but, in practice, were administered by Moscow via local elites loyal to the Communist Party (Khalid, 2021; Caroe, 1953; Clem, 1992).

The political framework of the Central Asian republics was established to stifle any manifestation of local autonomy or nationalist enthusiasm. Local leaders who opposed Soviet dominance or sought to enhance their republics' autonomy were promptly ousted from office (Pipes, 1983; Loring, 2014; Khalid, 2021). The hiring of local Communist Party officials from external regions further diminished local authority, since leaders frequently originated from Russia or other non-Central Asian countries to guarantee their allegiance to Moscow. This pattern of political centralization and control reflects the colonial strategy of governing through loyal elites or "collaborators" who advanced the colonizer's interests while subverting indigenous governance systems (Teichmann, 2009).

Similar to other regions of the Soviet Union, Central Asia had significant suppression of nationalist groups. Any manifestation of dissent or opposition to Soviet authority was ruthlessly suppressed. During the 1920s and 1930s, nationalist groups in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan aimed at promoting local identity or independence were relentlessly repressed (Fierman, 1991; Keller, 1992; Loring, 2014). The Basmachi Movement, an anti-Soviet insurrection in Central Asia, saw severe military suppression, resulting in the deaths or imprisonment of thousands of native combatants and civilians (Khalid, 2006; Paksoy, 1995). Stalin's purges in the 1930s specifically targeted Central Asian political leaders seen to possess nationalist or anti-Soviet inclinations (Loring, 2014). The local aristocracy also faced accusations of counter-revolutionary activities, sometimes based on fabricated allegations, resulting in executions or incarceration in labor camps (Paksoy, 1995). This repression reflects colonial tactics

employed by Western nations, like Britain and France, which frequently utilized force to quell nationalist movements and sustain dominance over their territories.

The Soviet Union's economic strategies in Central Asia were predominantly extractive, emphasizing the utilization of the region's natural resources to support Soviet Russia's industrialization. A notable instance of this was the coerced production of cotton in Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries. During Soviet governance, extensive areas of Central Asia were transformed into cotton monocultures, compelling indigenous farmers to cultivate cotton for sale to Soviet industrial hubs (Clem, 1992). This not only disturbed conventional agricultural methods but also resulted in extensive environmental damage, notably shown by the Aral Sea tragedy, where the diversion of water for cotton irrigation precipitated one of the most severe environmental catastrophes of the 20th century (Stringer, 2003). The cotton industry in Central Asia operated similarly to the resource extraction economies of European colonies in Africa and South Asia, wherein the colonized areas were converted into suppliers of raw materials for the advantage of the conquering entity. Similar to the British extraction of cotton from India for their textile mills, the Soviet Union utilized Central Asian cotton to support its industrial sector, disregarding the welfare of the local populace and the environmental repercussions.

Besides cotton, Central Asia has abundant natural resources such as oil, gas, and minerals. These resources were similarly utilized to advantage the Soviet Union, with local communities being marginalized from the economic gains derived from their own resources (Loring, 2014). The region's oil and gas reserves were predominantly developed to provide energy to the Soviet core, with earnings managed by Moscow instead of being spent in the local economy (Etkind, 2011). This pattern of resource extraction and exploitation epitomizes colonialism, when colonies function as resource bases for the economic advantage of the colonizing entity. Alongside resource exploitation, Central Asia saw enforced collectivization and industrialization efforts throughout Soviet governance. The collectivization of agriculture, initiated in the late 1920s under Stalin, was enforced in Central Asia with extreme brutality. Farmers were compelled to relinquish their property and cattle to participate in state-controlled communal farms. Individuals who opposed were designated as "kulaks" (affluent peasants) and frequently faced execution, imprisonment, or deportation to work

camps (Yakovlyev, 2022; Etkind, 2011). The coerced collectivization of agriculture resulted in extensive starvation and hardship, especially in Kazakhstan, where it is claimed that over 1.5 million individuals perished due to famine and enforced displacement (Kindler, 2018; Pianciola, 2001: 237-251).

