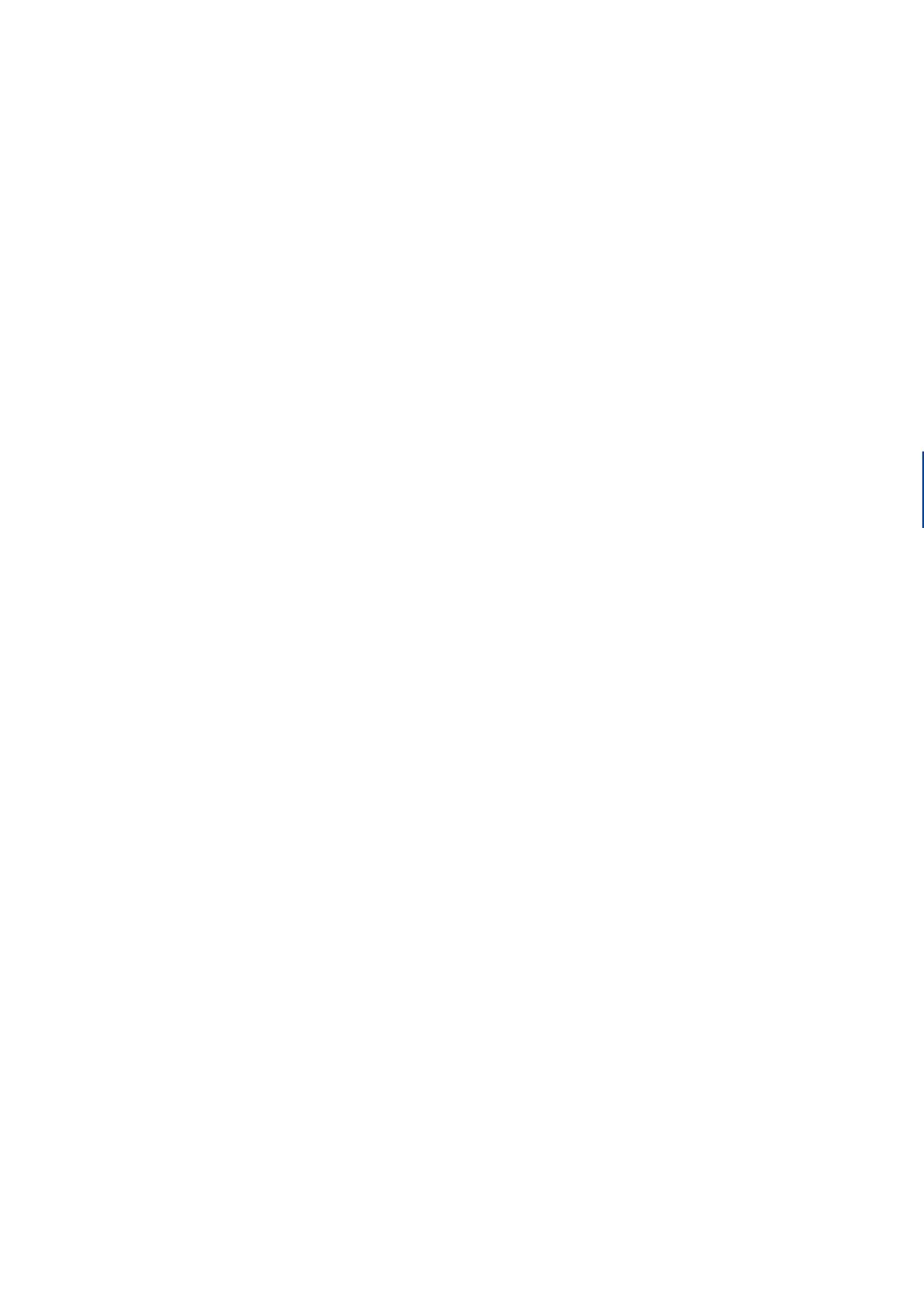


A large, bold, red letter 'V' with a white outline, positioned on the left side of the page, partially overlapping the blue vertical bar.

