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More-than-state ontologies of territory: Commoning, assembling, peopling

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Abstract

The idea of territory as a bounded, state-centric enclosure has been recently confronted with the help of decolonial insights. This paper attempts to overcome the resultant dichotomies between the statist and organic readings of territory by demonstrating how the making of the Russian state has been contingent on decolonial narratives and territorial imaginaries that have far exceeded the notions of the state as such. The Russian political geographic traditions have historically allowed for the coexistence of multiple and heterogeneous conceptions of territory, which were varyingly assembled to fit specific geo-political intentions. This paper delineates three ontological origins of the Russian territory that have consequently played key part in shaping the Russian territorial politics: (i) the ontology of commoning, deriving inspiration from communal land use and the collective autonomy of the peasant society, (ii) the ontology of assembling, grounded in the anthropogeographical imaginary of the 'borderless' Eurasian landmass and its nomadic livelihoods, and (iii) the ontology of peopling, grounded in the taxonomies of modernization and rational distribution of human subjects. Scrutinizing the interplay of these ontologies extends the

understanding of the porosity and plurality of the concept of territory and offers insights into the roots of Russia's own geo-political worldviews and their coloniality.

Keywords: *territory, state, political geography, history of geographic thought, Russia*

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INTRODUCTION

> The prime quality of the Russian space is its size. Russian space is always a large, great space. [...] By far, not all peoples and not all societies imagine space like this, but the Russians see it precisely as endless, vast, infinite, and lacking (within the limits of visibility) concrete borders (Dugin 2011, 186).

The state-centric gaze historically played an important role in political geography, offering some of the most insightful accounts of the spatial relations of power – including the reading of territory. Indeed, many influential works have portrayed the European nation-state, sovereign control, and bordering as key pillars of the concept (Giddens 1985; Gottmann 1973; Mann 1984). Following a post-statist turn, however, there has been a growing discontent with these approaches

leading to attempts that emphasized the multiplicities of territorial relations and challenged connections between state sovereignty and territoriality (Häkli 2001; Sparke 2005). One notable project here has been the one that stems from a decolonial lens and a wider commitment to decenter disciplinary geography (Noxolo 2017). This has not only revealed ground-up spatial strategies of power-making by indigenous and peasant communities, but also emancipated territory from its Western-centric knowledge structures, assisted by the insights into the "organic" ontologies embedded in the local context (Bryan 2012; Reyes and Kaufman 2011).

This article offers further insights into these debates by attempting to overcome the dichotomies between the statist and decolonial perspectives. We rather demonstrate the contingency of state territory on a variety of traditions and influences, which may exceed the idea of the state as such. We do so by exploring a set of ontologies, from which the Russian state—the focal point of this paper—has historically sourced its own territoriality and sovereignty.

Territory, in a familiar reading, acts as a bounded space, in which it is *the state* that gives birth to the territory and that encloses and encases as well as orders and regulates (Elden 2013). Yet, as we argue below, the Russian political rationale historically escaped such lineages of territory, the nature of which was actively debated in the development of Russian political, geographical, and philosophical intellectual traditions (Bassin 1991; Graybill 2007; Laruelle 2013; Oldfield and Shaw 2015). Russian perspectives cultivated an interpretation, in which it is rather the state itself that emerges as a product of territorial relations.

In this reading, territory is portrayed as collectively cultivated from the soil, which sustains organic state spatiality as an act of the 'gathering of the Russian lands' into one supra-ethnographic multitude. Even the projects of scientification and territorial development have emerged from the pluralistic visions of territory that differed from the understandings of the concept as premised on spatial enclosure. Here, conceptions such as soil, landscape and terrain

contributed to the multifaceted understanding of territory, consequently also informing geopolitical discourses and practices. It is this plurality of spatial relations that calls us to examine the interrelated and yet often contradictory ontologies of territory and the ways in which they have been assembled to produce specific political ideologies and projects throughout Russian history.

By initiating a dialogue between territory and Russian *territoriya,* we re-introduce a wealth of classical works by Russian spatial theorists, who, while borrowing from Eurocentric paradigms, appropriated original imaginaries from within Russia's cultural traditions, at the same time as repackaging them to justify the subjugation of its own citizens and neighbors. Here, we do not encompass all the depth of the traditional Russian thought, and we limit ourselves to a few and fairly dominant canons of knowledge – admittedly at the expense of the myriads of other, including subaltern voices. Yet we believe our paper will open doors for more extended explorations in this regard while further illuminating the limits of the statist/organic dichotomies in political geography. We also highlight that the classical Russian scholarship can assist in deciphering Russia's own colonial endeavors as well as their ongoing geopolitical ambitions, including those that arguably amounted to a war on Ukraine.

With these conditions attached, we chart three articulations of territory that historically assisted in shaping Russian territorial politics: (i) the ontology of commoning, deriving inspiration from communal land use and the collective autonomy of the peasant society, (ii) the ontology of assembling, grounded in the anthropogeographical imaginaries of the borderless Eurasian terrain and its nomadic livelihoods, and (iii) the ontology of peopling, grounded in the taxonomies of modernization and rational distribution of human subjects. The combinations and intersections of these have arguably given rise to Russia's various perceptions of spatial relations

of power and can thus also serve as an entry point to discern Russian geopolitical attitudes and their repercussions.

Our contribution is twofold. First, we bring territory into the 'Russia debate.' Territorial politics is central to Russia's internal and external exercises of power, yet a critical use of analytical frames of territory to examine Russian politics has gained little attention (Tsygankov 2003). Hence, understanding how adopting, modifying, or rejecting the Western-centric conception of territory in Russian major philosophical movements legitimized new modes of territorial appropriation becomes a key question. Second, we bring Russia into the 'territory debate.' Russian conceptual apparatus for understanding the spatial relations of power employs a myriad of other concepts—land, terrain, landscape, or soil, to name just a few—whose interconnections are often overlooked in the 'Western theory' since they have been studied as separate analytical entities. Hence, instead of offering a clear-cut definition of Russian *territoria*, we draw out manifold spatial vocabularies used to achieve political cohesion throughout Russian history – in line with or in opposition to the Western idea of territory.