The industrialization strategies implemented in Central Asia reflected colonial practices. Soviet planners frequently established factories and industrial complexes in Central Asia not to address the need of the local populace but to bolster the overarching Soviet economy. The establishment of extensive industrial facilities in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan throughout the 1930s and 1940s was predominantly intended for the production of commodities for export to the Soviet Russia, rather than for domestic use (Caroe, 1953; Stringer, 2003; Loring, 2014). This style of coerced industrialization, which favored the interests of the imperial core at the expense of the local populace, typifies colonial economies, wherein conquered territories are converted into providers of raw resources and products for the advantage of the colonizer.

Cultural policies in Central Asia sought to assimilate the region's varied ethnic groups into the Soviet ideological and cultural framework, mirroring the cultural assimilation tactics employed by Western colonial powers. A major element of this cultural colonization was the Russification strategy, which aimed to elevate the Russian language and culture while undermining indigenous languages and customs (see Table 1). Russian was established as the official language for government, education, and commerce throughout Central Asia, and competence in Russian was essential for social mobility and access to influential positions within the Communist Party (Adams, 2011). Despite the Soviet Union's formal endorsement of "internationalism" and the equality of all ethnic groups, Russian culture was favored in practice, while non-Russian ethnic groups were either encouraged or compelled to embrace the Russian language and cultural norms. This reflects the cultural strategies of Western empires, such as the British, French, and Spanish, which frequently enforced their languages and cultural traditions on their colonies to cultivate a more cooperative and homogenous populace.

The Soviet Union implemented a program of eradicating religious and traditional customs in Central Asia, perceiving them as impediments to the establishment of a modern communist society. Islam, predominantly

observed by the majority in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan, was specifically attacked. Mosques were shuttered, religious leaders were oppressed, and Islamic instruction was prohibited (Teichmann, 2009; Khalid, 2021). The state furthermore advocated atheism and endeavored to supplant conventional religious behaviors with Soviet-sanctioned cultural festivals and rituals. Alongside Islam, several traditions and customs were repressed, especially those perceived as bolstering local identities or nationalist feelings. Traditional attire and festivals were suppressed, while Soviet-sanctioned cultural traditions were endorsed instead (Adams, 2011). This practice of cultural suppression exemplifies colonialism, as the colonizer endeavors to obliterate or diminish indigenous culture to impose its own cultural ideals and standards. From a postcolonial viewpoint, Soviet policy in Central Asia might be interpreted as a manifestation of colonialism, notwithstanding the Soviet Union's formal disavowal of the imperial term and its portrayal as a liberating entity for subjugated populations. The political repression, economic exploitation, and cultural assimilation enforced by the Soviet regime in Central Asia closely resemble the control techniques employed by European colonial powers in other regions globally.

The political centralization and suppression of local nationalist movements, the exploitation of resources for the advantage of the Soviet economy, and the implementation of cultural assimilation programs all illustrate the colonial characteristics of Soviet governance in Central Asia. Moreover, the Soviet state's rationale for these policies—modernization, progress, and the establishment of a communist society—mirrors the “civilizing mission” discourse employed by Western colonial powers to legitimize their subjugation of non-Western populations. Despite the Soviet Union's assertion of constructing a new and equal society, its treatment of Central Asia has several parallels to the processes of dominance, exploitation, and cultural erasure inherent in classical colonialism. The establishment of Soviet authority in Central Asia was not a consensual emancipation but a forceful and sometimes violent endeavor that subjugated the region to the interests of the Soviet state.

The political, economic, and cultural policies of the Soviet Union in Central Asia exhibit all the characteristics of colonialism. The Soviet state, by enforcing centralized political authority, extracting resources for its own advantage, and suppressing indigenous cultures and identities,

converted Central Asia into a colonial periphery that catered to the interests of the imperial core. Notwithstanding its discourse of emancipation and parity, the Soviet Union's approach to Central Asia exposes a profoundly exploitative and forceful dynamic, closely resembling the characteristics of traditional colonialism as executed by European empires. Characterizing Soviet governance in Central Asia as a manifestation of colonialism facilitates a more sophisticated comprehension of Soviet imperialism and the overarching processes of colonialism in the 20th century.