THE ROLE OF UKRAINIAN STUDIES IN GLOBAL DECOLONIZATION

Published in: Tetiana Grebeniuk et al., Decolonizing Academic Curricula. Integrating Ukrainian Studies through a Thematic Approach. Heidelberg: heiBOOKS, 2026. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11588/heibooks.1629>



1

UKRAINIAN STUDIES AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN GLOBAL DECOLONIAL SCHOLARSHIP

The fundamental problem in decolonization of academic curricula in Ukrainian studies is the problem of Ukraine's singular place in postcolonial and decolonial discourse. Associated with restoration of threatened agency, decolonization implies understanding from whom this agency should be protected. And here we face the problem of the duality of colonizing influences – Eastern and Western – whose object (with varying degrees of directness or indirectness) was Ukraine and whose echoes still impede the perception of it as an independent state, both abroad and within the country. This issue is further complicated by the fact that the global scientific community, due to certain epistemic distortions, has ignored these influences for decades.

The most direct and immediate is the eastern, imperialist-colonial influence on Ukrainian state from Russia, which – under brands of both the Russian Empire and the USSR – exerted pressure on Ukraine, depriving it of political, economic, and cultural subjectivity and resorting to genocidal practices (the Holodomor, repressions, forced deportations). In the formative stages of postcolonial discourse, insufficient attention was paid to understanding Russia's

foreign policy as a colonial one. In particular, Edward W. Said in his aforementioned work “Culture and imperialism”, while agreeing that Russia was neither more benign nor less imperialist than the British and French empires, still avoids considering this state in the colonial context on the grounds that Russia acquired its imperial territories mainly by adjacency, while personally he is interested in cases of overseas domination, due to his own initial belonging to a colonial community of this kind (Said 1994: 23). Said’s attitude towards Russia is also revealed in certain linguistic markers that indicate his incomplete understanding of the scale of Russia’s colonial appetite or the irrefutable ideological authority for him of this state, which he, by the way, views in the paradigm of “Westerners.” For example, Said “refuses” to notice Russia’s colonial claims to European states, including Ukraine, arguing that “Russia moved to swallow whatever land or peoples stood next to its borders, which in the process kept moving farther and farther *east and south*” (Said 1994: 23, emphasis added).

Another eloquent case is when, stating the Westerners’ desire for ideological, moral, and intellectual domination over the former African colonies after the Second World War, Said uncritically quotes an arrogant remark he heard from an American intellectual: “Show me the Zulu Tolstoy” (Said 1994: 25). That is, in this context, Tolstoy’s works are seen as the pinnacle achievement of the Western world. Thus, even if the authoritative founder of the official postcolonial discourse non-critically valorizes Russian cultural achievements, the refusal of the postcolonial discourse to recognize the imperial-colonial nature of Russian influence in the late 20th and early 21st centuries seems quite natural.

Ignoring Ukraine, unwillingness to see it among the agents of the political processes of the 20th and 21st centuries, sometimes takes on outrageous forms within some research. This tendency is present both in the early days of postcolonial studies and in contemporary

research. An example of old distortions is Samuel P. Huntington's work "The Clash of Civilizations?" (1993) in which the author, schematically dividing the world into East and West, leaves in it no room for Eastern Europe. More recent examples include the well-known book by Walter D. Mignolo "The politics of decolonial investigations" (2021) in which the USSR of the second half of the 20th century is seen as a homogeneous country, "becoming Western" and joining Western civilization. It is indicative that there is no mention of the ideological differences between Russia and other Soviet republics (which soon became separate Eastern European countries) and, accordingly, the peculiarities of their foreign policy strategies. The book attributes to Russia the status of a monopolist even in those issues in which Ukraine has historical primacy, such as religion and literacy: "Russia/Soviet Union has a Cyrillic alphabet, its connection with Greece is through the Orthodox church, and its population is mainly slaves. The Soviet Union was indeed a clear case of Westernization through state politics" (Mignolo 2021: 347).

As Aliaksei Kazharski aptly notes, using the decolonialized term "Westsplaining" in his arguments, "Western discourse on Central and Eastern Europe more often than not suffers from distortions caused by its deep Russocentrism" (Kazharski 2022). The researcher largely sees the origins of this Russocentrism in the assessment of Russia by other states as a "powerful player" in "great power management," whose power justifies ignoring the political and economic subjectivity of Eastern European countries¹.