Beyond Russia, the scholarship that we will discuss was also fundamental for a number of major international movements, from critical agrarian or peasant studies and various abolitionist and anarchist frameworks to nationalism and far-right thought, and yet they have been only scarcely explored in the modern Anglophone scholarship. For example, works by Chicherin, Lamanskiy, Savitskiy, Gumilev, and others influenced the global modes of knowledge production about space and power, yet not in direct linear ways. Eurasianists contributed and "exercised powerful influence" in the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, and the development of structuralist political thought (Glebov 2017), while works of the Slavophile and Pochvennik philosophical movements were used for comparative analyses among peasant societies and customary practices of land management across the world, pioneered by James C. Scott and

Teodor Shanin (Scott 1998; Shanin 1971). Illustrative here are also the early Soviet theories of socio-environmental synthesis, such as Gumilev's ethnogenesis or Vernadsky's noosphere, which transcended environmental determinism and notably "pre-dated early Anglophone writings on humans in landscapes (e.g. Sauer 1925) and present-day conceptions of sustainability" (Graybill, 2007; also Oldfield and Shaw, 2006). These accounts were arguably part of a longer tradition of pluralistic comprehensions that differ from the state-centric understandings of territory as a "fixed space of law, calculation and violence" (Usher 2019).

The rest of the article is organized as follows. We start with a brief positioning of the main theses within the development of decentered, mainly decolonial approaches to territory. This is followed by a three-fold discussion of ontological configurations of territory – each tied to specific categories of spatial analysis and territorial manifestations proposed by different intellectual movements and informing different political projects. Finally, we conclude with a reflection on the implications and possible contributions of the Russian conceptualizations of territory to the political geographic field of study.

RUSSIAN LINEAGES IN POSTCOLONIAL DEBATES

The concept of territory has been mobilized by various philosophical movements, envisioning it, for example: as a spatially enclosed part of the Earth's surface under the control of a group of people (Gottmann 1973; Sack 1986); as a "defined segment of a material world" assigned with a certain meaning (Delaney 2005, 14); or later revised as a 'political calculative space', a 'political technology', or a process, rather than an outcome of the spatial relations (Elden 2013; Murphy 2013; Paasi 2008; Raffestine 2012). Typically positioning these debates across the lines of state sovereignty has, however, limited the discussion to the questions of top-down governance, focusing on the colonial state as one of the "most complex and achieved formats for territory" (Sassen 2013, 21), thus directly or indirectly privileging the Eurocentric understandings at the

cost of their alternatives (for an overview see Elden 2013; also: Minca et al. 2015). Such theorizations of territory have been debated with the advent of the relational and topological shifts – for example, deconstructing the reading of state spatiality and rather theorizing territory as a social practice and as an effect of social relations (Painter 2010).

Explorations of alternative imaginaries of territory in different languages and contexts further illustrate the limits of the Western gaze. Postcolonial perspectives have been revealing in resisting the historical lineages of rationalization and calculation under the rubric of Eurocentric modernity (Jazeel 2017; Radcliffe 2017). Comprising different strands, this scholarship has, for example, explored experiences of indigenous disempowerment and anti-colonial demands for territorial autonomy (Offen 2003; Reyes and Kaufman 2011), as well as grassroots and peasant strategies of claiming landed property or food sovereignty beyond the territorial logic of state control (Baletti 2012; Trauger 2014).

Perhaps the most accomplished decolonial reading of territory has thus far stemmed from a Latin American standpoint (Bryan 2012; Clare, Habermehl, and Mason-Deese, 2018; Sandoval, Robertsdotter, and Paredes 2017). Turning attention to spatial strategies as means of living, survival, and counter-hegemony brought to the fore a widened conception of territory as the "appropriation of space in pursuit of political projects – in which multiple (from bottom-up grassroots to top-down state) political strategies exist as overlapping and entangled" (Halvorsen 2019, 2; see also Halvorsen, Fernandes, and Torres 2019). As a variant, this decolonial effort has searched for radical alternatives to modernity, drawing attention to the localized experiences of social movements across Latin America (e.g., Asher 2013; Escobar 2008; Mignolo 2007). Instead of dismantling Eurocentric rationality altogether, it acknowledged the ways in which "Western frameworks have often been vernacularized" (Radcliffe 2017, 330), while also recognizing the

limits of developing true alternatives to modernity from the ground-up social movements (Bryan 2012).

While Russia has been a challenge to decolonial thought, which "inextricably associates modernity with capitalism, the nation-state, and liberal democracy" (Koplatadze 2019, 4), bringing post-socialist politics into a postcolonial analysis—or "thinking between the posts"—has recently gathered much fruitful thought (Chari and Verdery 2009; Karkov and Valiavicharska 2018; Kušić, Lottholz, and Manolova 2019; Tlostanova 2012). A specific role of Russia in this comparative decolonial project has yet been conflicting. While itself an imperial power and a colonizing nation – not least in relation to the Eurasian landmass and peoples it has absorbed – "Russia engaged in a massive effort to manufacture a history, one that stands in partial opposition to the history created by the West" (Thompson 2000, 23 in Koplatadze 2019). Russia's 'Janus-faced' colonial practices – constructed against Russia's neighbors but also portrayed by the state as outside Western modernity and, therefore, as a form of decolonization (Tlostanova 2003) – make it an interesting and conflicting voice in this debate.

