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## New Threats, Old Challenges: Understanding Roman Imperialism in Post-Soviet Russia

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Russian scholars who want to study the Roman Empire, its provinces, and theoretical aspects of Roman imperialism face issues such as the notable disfavour for theoretical re-thinking and debate (a striking contrast to Western academia). This has largely been determined by specific features of Russian academic tradition that have seen it distance from an anti-imperialist and Marxist political tool towards a neutral space that is anti-ideology with a bias against 'hot' topics. Other problems are created by the political context and socio-economic conditions of academics. To add to this, scholars are underpaid, underrated, overexploited, and act within a specific public discourse that is filled with imperial nostalgia. This paper discusses these issues and some of the key features of contemporary Russian scholarship on the Roman Empire and imperialism; special attention is given to Marxist legacy of Soviet scholarship and its potential for future studies of the Roman Empire. Possible strategies to deal with these factors are briefly discussed at the end.

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## A Twist of Titles

In 2009 I had my first meeting with my supervisor. A couple of years before it I had finished training as a history teacher at the University of Kaluga, a small town not far from Moscow, and was then in search of a topic to study. Roman Britain appeared to be a rather interesting subject to tackle for several reasons. There was not, for example, a single book in Russian about it, so the field was almost empty. Also, I had some knowledge of English (far from any decent level but good enough for a small Russian town) so could start working with the literature without wasting time. We discussed formal issues and formulated a title for my PhD thesis, 'The Romanization of Britain'. