

# INTRODUCTION

## RUSSIAN AND SLAVONIC STUDIES AT THE CROSSROADS: THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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THIS ‘TALKING POINT’ FORUM AROSE in the context of the crisis in Russian and Slavonic Studies prompted by Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the brutal ensuing war. It considers how the war is forcing scholars urgently to rethink their conceptualization of the field and completely to rewrite the curricula for their teaching programmes. Questions have arisen over the extent to which lessons from the broader ‘decolonization’ agenda that is being pursued in most other humanities disciplines have been sufficiently or appropriately applied to the curricula, artistic and literary canons, linguistic coverage, intellectual assumptions and geopolitical reach of Russian and Slavonic Studies, as well as over whether the field’s very title reflects a lingering bias towards an ‘imperial centre’. This bias, it is argued, comes at the expense of the multiple languages and rich cultural heritages of the peoples subjugated by the Russian and Soviet empires throughout their long histories. The collapse of the Soviet Union shifted the balance of power in the region, with some countries joining the EU and NATO, while others remained within Russia’s orbit. As geopolitical fault lines shift, so the boundaries of our field of study, and its very naming, have become contentious. Indeed, the multiple variants on names for our field to be found in institutions where it is represented (Russian and East European Studies; Slavonic Studies; Russian and Slavonic Studies; Russian and Eurasian Studies; even Eurasian Studies), remain tainted with more than a hint of an imperial aftertaste.

However, there are risks entailed in applying wholesale to a contiguous Eurasian empire principles derived from scrutiny of overseas European empires whose histories and modes of interaction with their subjects are quite different. Moreover, the history of Russian Studies in the UK (and in the West more generally) reflects the very specific influence of the Cold War, when a primary motivation for studying the Soviet Union and its official language was precisely to ensure the acquisition of the in-depth cultural and historical knowledge necessary to understand and thus combat what was seen as an aggressive, hegemonizing threat to the integrity of

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the democratic order. Arguably, and ironically, we may be witnessing a return to the 'Enemy Studies' rationale for maintaining Russian-language provision within our secondary and higher education sectors (a factor which inevitably shapes the research interests and agendas of the staff who must deliver the programmes which sustain their posts).

At the same time, broader criticisms have long been levelled at the fallacies that any one nation ever truly coincides with one language, that single nations (or countries) or, indeed, single languages, are meaningful and appropriate units of study and that any geo-culturally localized entity can be understood outside of its traversal by trans-local and global flows of texts, linguistic norms, values, people and artefacts. Long before Putin's invasion of Ukraine, the baton of the 'transnational turn' which swept across the humanities at the end of the twentieth century was being passed to Modern Languages scholars. It is in this context that Liverpool University Press launched its Transnational Modern Languages initiative towards the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century. Paradoxically, perhaps, the initiative took the form of an overarching handbook complemented by edited volumes of research essays relating to each of the most widely taught European languages (French, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Russian). The compromise of issuing volumes 'by language area' alongside the handbook reveals the persistence of national imaginaries, as well as the resilience of disciplinary structures.

The editors of this Talking Point also co-edited the *Transnational Russian Studies* volume. Published in 2020, this volume considered how the transnational paradigm applies to the Russian context. It did so, however, without hindsight of what happened to Ukraine in February 2022. Feeling that it is necessary now critically to revisit the agendas and arguments we set forth in the extended introduction we wrote for *Transnational Russian Studies* and to review them in the light of the invasion, we co-authored a set of reflections on our original positions and presented the new insights and propositions regarding the future of our discipline that the ongoing war has engendered in us. Again, the contradictions and tensions we address here are implicit in the divergent readings that may be retrospectively applied to the title of our volume: were we proleptically anticipating the drive to deprivilege the imperial centre at the heart of our discipline (*Transnational Russian Studies*), or, conversely, were we legitimating the imperializing force that Russia still exerts over the territories contiguous to it (*Transnational Russian Studies*)?

This Talking Point format offers a valuable opportunity to include other, contrapuntal voices on these issues. We invited responses from eight leading scholars in our extended field, seeking out representations of specialisms and perspectives which diverged from our own, including from those who work on non-Russian cultures. We invited each person to write a response to our essay, encouraging them to be constructively critical, giving them full latitude in their responses, the views expressed in which are their own. We indicated that we would welcome point-by-point engagement with the essay, approaches that used the essay as a starting point for the authors' own thinking in relation to the war's impact on our field and texts that combined both approaches. Two of the responses were co-authored, meaning that we

received six responses in all. The Talking Point section thus consists of our editorial reflection, followed by the responses. Ultimately our aim is to offer a contribution to the ongoing debate raging across our discipline in the context of the current war in Ukraine, while at the same time providing a distinctive and valuable perspective on discussions around the implications of the decolonization agenda for Modern Languages more broadly.

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