The idea of decolonization has long been prevalent in Russian official discourse (in philosophical thought and state territorial policy) but was presented differently in different periods. In the early Soviet period, it was discussed in relation to the undoing of the historical wrongs of the Russian imperial past as the Soviet Union portrayed itself as the "empire of affirmative action" (Martin 2001) or "empire of nations" (Hirsch 2005), while in pre- and post-Soviet times the statist decolonial discourse was rather turned against the "creeping" Western influences. But no matter the direction of the supposed decolonization, these perspectives were used by state actors for achieving their own geopolitical objectives. These alternative projects created to contrast European colonial experiences have historically appropriated ground-up spatial practices of collective land ownership, peasant sacralization of nature, or indigenous and

nomadic ways of life to only mobilize them in Russia's own modes of colonizing (Erley 2021; Sunderland 2016).

Hence a goal of this paper is to address how the concept and the practice of territory were shaped as a result of the intersection of the Russian-built imperial reasoning with the experiences of those subjugated by its "salvation rhetoric" (from the peasants of the Russian land commune to the steppe peoples and tribes). We think this is complex intersectionality worth exploring, as ideological discourses of the Russian state were superimposed on its colonial practices resulting in complex territorial outcomes.

Methodologically, our analysis followed a deductive approach by which we first identified larger philosophical influences in Russian historiography and analyzed their dialogue with territory and the state. These helped us to articulate the three ontological perspectives of territory and trace them in more detail through a literature review and archival research. Firstly, this involved an archival analysis of the socio-political and agrarian periodicals that impacted the development of social thought and practice, in particular around the logic of commoning. These were collected and analyzed at the Russian State Historical Archive. Secondly, it involved an analysis of the classical texts that chronicled the development of Russian intellectual movements from the late 19th-early 20th century, theorizing about spatial relations. These were retrieved from the Russian State Library and open sources.

The scholarship we reviewed comes from an official geographical canon, hence self-interest of the ruling classes plays a central role. This is not the least since the scholarly outlets where much research was published were state-sanctioned, and many scholars themselves were involved in state politics, from conducting ethnographic surveys for the early Soviet state to helping shape the post-Soviet geopolitical agenda. One of the interesting aspects of this scholarship, however, is that it spilled outside the academy to define society at large and

influenced governmental policy and everyday discourse substantially. It was indeed used by the state to legitimize territorial pursuits, but at the same time discussed by some scholars as a potential for liberatory politics. This intermingling of different philosophical discourses with different political attitudes throughout the imperial and later Soviet periods serves as the base for discussion in this paper.

ENCOUNTERING RUSSIAN SPACE

Power in the Russian political context, both top-down and bottom-up, has interpreted space as infinite and unlimited; hence the tendency to spatial bordering was seen as foreign and borrowed from abroad (Akhiyezer 2002; Filippov 2002; Zamyatina 1999). In the words of Pyotr Chaadaev, a Russian philosopher and intellectual of the early 19th century, "[o]ur whole history is a product of the nature of that vast land that we inherited; it was she who scattered us in all directions and scattered in space from the very first days of our existence" (Chaadaev 1994, 26 in Zamyatin 2003). This spatial quality of vastness and remoteness often amounted to spatial anxiety or the "chronic deficiency of power" (Korolev 1997). This not only implied the weakness of power mechanisms to defend the wide, open frontiers of the nation and inefficiency of border-making strategies (commonly considered under the rubric of 'territory') but also resulted in various contradictory consequences, from the inability of political technologies to stratify geographic space leaving it systematically "idle" or "empty," to the "unlimited implementation of direct violence that compensated for technological insufficiency with the accretion of extremely rigid macro technologies" of power (Korolev 1997). Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev believed that since the organization of the Russian space proved impossible, it prevented the consolidation of the "form" (Berdiaev [1918] 2017; Mjør, 2017). Obtaining that form would present the "liberation of the Russian creativity from its physiological repression by the Russian land" (Prokudenkova 2015), as "the Russian soul is bruised by vastness" and this borderlessness "does

not liberate but enslaves it" (Berdiaev [1918] 2017). Russia's destiny is to master space, hence if controlled properly, it will generate new energy.

Russian political and geographical scholars consequently mobilized the idea of territory in many different and sometimes conflicting ways, in support of or in tension with the state. This plurality stemmed from the development of various conflicting philosophical movements of Slavophilism, Pochvennichestvo (return to the native soil), Narodnichestvo (populism), Eurasianism, and Zapadnichestvo (Westernism), to name a few, which built on longer-term and engrained territorial imaginaries using the concepts of land, soil, terrain, landscape, or place to describe the multitude of Russia's spatial expressions of power. Our three selected ontologies of territory grow from these distinct traditions that directly or indirectly employed different (and often grassroots) spatial categories for the explanation of the operations of state power. These also correspond with different political technologies employed by the state for its colonial endeavors or, on the contrary, mobilized in the anti-colonial struggles. Migrating from one tradition to another, the conception of *territoriya* did not solidify in a static and dominant form but rather remained fluid and articulated in different ways (Table 1). Reflection on this multiplicity and complexity is something that exposes the epistemological limits of the Western-centric reading of the concept and its uniform spatial logics.

This ontological mosaic has generated a vast array of possible spatial scenarios of power with corresponding political technologies – some of which we review below. While helping to construct other notions of territory in contrast to their Western counterparts, these ontologies also molded the decolonial narrative to absorb local experiences, which have been varyingly assembled to legitimize territorial expansions. Divergence of the Russian territorial-administrative policies from other, more traditional modes of colonization generated a plethora of different official discourses. Also, the role of those affected by Russia's colonial actions changed

accordingly within this narrative. Russia's own territorial practices should be discussed at the intersection of these perspectives, situating its different modes, tactics, and effects on local communities.

COMMONING: SOIL, LAND, NAROD

It is believed that the unbounded nature of Russian geographic space contributed to the formation of the "defense consciousness" and the preservation of community and collectivism (Korolev 2002). Territory here emerges from the philosophical investigations of Slavophile and Pochvennichestvo movements based on their learnings about the experiences of the Russian land commune, or *mir*. *Mir* has appropriated land in the pursuit of peasant collectivist autonomy – neither within nor fully without the state – since the 14th century, hence defying the territorial logic of private property (Smirnova 2019). The spatial organization of the commune was maintained with customary practices of annual land repartitioning and everyday land management, through which *mir* reproduced the systems of alternative socio-economic relations that separated it from the state rule (Pallot 1999; Zyrianov 1992). The collective nature of the production of space and knowledge about it was embedded in customary 'peasant geometry' and engrained in centuries of common struggle over peasant land rights – "people used the land and landed resources like air, and no one had in mind, that it could be turned into an exclusive usage or even ownership" (Peshehonov 1907, 191). Views of the soil as no one's or God's property were preserved in the consciousness of the peasant folk (Peshehonov 1907). Hence the organic, 'soft' territoriality could best characterize the ontology of commoning, through which emerged the new conditions for the formation of a more-than-state territorial identity of the Russian *narod* (the people).

Comparing communal territoriality to state space, Vasily Leshkov, a legal thinker and a Slavophile of the Russian Empire, thought that mir exercised territorial integrity and was, in fact,

an embryo of Russia's public and legal institutions (Leshkov 1858). As he argued, "communal ownership offered mir full powers over its lands – not only the right of use but dominium and also partial imperium in the form of governance over its members" (Peshehonov 1907, 199). The rationale of commoning in this view was pictured as similar to territorial sovereignty – "within defined borders, mir exercises the right of its members to their soil" and the rule of the commune over its members (Peshehonov 1907). On the pages of the Russkoe Bogatstvo (the Russian Wealth magazine) (1907), Peshehonov argues that the formation of the collective rights to land reminds us that mir was an organic part of the state; it possessed a "territorial unity, able to fulfill governmental functions" and yet it embodied the "general democratic principles of self-government" and autonomy. This view aligns with that of Russia's renowned philosopher and anarchist, Pyotr Kropotkin, who envisioned the commune as an alternative to territorial states, providing the necessary means for extending self-sufficiency and solidarity (de Oliveira 2018). Many features of commoning are notably reminiscent of broader collective practices and customary forms of property around the world – from the Mexican ejido to East African kinship-based land relations (Jones and Ward, 1998; Shipton and Goheen, 1992).

A political philosopher of the Russian Empire, Boris Chicherin, referred to the work of Baron von Haxthausen, a German agricultural scientist, to compare collective land ownership in Russia with German landed practices (Chicherin 1856, 374). He explained that a unique character of Russia's communal practices lay in the patriarchal nature of the socio-political order, contrasted with German *gemeinde*, characterized by von Hazthausen as "the meeting of persons brought together by chance, whose relations were established as much by the governmental and legislative measures from above, as by customs and traditions" (Chicherin 1856). The practice of equal and universal redivision of land, as argued by Baron von Hazthausen, "followed from the ancient beginning of the Slavonic law, namely from the inseparability of family property."

Family, in the words of Chicherin, was an archetype of the folk (*narod*), hence *mir* was a "family at large, it was the owner of the land" (1856, 377).

The return to the native soil in search of the Russian idea was a main point of departure for the influential philosophical movement of Pochvennichestvo in the mid-19th century that grew on the ideas of Slavophilism. Others took the territorial imagery of commoning to argue for the creation of a large colonial entity of Slavdom, or a pan-Slavic nation-state based on the Russian identity with the East Slavic culture. Building on the ideas of late Slavophilism, Russian ethnologist and geographer Vladimir Lamanskiy developed the territorial category of '*sredinniy mir*' (the median world) to describe the features of the East Slavic realm that contrasts with Europe and Asia. One of the core differences between the Greek-Slavic and Roman-Germanic worlds, as Lamanskiy argued, lies in the persistence of the collective way of life in the former (Lamanskiy [1870] 2010, 92). Greek-Slavic world, in his words, was not familiar with the "Western kind of a landless peasant; it lived under the beneficial rule of a family life and communal self-governance" (Lamanskiy [1870] 2010). *Sredinniy mir* knew no rules of uniform land repartitioning, as seen in Europe or Asia, while its unity was ensured by the absence of the internal re-division of land – we have in front of our eyes a "huge mass of plains and mainlands, without almost any seacoasts, mountain gorges, and valleys, and then a series of relatively small lands, each with its own independent character" (Lamanskiy 1892, 46). Here, the collectivist peasant ideas were repurposed and extended to denote the "borderless" expanse of the empire – exploiting the decolonization narrative created by Slavophiles in the discussion of negative qualities of individual land ownership (Smirnova 2022).

Even in later times, when individual ownership was encouraged and legitimized – during both the 1906 Stolypin land reforms (orchestrated by the prime minister of the Russian Empire) or after the post-Soviet land distribution processes – the persistence of collective land use and

governance remained commonplace. With the establishment of the institute of private property, cases of commonship were not anymore legally binding and often based on verbal agreement and mutual trust between the members of the village. Moreover, land privatization was seen as a "more-than-individual, collective issue potentially threatening the very fabric of common village life" (Vorbrugg in press), not only transcending but outright rejecting the rules and rights of property.

These contested territorial identities based on the right to occupy and cultivate land collectively have been constructed in resistance to another alternative conception of territory proposed by the Eurasianist intellectual movement that rejected the idea of an all-Slavic nation to focus on the development of a more sophisticated geographic dimension of the Russian state and its ethnographic multitude defined by the assemblage of Eurasia.