¹ According to Galyna Kotliuk, in many ways Ukraine «owed» the distortion of its image in the international arena to Russia: "Russian colonialism has invented the image of exotic Little Russians – subhuman "brothers" of Great Russians; the West has seen Ukrainians as underdeveloped barbarians somewhere between Russia and European civilization" (Kotliuk 2023: 7).

In addition to political and economic explanations for the neglect of Ukraine's agency in the post- and decolonial discourse of the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, we now have a thorough explanation of these distortions in the epistemic plane. These considerations have been most consistently articulated by Vitaly Chernetsky in a number of his public speeches and publications in recent years. Demonstrating and explaining "a long history of marginalizing Ukrainian topics and ignoring or dismissing Ukrainian voices" (Chernetsky 2024: 23) in world opinion, the researcher uses the apt term "epistemic injustice towards Ukraine"².

It was Timothy Snyder who have drawn the attention of Westerners to the attempts in all kinds of discourse to erase Ukraine from the map of political processes of the 20th and 21st centuries. Thus, addressing German society about their collective responsibility for World War II and the Holocaust, the scholar points out the injustice of replacing the USSR as the main recipient of this responsibility

² Considering the problem of distortions in the representation of Ukraine in scientific and media discourses, Chernetsky appeals first of all to the work by Miranda Fricker "Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing", the author of which considers epistemic distortions to a large extent as a result of manipulations in the media and education sphere. According to Fricker, the concept of epistemic injustice mostly consists "in a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower" and "might first and foremost prompt thoughts about distributive unfairness in respect of epistemic goods such as information or education" (Fricker 2007: 1). Chernetsky also proves the validity of applying to Ukraine the concept of "epistemic oppression" substantiated by Kristie Dotson (2014) and Gaile Pohlhaus (2020). Finally, Chernetsky addresses the academic community with a call for systematic and long-term work to overcome epistemic prejudices against Ukraine: "I call on colleagues in academic institutions across the entire world to recognize and confront entrenched anti-Ukrainian prejudice. Please do not approach this as a temporary problem in need of a temporary solution. Returning to the status quo ante is impossible" (Chernetsky 2024: 29).

with Russia. After all, Ukraine, which was an important military target of Hitler, suffered much more from these genocides, both because its territory was completely occupied during the war and because a much higher percentage of the Ukrainians than the Russians died in the war. Finally, talking about Germans' responsibility without mentioning Ukraine is completely unacceptable even for the sake of the Germans themselves: "Getting the history of Ukraine wrong in 2013 and 2014 had European consequences. Getting the history of Ukraine wrong now, when Germany is the leading democracy in the West, will have international consequences" (Snyder 2017). At the beginning of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine in 2022, Timothy Snyder proved with striking clarity the thesis that Western society had not been ready to accept since 2014: "The war in Ukraine is a colonial war" (Snyder 2022).

In fact, it was the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine that became the point of no return in the transformation of the global decolonial discourse. Only then was the systemic understanding of Russian colonial aggression launched, and Ukraine gradually began to acquire the status of an independent political agent.

The problem of determination of the object of decolonizational efforts (ex-colonizer) also deserves a separate discussion. In this aspect, Ukraine is significantly different from other countries with colonial past. Uncharacteristic in the context of the current trend of debunking the dominance of the Global North is Ukraine's desire to join the Western paradigm, which for Ukrainians embodies the undeniable victory of freedom and democracy over the ghosts of the colonial past. Instead, the eastern, (pro)Russian social formation, ever since Mykola Khvylovy's call "Get away from Moscow!" and Ivan Dziuba's sharp question about the choice between internationalism and Russification, has been associated by Ukrainian intellectuals with totalitarian repression, colonial pressure, and unfreedom.

That is, while the world's most famous anti- and decolonial studies condemn the countries of Western Europe and North America, Ukrainian scientific, journalistic, cultural, and artistic discourses demonstrate the desire to join the Global North and a much lower level of condemnation of the colonial past of its countries than representatives of these countries themselves do.