CONCLUSION

This article has contended that the Soviet Union, frequently omitted from conventional postcolonialism and development studies discourse, ought to be acknowledged as a colonial power – especially regarding its governance of Central Asia and the Caucasus. The oversight of the Soviet Union as a colonial empire in critical academic discourse might be attributed to the ideological connections between Marxism and postcolonialism, which perceived Soviet socialism as a liberating force rather than one of oppression. However, the historical reality of Soviet dominance in non-Russian territories – especially in Eurasia – demonstrates patterns of exploitation, repression, and cultural obliteration that closely resemble traditional colonial tactics.

The Soviet Union used diverse political, economic, and cultural policies in Central Asia and the Caucasus that exhibit distinct parallels with the colonial tactics of Western empires. Moscow exercised stringent control over local administrations, suppressing any semblance of local autonomy or nationalist sentiment via repression, purges, and the elevation of loyal Soviet elites. The region's resources were exploited and misdirected to enrich the Soviet core, causing local communities to endure the consequences of enforced collectivization, monoculture cultivation, and industrial exploitation. The Soviet authorities culturally enforced Russification, methodically eroding indigenous languages, religious practices, and customs, while advancing Soviet ideology over local identities. These programs aimed to convert the periphery into an obedient, economically productive, and ideologically congruent territory that fulfilled the requirements of the Soviet state.

The article has illustrated that Soviet activities in Central Asia and the Caucasus might be seen as colonialism, not alone owing to the oppressive and exploitative characteristics of Soviet governance, but also because of the overarching structural dynamics of center-periphery interactions.

Similar to the British, French, and Belgian empires, the Soviet Union subjugated these territories to fulfill the political, economic, and ideological requirements of the metropolis. The execution of this action under the pretense of socialism does not diminish the underlying imperial forces involved. The Soviet Union continued a kind of rule akin to imperialism by controlling local resources, enforcing political repression, and eradicating cultural individuality.

Postcolonial theory has long argued that once a colonial regime is established over a territory, it may be extremely difficult to shake off the political, economic and cultural “chains of dependence” – even if said territory manages to obtain official independence as a polity. The ease in which Russian President Vladimir Putin has been able to wield “neo-colonial” influence over the newly independent states of Caucasus and Central Asia since the early 2000s can be seen as evidence that the Soviet Union indeed established deep roots of colonialism in these lands. Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, contemporary Russia persists in having considerable impact over the post-Soviet space. Russia’s present-day neo-colonial tactics encompass military operations, economic coercion, and the exploitation of ethnic and territorial disputes to sustain its regional power. Russia’s neo-colonial influence in Georgia, for example, is seen in the disputes around Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Following the Rose Revolution in 2003, which established a pro-Western administration in Georgia, Russia leveraged its military and political clout to bolster separatist groups in these areas, ultimately leading to the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. By acknowledging Abkhazia and South Ossetia as autonomous entities and deploying military forces in these regions, Russia has essentially undermined Georgia’s sovereignty. This military operation aims to maintain Georgia’s instability and dependency, obstructing its aspirations to join Western organizations such as NATO and the European Union. In this perspective, Russia’s activities reflect the divide-and-rule strategies employed by colonial powers, wherein ethnic and territorial divides were manipulated to undermine and dominate subordinate states.

Russia has established itself as a vital military ally in Armenia, operating a military post in Gyumri and serving as a principal armaments supplier. Armenia’s profound military reliance on Russia undermines its sovereignty, compelling it to conform to Russian geopolitical goals, frequently to the detriment of its own national objectives (Terzyan, 2018). Russia uses