ASSEMBLING: PLACE, LANDSCAPE, TERRAIN

If the Slavophiles saw a core identity of the Russian state in the original qualities of all Slavic folk and their communal and pregiven rights to soil, the Eurasianists stressed the importance of place, landscape, and terrain, and their biogeographic features as a starting point. Russia was interpreted as a Eurasian, trans-continental union formed as an organic fusion of different ethnic lifestyles of European and Asiatic roots, thus nurturing not a pan-Slavic, but rather a trans-ethnic Russian 'super-ethnos', stretching far beyond ethnocentrism (Gumilev 2001; Kolosov and Mironenko 2001). Eurasianism, although an undertaking of Russian émigré scholars in the 1920s and 1930s, was mobilized as a project of decolonization from the popular Eurocentric tendencies in search of Russia's customary territorial identity. This movement heavily borrowed from the experiences of nomadic tribes and communities, romanticized by its leading figures. The "cult of nomadism" was a core defining feature of this decolonization project, as nomadism symbolized "movement, permanent regeneration, nonhistory, and a unique human psychology" (Laruelle

2008, 36). Rediscovering nomadic experiences of steppe societies and their sacral relations with nature, Eurasianists equated the peoples of Eurasia with the Russian world and portrayed the borders between the two as porous, thus extending the territorial claim to Asia (Laruelle 2008).

This strand of spatial thought also heavily borrows from the works in soil sciences. The Russian geographer Pyotr Savitskiy, one of the influential visionaries of Eurasianism, claimed that the "Eurasian landmass could be divided into a series of adjacent biogeographic regions or biomes," which would form a full social world enclosed in and of itself (Bassin 1991, 15). The soil, he thought, was incorporated into the flesh of the people, hence "tribes" would form "ethnicities" in full dependence on natural conditions such as climate, topography, and abundant resources. "It is the natural environment itself," he summarized, "that teaches the peoples of Eurasia to recognize the need to form a single state and to create their own national cultures while working co-operatively with one another" (Savitskiy 1997). Savitskiy saw Eurasia as a '*sredinnaya zemlya*' (or the middle Earth) – not as a nation-state, but as an entire civilization formed via assembling of the "Aryan-Slavic culture, Turkic nomadism, Orthodox traditions of the Byzantine empire, and legacies of the Roman law related to the land" (Savitskiy 1997; Syrikh 2012).

Pyotr Savitskiy used the term *mestorazvitie* or 'place development' to describe this "geo-historical, geo-political, geo-cultural, geo-ethnographical, and even geo-economic entity" of Eurasia (Bassin 1991, 16). He argued that "each, even small, human environment, strictly speaking, has its own unique geographic space," hence, the Eurasian steppe could be characterized by its "large" *mestorazvitie* (Savitskiy 1997, 284). As Savitskiy claimed, ethnic groups are "nurtured" in *mestorazvitie* and "ingrown" in the landscape, where they acquire their form. In the Eurasianiast thought, territory has a "transparent nature" (Laruelle 2013); it emerges

as a "dynamic material substrate rather than fixed spatial extent," as also found across the traditions of anthropogeography (Usher 2019, 2).

Eurasianism built heavily on the Russian anthropogeographical tradition, which was itself strongly influenced by German intellectual lineages (Golubchikov and Golubchikov 2012). The category of *mestorazvitie* also laid the foundation for the development of a new branch of the philosophy of geography termed by Savitskiy' geosophy', which underlined the historical and geographical principles of world-making and engaged with spatial practices in terms of their potential for assemblage. Through the lens of geosophy, Eurasianists developed numerous conceptualizations for the Eurasian terrain, or what they referred to as the "steppe phenomena"—the 'great steppe' in Gumilev or the 'sense of steppe' in Savitskiy. The notion of the steppe and its capabilities of assembling was proposed to work as a conceptual "bridge between the cultures and civilizations of Eurasia" (Pobedinskiy 2009, 25), prioritizing Russia as a "connecting element of Eurasian national diversity" (Laruelle 2008, 39). Hence it was the geographic features of the place, landscape, and terrain that have shaped, and have been shaped by, the historical processes and the formations of the Eurasian state space (Shaw and Oldfield 2007).

Konstantin Chkheidze, Czech-Georgian-Russian writer and political philosopher (1931), also highlighted differences between what we call here the ontology of assembling and the Western-centric conception of territory. He stated that in contrast to the generally accepted notion of the state as unity between territory, population, and power—where the "main property of state territory is impermeability; of the population – attachment to a single political whole; and of power – independence and sovereignty"—the category of *mestorazvitie* (and hence of spatial assembling) focused on the natural features and the wealth of location (Chkheidze 1931). Geopolitics from this standpoint is interested in the "population not in terms of its belonging to a single political entity […], but in terms of its creative capabilities; the main focus here is on

coproduction, cooperation, and participation in a unified cocreation" (Chkheidze 1931). This provided a somewhat different source for the legitimation of the Russian colonizing power from its Western counterparts – not as a bearer of humankind into indigenous "wasteland," but as an organic "guardian" of Eurasian lands, tribes, and habits, with underlying consequences of such thinking.