We should also take into account the factor of wary attitude towards Ukraine by the countries of the Global North themselves, whose positions on the post-totalitarian state with a low standard of living have not yet agreed upon among themselves. In this context, Volodymyr Yermolenko characterizes the current mental state of Ukraine as “atypical post-colonialism,” in which Ukraine is between a “bad” (Russia) and “good” (Western countries) empires, the first of which is a direct threat to Ukraine while the second one cherishes otherness towards it, which makes it impossible for Ukraine and the West to have full trust (Yermolenko 2021: 25).

2

DECOLONIZATION PRACTICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: VARIETIES, APPROACHES, SHORTCOMINGS

The process of decolonization in academia is painstaking and lengthy, and it unfolds on several levels³. On the surface level, the decolonization of higher education is supported by the increase in the number of teachers and students from previously marginalized (by race, ethnicity or nationality, gender, etc.) population groups.

³ Sharon Stein and Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti describe decolonization as “a lifelong, life-wide process, fraught with difficulties, competing demands, and uncertain outcomes” (Stein, Oliveira Andreotti de: 5).

The importance of such recruitment is emphasized in most works on decolonization of education (for example: Dei 2016; Mbembe 2019; Ziai, Bendix, Müller 2020 and others). It is noteworthy that the world's higher education institutions are gradually coming to the realization of the insufficient number of faculty members from Ukraine, Eastern Europe, the Baltic countries and Central Asia in the world academic sphere, against the background of the high number of staff from Russia. Understanding by students of the decolonization processes in countries with a "post-Soviet" past is impossible without demarginalization of representatives of these countries in world educational institutions (see: Hendl, Burlyuk, O'Sullivan, Arystanbek 2023: 27).

Also, among the common directions of decolonization efforts are mentioned rethinking of the teacher-student relationship carried out in the direction of increasing freedom of the latter (Mbembe 2019), supporting students' activist movements (Kessi, Marks, Ramugondo 2021), paying close attention to position, emotion and relationship of both students and teachers (Cheang, Suterwalla 2020: 895-6). Undoubtedly, all these activities are effective on the way to overcoming the ideological consequences of colonization, but the most important and productive direction of decolonization activity in higher education remains the work on the curriculum, because it concerns the direct content of the educational process.

The views of different researchers on specific mechanisms and forms of decolonization of the curriculum differ somewhat, because they are influenced by the circumstances of colonization and liberation from colonial pressure in each specific region. However, there is a common denominator in the existing concepts of decolonization of curriculum in higher education. First and foremost it is attention to and respect for the plurality of voices and narratives that have previously been ignored, as well as helping learners and teachers

come to terms with their own biases that they were not aware of before. Ben Kotzee explains the nature of this type of prejudice as follows: “Many people who belong to disadvantaged social groups cannot effectively articulate their experiences due to having been educated in a dominant culture in which they do not come into contact with critical scholarship...” (Kotzee 2017: 331-332). It should be noted, however, that not only representatives of disadvantaged social groups can be prejudiced, but also the ones of the dominant majority, which for generations has assimilated the worldview codes of the colonizers. In general, institutions of higher education should be at the forefront of efforts to eradicate epistemic injustice. Heidi Grasswick notes that the epistemic strength and political influence of these institutions are a guarantee of the extreme persuasiveness of their positions, and therefore, in the case of their functioning as sources of epistemic injustice, the consequences of their influence on society will be devastating (Grasswick 2017: 313).

Some forms of application of decolonization practices in educational activities are critically considered in decolonial studies of the beginning of the 21st century. Thus, among the common mistakes of decolonization of the curriculum is an automatic giving to marginal phenomena the status of central ones, because such an approach disorients students and makes it difficult for them to realize the real consequences of colonialism, – as emphasize Sarah Cheang and Shehnaz Suterwalla (Cheang, Suterwalla 2020: 895).

George Dei criticizes offering decolonial elective courses that advocate inclusion to the student environment in which representatives of minority and majority groups exist in different mental planes that do not overlap. After all, “anti-racist, feminist and anti-class bias coursework” will be interesting mainly for representatives of minorities, and as a result of such a curriculum policy, the barriers between student groups will only grow (Dei 2016: 55).

Tamara Hundorova warns against simplifying decolonization issues for the needs of the educational process, as a result of which we have a situation where “[c]atastrophes and wars become fearless, they are packaged in capsules, defenseless and sublimated. They can be used, for example, to diversify lectures or attract students. Such topics become distinctly temporary, and the decolonization of the academic field and humanitarianism is simulated” (Гундорова 2024).