economic integration frameworks, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), as instruments of neo-colonial dominance. Armenia, for instance, is a member of the EAEU, which constrains its economic autonomy and strengthens its connection to the Russian market. Despite being portrayed as a cooperative economic union, the EAEU frequently operates as a tool for Russia to exert dominance over the economic policies of member nations, hence maintaining their reliance on Moscow (Gast, 2023). Azerbaijan has mostly upheld an autonomous foreign policy, particularly owing to its critical oil and gas resources; yet, Russia continues to exert considerable influence on the nation's security dynamics. In the 2020 Second Nagorno-Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Russia engaged diplomatically, facilitating a ceasefire and deploying peacekeeping troops to the area. This enabled Russia to reaffirm its influence in Azerbaijan without direct military dominance. Russia's participation in the war guarantees that both Armenia and Azerbaijan depend on Moscow for conflict settlement, hence preserving Russia's position as the principal mediator in regional security issues.

The relationship between Russia and the Central Asian republics—Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan—since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 is frequently described as neo-colonial (Gherasim, 2020). Despite achieving official independence, these states remain under substantial political, economic, and cultural influence from Russia. Russia has endeavored to sustain its supremacy through a confluence of economic dependence, military alliances, and cultural affiliations, employing techniques that closely mirror well-known neo-colonial methods. Russia primarily exerts power over Central Asia through economic reliance. A significant number of Central Asian economies remain tightly linked to Russia due to their historical integration within the Soviet Union, and this reliance has continued in the post-Soviet era. The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), functions as a principal mechanism of economic unification. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are participants in the EAEU, which operates not only as an economic cooperative but also as a mechanism for Russia to exert influence on the economic policies of its member states. The EAEU restricts member states' capacity to freely negotiate trade deals with non-member nations, so constraining their economic autonomy.

Russia also employs military alliances and security agreements as tools of neo-colonial dominance in Central Asia. The Collective Security Treaty

Organization (CSTO), a military alliance commanded by Russia comprising Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, serves as a crucial instrument for Russia to exert its control over the security dynamics of the area. Despite being formally characterized as a cooperative defense alliance, the CSTO functions as an instrument for Russia to sustain a military presence and to influence the security policy of its member nations. Russia's military intervention in Kazakhstan was particularly evident during the 2022 turmoil, which was triggered by protests against economic circumstances and political persecution. Kazakhstan's government solicited aid from the CSTO, leading to the deployment of Russian soldiers to suppress the protests. This action not only secured the Kazakh regime but also solidified Russia's position as the principal guarantee of regional security (Libman and Davidzon 2023). Such operations reflect the tactics employed by neo-colonial powers to exert military dominance over their colonies, sometimes masquerading as efforts to preserve stability.

Tajikistan, strategically situated adjacent to Afghanistan, exemplifies Russia's utilization of military alliances to exert power. Russia sustains a substantial military presence in the nation, exemplified by the 201st Military Base, one of the largest Russian military installations beyond its borders. The military presence enables Moscow to shape Tajikistan's security policy and guarantees the nation's reliance on Russian assistance to address internal and foreign security concerns, especially those arising from instability in neighboring Afghanistan. Turkmenistan, with the fourth-largest natural gas reserves globally, has historically relied on Russian pipelines for gas exportation. Despite Turkmenistan's efforts to diversify its export channels, notably through the development of the China-Central Asia gas pipeline, Russia continues to have considerable influence over the region's energy industry. State-controlled Russian energy enterprises, including Gazprom and Rosneft, are pivotal in Central Asian energy production and transportation, therefore securing the region's energy resources in alignment with Russian goals (Baev, 2014). The domination of natural resources exemplifies neo-colonial exploitation, as colonial powers extract riches from their colonies, perpetuating their dependence on the colonizer for access to global markets. Russia's dominance over Central Asian energy resources guarantees that the region's economic prosperity is linked to Russian interests, hindering these nations from attaining complete economic autonomy.

The article has advocated for a more nuanced examination of colonialism and development, prompting researchers to re-evaluate the ideological assumptions that have traditionally influenced literature. Treating the Soviet Union as a colonial state – and contemporary Russia as a neo-colonial power – facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms of imperialism across many political situations, be they capitalist or socialist. This article aims to further the critical analysis of colonialism, transcending ideological confines and acknowledging the various kinds of control that have influenced the contemporary world.

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