The Eurasianist project, however, acquired an ambiguous position across Eurasia itself, in particular following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Eurasianist works were appropriated for both national identity building in the former Soviet republics and the expansion of Russia's renewed political reach. Most notable here is the scholarship of Lev Gumilev that was celebrated by Turkik nationalist movements and Russian far-right thought alike, as well as "liberal "'Eurasianists" looking to re-create an EU on post-Soviet soil and conservative "Eurasianists" seeking a quasi-fascistic revival of the Russian Empire" (Jukić 2021). The role of Tatarstan in the Eurasianist project is illustrative as it was seen as foreign to the Tatar identity itself, accusing it of "Russo-centrism, Russian messianism and statism" and reminding of the historical persecution of the Tatars by Russia (Shnirel'man 2017). A different picture, however, could be found in nations like Kazakhstan, Turkey and Hungary, where neo-Eurasinism was repurposed in support of new authoritarian politics, stretching well beyond the post-Soviet realm.

PEOPLING: SETTLEMENT, REGION, NATIONALITY

Historically, the gradual expansion of territorial frontiers of the Russian state and the need to protect both the peripheries and the "core" required a more formal organization of territory (and its ever-distant borders). While Russia yielded to the Westphalian order, the tensions between flexibility and fixity remained part of its territorial logic. The key political task in controlling territory was not so much in the bordering exercise as in the peopling of the vast space. However,

that task itself involved the dilemma of mobility (moving people across space) and immobility (settling people to control that space).

As Kivelson (2006, 7) suggests, already by the mid-17th century, when Muscovy's rule stretched across Eurasia to the Pacific, mobility and immobility danced in counterpoint: "locating people, identifying them, and binding them into position assumed as much urgency as identifying and binding people in rank and degree… at the same time, both the state and its unruly subjects continued to move through space and across the continent." This border production was yet circumscribed and never fully enclosed or complete but rather worked alongside the environmental, and landscape elements, such as great rivers. This is also visible in the early cartographic representations of Russia. Kivelson, in a historical and geographical account (2006), observes that maps produced in the 17th century Russia did not have proper identification of the state's territorial reach but rather demarcated ethnical or regional identities without incorporating them into a unified state affiliation. This contradicted the Westphalian principles already established by that era.

This complex dynamic also stemmed from a dialectical relation between the spontaneous colonization of the geographic space of the Russian empire by free settlers and, at the same time, the political desire to "tighten the localization of power among the chaotic people's space, where serfdom was one such technology" (Korolev 2002). In this case, the stratification of space often took different forms – for example, from the establishment of strategic corridors for forced settlements of Cossacks along the major roads and rivers in the Russian South or experiments with military settlements in the steppe by relocating enserfed peasants to the East, to the rapid industrialization and exploitation of resources in the Russian North and other resource and agricultural frontiers of the 20th century (Moon 2013). Thus, the fixation of power across Russia's geographic space was often achieved through moving and organizing resources and human

subjects (Breyfogle, Schrader, and Sunderland 2007; Burbank, Von Hagen, and Remnev 2007; Sunderland 2007). The erection of support points or cordons, fortresses, and outposts, and the attachment of the controlled peoples to the soil, restricting (albeit to a limited degree) a free and spontaneous movement of the population once it had moved and populated the land, constituted one of the main territorial rationales, contrary to the spatial enclosure designed to control and contain the population within (Kobishchanov 1995; Lyubavskiy 1996; Zamyatina 1999).

Fast forward to the Soviet era (and admittedly bypassing many potentially pertinent examples such as those emanating from state reforms during modernization, enlightenment and imperial acquisitions), the 1917 Socialist Revolution launched a particularly pronounced wave of attempted shifts towards "hard" territorial organization, dictated by the spirit of the 'scientific communism.' However, Bolsheviks' relations with space, in the words of Gorbachev (2018), were still complex and evolving. The geopolitical realities of the early socialist rule dictated a shift from the previous ideals of borderless 'world revolution' towards a defensive communist state, its internal constitution and nationalist politics. One of the first steps of Lenin's government was to recognize "nationalities" within the emerging Soviet state and render them their own territorial "autonomy" or self-determination – the fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism that saw national autonomy as a step towards working-class internationalism. This followed the communist ideology of decolonization and Stalin's earlier writings that strongly defined a nation as "a unity of *territory*, language, and economic life" (Gorbachev 2017 based on Stalin 1913).

In reality, this Soviet-style postcolonial reparation from Tsarist policies was rather a re-articulation of previously defined "nationalities" scrutinized by experts from the imperial regime based on basic characteristics such as language or religion (Hirsch 2007). Despite the goals of setting up a distinctly different mode of governance (a "union of nations"), the policy of nation-building portrayed nationalities (or "*narodnosti*") as "victims of Tsarist-imposed statelessness,

backwardness and culturelessness" which made it difficult for them (but crucial for the future prospects of the Soviet economy) to "develop" (Slezkine 1994). This gave rise to the Soviet administrative structure of the territorially defined "national republics," separated from the Russian Federation, as well as a range of ethnic minority administrative units within the republics themselves. This bordering was achieved in a style resembling Western colonial partitions, dividing many single ethnic groups across the neighboring units and included clearing out large border regions settled predominantly by ethnic Russians (defined by Lenin as the 'oppressor people'). At the same time this process went hand in hand with reshuffling ethnic Russian communities to fit the current political agenda and achieve cross-border cooperation where necessary. Such territorial configuration, with its potential for extra-territorial claims and inter-ethnic conflicts, was, to a large degree, inherited by the late Soviet and then post-Soviet states.

The outcomes of the regionalization policy drastically recharted the Soviet borderlands. The effects were often painful – from across the North Caucasus, where the forced deportation of Cossack and Slavic settlers from the land formerly belonging to indigenous mountain people was presented as an act of postcolonial reparation, to Central Asia with the removal of peasant settlers of the Tsarist period from the land formerly used by Kazakh nomads (Martin 1998), to Tajikistan, where historically oppressed Tajiks were forcefully returned to the border region to fix imperial wrongdoings (Kassymbekova 2011), as well as to transfer manpower for cotton production quotas and to form political alliances with Afghanistan (Martin 1998). For ethnic groups at the borderlands, this meant the loss of ties to the land and the entire uprooting of tribal communities from sites of heritage and culture.