3

APPROACHES TO AND METHODS OF DECOLONIZATION OF THE CURRICULUM IN UKRAINIAN STUDIES

Olesya Khromeychuk, in her keynote speech delivered at the British Association of Slavonic and East European Studies Conference, Cambridge, in 2022, emphasized that, in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, there is an urgent need to decolonize and de-imperialize our knowledge: “We need to equip ourselves with appropriate terminology to discuss the region not just as ‘post-Soviet’, but in ways that will reflect the different trajectories taken by the former republics in the three decades since the collapse of the USSR and how each tackled the legacy of the Russian as well as Soviet empire over this time” (Khromeychuk 2022). One cannot but agree that this aspect of teaching should be a leitmotif of Ukrainian studies today, especially those focused on the period of State Independence of Ukraine.

Also, referring to the relevance of the decolonization of Ukrainian studies during the Russo-Ukrainian war, Daria Tsymbalyuk notes the need to single out the subject of aggressive actions and the source of violation, since genocidal experience is not just an academic case

study or a natural disaster, and current and past crimes and names of criminals must be articulated. One of the tasks of the educational process, the researcher calls developing a personal position of students regarding aggression, stimulating their position of complicity in the situation (Tsybalyuk 2022).

The problem of demarcating the concepts of colonial and imperial (post-colonial / post-imperial) discourses belongs to the purely theoretical problems with which the faculty themselves must first be advised, in order to then use an adequate theoretical and methodological toolkit in educational decolonization practices. This issue is addressed, in particular, in the works of Shkandrij (2001), Ryabchuk (2019), Fineberg (2024), and others. The importance of this issue is often underestimated in decolonization theory. However, the forms, goals, and features of subjugation of one group of people by another in colonial and imperial approaches are different, and we must be aware of these differences. As Joseph Grim Fineberg writes, “[b]oth coloniality and imperial logics are present in Eastern Europe, and it would be wrong to oppose only one and ignore the other. But it’s important to disentangle them, to understand the distinct logics at play as we look for forms of resistance adequate to them” (Fineberg 2024).

And in the end, the urgent need for decolonizing the curriculum of Ukrainian studies is to instill students with critical attitude to self-selected sources of preparation for classes, as well as the creation of databases of information resources in which Ukrainian studies will be presented without colonization stamps and epistemic prejudices. This problem is raised in the work by John Vsetecka, who offers his own list of recommended resources and emphasizes the importance of working on creating such bases (Vsetecka 2023). Among the databases of such kind must be mentioned the “Ukrainica and Other Teaching Resources. The Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University” and “Ukrainian Decolonial Glossary”.

LITERATURE

- Cheang, S., & Suterwalla, S. (2020). Decolonizing the curriculum? Transformation, emotion, and positionality in teaching. *Fashion Theory*, 24(6), 879–900.
- Chernetsky, V. (2024). Centering Ukraine in the paradigm shift in East European studies. In *A world order in transformation? A comparative study of consequences of the war and reactions to these changes in the region* (pp. 23–30).
- Dei, G. (2016). Decolonizing the university: The challenges and possibilities of inclusive education. *Socialist Studies/Études Socialistes*, 11(1), 23.
- Dotson, K. (2014). Conceptualizing epistemic oppression. *Social Epistemology*, 28(2), 115–138. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2013.782585>
- Fineberg, J. G. (2024). The fall and ambivalent rise of East European anti-colonialism. *Commons*. <https://commons.com.ua/en/kolonialnist-chi-imperskist-na-prikladi-shidnoyi-yevropi/>
- Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford University Press.
- Grasswick, H. (2017). Epistemic injustice in science. In I. J. Kidd, J. Medina, & G. Pohlhaus Jr. (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of epistemic injustice* (pp. 313–323). Routledge.
- Hendl, T., Burluk, O., O'Sullivan, M., & Arystanbek, A. (2023). (En)Countering epistemic imperialism: A critique of “westsplaining” and coloniality in dominant debates on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 45(2), 171–209. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2023.228846>
- Huntington, S. P. (1993). The clash of civilizations? *Foreign Affairs*, 72(3), 22–49.