However, already in the mid-1920s, the Soviet spatial world shifted towards a more economically pragmatic and yet binary politics of the redistribution of resources and the concentration of political and economic powers. Space was now conceived primarily as a source

for collective production, meaning the merge of Lenin's uncompromising nationality principle with an exploration of the economic potential of each unit (Hirsch 2007). This type of territorialization was developed on the basis of economic *rayonirovanie* (region-making), built on the earlier, pre-revolutionary tradition of systematizing statistical knowledge about the territorial division of labor and identifying territorially specific agricultural and industrial systems. The key features of economic regions included the specialization, interaction, coherence, and complementarity of economic agents in each territorial designation – in turn, underpinned by the natural resource base, natural ecosystems, and environmental conditions. In this sense, the early Soviet *rayonirovanie* assumed certain elements of assemblage, with its ontology of the co-production of the social and the natural.

In practice, region-making was limitedly successful since economic planning and economic decision-making remained confined within the administrative division. The economic division was rather used as a large-scale schemata for the development of the so-called territorial-industrial complexes (*TPK*). The latter represented plan-led territorial clusters of interconnected and cooperating enterprises, which typically stretched across different administrative-territorial units, being organized around resource bases and energy supplies. Interestingly, the dilemma of mobility and immobility remained part of the state territorial conundrum, even if now within a more strictly defined territorial organization. One of the technologies to resolve it was the Soviet rapid urbanization and assimilation of the resource periphery (particularly in the North and East), achieved via the expansion of the monotowns – a network of single-industry towns that complemented each other in industrial commodity chains (Golubchikov, Badyina, and Makhrova 2015). Other large-scale state territorial technologies to serve the same purpose included *Gulag* (in the Stalinist era) – or enclosed zones of forced-labor prison camps. Yet, overall, peopling territory was negotiated with the other preceding but overlapping ontologies.

NEGOTIATING ONTOLOGIES IN POLITICAL PROJECTS

Indeed, Russian territory follows multiple rationales and operates on different scales – both as a subject of grand state projects and bottom-up collective experiences of land occupation. Analyzing interrelations between the logics of commoning, assembling, and peopling helps explain how different forms of the appropriation of space have allowed a variety of political projects to emerge, each following specific political reasoning and the application of different spatial technologies of power.

For example, after the socialist revolution, the idea of commoning was brought back to introduce a new logic of peopling in relation to resource management and economic development – land was still worked collectively yet became measured, rationed, and quantified by the central state apparatus. Communal land tenure was revived in the form of collective farm enterprises (or *kolkhoz*) but lost its sovereign power to the new administrative structure of rural soviet units or *soviety* that extended the old *mir* "from the political microcosm of the commune to the wider scale of the state" (Atkinson 1983, 196). What Korolev refers to as the "new mechanism of the spatial localization of power" came in place of the former *mir* under the land collectivization movement in the 1930s, which eradicated the regime of commoning, leaving it as an ideological construct divorced from its material manifestations (Korolev 1997). Indeed, *kolkhoz* relations based on a state experiment of a massive scale were expansionist and colonizing, leading to disruptions of local livelihoods and customary land relations in Soviet republics, and yet their post-Soviet continuities today allow communities to function outside state rule – a persistent tendency across rural Russia (Vorbrugg in press).

Similarly, after the breakup of the Soviet Union and the opening of the 'pandora box' of social theories to replace the previous Marxist-Leninist officialdom, the ontologies of commoning and assembling have re-emerged to inform other territorial and nationalist

imaginaries. The drawing of Russia's new national boundaries, in which a "quarter of the population and half of the territory of its Soviet predecessor was lost, has produced a "Russian" nation-state entity which had no precedent in Russia's national experience" (Bassin and Aksenov 2006, 100). This provoked a search for a new sense of territorial identity, to only come to the revitalization of its imperial syndrome and reoccurring calls to restore the great power status, most illustratively articulated in the writings of Alexander Dugin (Ingram 2001, Laruelle 2006).

All three ontologies that we review in the paper are mixed and matched in a hybrid geopolitical discourse to justify actual or potential state projects. These can be exemplified by the external expansionism, such as evidenced in the annexation of Crimea, as well as by internal expansionism as evidence in the recent call to establish new centers of economic development in Siberia. In the former example, the annexation was fueled by the sense of "liberation" and commoning of the Russian people and the return of a "Christian birthplace of what used to be known as Kievan Russia, a proto-state of Russia and Ukraine" (Khrushcheva 2019). In the latter, the need to build scientific and industrial centers in Siberia with a population of 300,000 to 1 million employed the principles of peopling to create new poles of attraction both for the population of Russia itself and for numerous compatriots in the CIS countries, conveying renewed ways of territorial expansion and reanimating the old resource frontiers. The idea was expressed by Sergey Shoigu, who served both as the Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation and the Head of the Russian Geographical Society. The legacy of "ambiguous territorial belonging" fuels the marriage of new Eurasianism with revisionist ideas for the territorial unity of the former Soviet realm (Bringa and Toje 2016; Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2016). All this has come together in Russia waging a war against Ukraine, while building an anticolonial narrative of victimhood and liberation – which stretches not only in relation to Russia, but also the rest of the non-Western world (Kassymbekova and Marat 2022).

CONCLUSIONS

Various ontologies of territory that we have attempted to excavate here take us beyond the state-centric territorial norms of spatiality in multiple ways. They not only revitalize what was once excluded from the rubric of territory – means of commoning rather than individual ownership, biological elements of terrain rather than abstract calculation, fluid spatiality rather than fixed spatial enclosure – but at the same time, they have a potential to connect Russian conceptual deliberations and their grassroots origins to the new waves of discourse attuned to decolonial challenges that bring about a different understanding of territory.

The first set of territorial imaginaries that we have examined in this paper includes the ontology of 'commoning.' This idea draws from the collective territorial experiences of the peasant land commune, which debunk the modern logic of private property as legitimate individual ownership of land and exercised a collective right of the people to the soil for centuries. This ontology of commoning influenced one of the conceptions of *territoriya*, which aimed to denote Russia's colonial projects of nation-building based on the unity of *narod* (the people) and their collective ownership (or rather a commonship) of all-Slavic soil. The commoning, in a territorial sense, implied the expansion of the state as an organic process justified by the centuries-old Slavic traditions and collective sovereignty over the land, widely theorized and romanticized in the Slavophile philosophical tradition to chart the extent of the East Slavic realm. In this understanding, territory is grounded on the collective working of the land contrasted to Western ideas of ownership – built on peasant experiences but later repurposed to denote a new colonial reach of the Russian state.

The second spatial typology that gives rise to *territoriya* is conceptualized as the ontology of 'assembling' vividly applied in the Eurasianist philosophical tradition to the colonial project of Eurasia and its borderless steppe identity. Assembling, or 'gathering of the Russian lands' and the

peoples that reside on them is explicitly set apart from the 'hard' conception of territory due to the focus on organic capabilities of 'place development', contrasted with bordering. The ontology of assembling stresses the organistic quality of the environment–human interdependencies: the people produce their environment, but the latter shapes anthropological, cultural, and physiological features of the population (Golubchikov 2003). Here, territory borrows heavily from the theoretical preoccupation of the Eurasianist philosophical movement with nomadic ways of life found across Central Asian societies, extending Russia's territorial reach to Asia. In this understanding, territory is systematically cultivated from the natural conditions of the terrain and not from the 'administrative' acts of mapping, dividing, and enclosing.

The third ontology of territory discussed in this article involves the logic of 'peopling', seen through examples of strategic administrative division proposed by a series of state political projects of modernization. This revolved around the more direct politics of rationalization and, hence, the concentration of political power and human resources. For example, in the Soviet period, this type of territorialization was developed on the basis of *rayonirovanie*, or the system of administrative and economic clustering of space according to the development goals, nationality principle, and industrial potential, giving rise to state political projects such as, for instance, the territorial industrial complexes, mono-industry towns, or Gulag prison settlements aimed for the "rational" distribution and exploitation of resources and labor. In this understanding, although ideologically grounded in celebrated ideas of national self-determination of nations absorbed by the Soviet Union, territory is not fixed but populated, keeping its borders in flux.

Territory in the Russian context has been historically situated and practiced by different groups, entangled with colonial ideas of the Russian state in different ways and to a different degree. We believe the conceptions we review can be put to progressive ends when liberated

from their statist appropriations. Though grassroots experiences of territory based on the collective authority and society-nature symbiosis were absorbed by Russia's various scholarly traditions to build a collective image of state space (in itself colonial and expansionist), they could be released from these abusive interpretations to inform other modes of theorizing. For example, inquiring into the everyday practices of sustainable food production (Jehlicˇka 2021), geographies of land ownership, or slow violence in land grabbing across Central and Eastern Europe (Kušić 2020; Vorbrugg 2019) has already contributed to the reanimation of the peripheral knowledges, in parallel with some new exploratory connections with the postcolonial scholarship from the South (Galuszka 2021; see also Müller 2021). Moreover, historical and contemporary accounts of the effects of Russian/Soviet territorial politics have been discussed in Anglophone scholarship extensively (Artman 2013; Bichsel 2021; Kassymbekova 2011; Lazarenko 2022; Shelekpayev 2018; see also Marat 2021) but only recently started to inform global theorizations. This allowed for reclaiming local knowledges from their post-Soviet area studies 'containers' while at the same time recapturing the emancipatory potential of socialism to inform a new decolonial project (Kušić, Lottholz, and Manolova 2019).

Along these lines of reasoning, Slavophile inquiries on commoning derived from peasant experiences could contribute to the global conceptions by seeing territory as 'dwelling' in "pursuit of basic life purposes" open for common use and not based on individual ownership (Paasi et al. 2022). This approach would allow shifting from the "nationalist narratives" that reproduce the idea that "territory is a form of property to be owned by a particular national group" (Agnew 2008, 187) and instead pay attention to collective relations beyond demarcated jurisdictions, based on place-making and "mutual obligations mediated by the land" (Paasi et al. 2022, 6; see also Agnew 2019). In another example, Eurasianist conceptions of assembling and nomadic livelihoods they evoked could contribute to thinking with terrain in shifting attention to

the "political materiality of territory," as terrain is a category that conjures "material forms, volumes and textures that are not reducible to human control and appropriations" (Elden 2021). This brings about the focus on the physical attributes of the earth and contests relations between territory and sovereignty as they become secondary to the logic of land, terrain, or landscape (Usher 2019). This significance of geological topographies and natural relations with territories allows focusing on place-based scenarios and not abstract claims to space since, in the former sacral relations to the soil have a priority over individual ownership of a piece of land (Espejo 2020; Paasi et al. 2022).

Unearthing local and indigenous voices becomes a huge task moving forward as these perspectives have been racialized and repurposed by the Russian state and, at the same time, rarely explored in Anglophone scholarship in comparison to their statist and colonial interpretations. It is our anticipation that such scholarly debate has the potential, on the one hand, to further decenter modern Western assumptions, while on the other, further expose the coloniality of the Russian political project, from which one could start generating other ways of theorizing beyond the universal conceptions of space and power.

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Figure/table capture:

Table 1. Ontologies of territory in Russian intellectual traditions.