- Isasi-Díaz, A. M., & Mendieta, E. (Eds.). (2012). *Decolonizing epistemologies: Latina/o theology and philosophy*. Fordham University Press.
- Kazharski, A. (2022, July 19). Explaining the 'westsplainers': Can a Western scholar be an authority on Central and Eastern Europe? *Forum for Ukrainian Studies*. <https://ukrainian-studies.ca/2022/07/19/explaining-the-westsplainers-can-a-western-scholar-be-an-authority-on-central-and-eastern-europe/>
- Kessi, S., Marks, Z., & Ramugondo, E. (2021). Decolonizing knowledge within and beyond the classroom. *Critical African Studies*, 13(1), 1–9.
- Khromeychuk, O. (2022, June 13). Where is Ukraine? *RSA Journal*. <https://www.thersa.org/rsa-journal/2022/issue-2/feature/where-is-ukraine>
- Kotliuk, G. (2023). Colonization of minds: Ukraine between Russian colonialism and Western Orientalism. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 8, 1206320.
- Kotzee, B. (2017). Education and epistemic injustice. In I. J. Kidd, J. Medina, & G. Pohlhaus Jr. (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of epistemic injustice* (pp. 324–335). Routledge.
- Mbembe, A. (2019). Future knowledges and their implications for the decolonisation project. In J. Jansen (Ed.), *Decolonisation in universities: The politics of knowledge* (pp. 239–254). Wits University Press.
- Mignolo, W. D. (2021). *The politics of decolonial investigations*. Duke University Press.
- Pohlhaus, G., Jr. (2020). Epistemic agency under oppression. *Philosophical Papers*, 49(2), 233–251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/05568641.2020.1780149>
- Shkandrij, M. (2001). *Russia and Ukraine: Literature and the discourse of empire from Napoleonic to postcolonial times*. McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Said, E. W. (1994). *Culture and imperialism*. Vintage.

- Snyder, T. (2022, April 28). The war in Ukraine is a colonial war. *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/essay/the-war-in-ukraine-is-a-colonial-war>
- Snyder, T. (2017, July 7). Germans must remember the truth about Ukraine for their own sake. *Eurozine*. <https://www.eurozine.com/germans-must-remember-the-truth-about-ukraine-for-their-own-sake/>
- Spivak, G. C. (2015). Can the subaltern speak? In P. Williams & L. Chrisman (Eds.), *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory: A reader* (pp. 66–111). Routledge.
- Tsybalyuk, D. (2022). Academia must recentre embodied and uncomfortable knowledge. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 6(6), 758–759.
- Ukrainian Decolonial Glossary. (n.d.). <https://decolonialglossary.com.ua/home-en>
- Ukrainica and other teaching resources. (n.d.). The Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University. <https://huri.harvard.edu/teaching-resources-list>
- Vsetecka, J. (2023). Integrating scholarship on Ukraine into classroom syllabi. In O. Palko & M. Férez Gil (Eds.), *Ukraine's many faces: Land, people, and culture revisited* (pp. 375–392). transcript Verlag.
- Yermolenko, V. (2021). Atypical post-colonialism: Ukraine in global political thought. *UA*, (2), 19–25.
- Ziai, A., Bendix, D., & Müller, F. (2020). Decolonizing knowledge orders, research methodology and the academia: An introduction. In D. Bendix, F. Müller, & A. Ziai (Eds.), *Beyond the master's tools?: Decolonizing knowledge orders, research methods and teaching* (pp. 1–15). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Гундорова, Т. (2024, травень 16). Ми зловживаємо словом «деколонізація»: дослідниця Тамара Гундорова про літературу після постмодерну, естетизацію катастроф і постколоніальну травму.

Українська правда. <https://life.pravda.com.ua/culture/tamara-gundorova-pro-dekolonializm-301571/>

Забужко, О. (2022). Найдовша подорож. Видавничий дім «Комора».

Рябчук, М. (2019). Долання амбівалентності. Дихотомія української національної ідентичності – Історичні причини та політичні наслідки. Інститут політичних і етнонаціональних досліджень ім. І. Ф. Кураса НАН України.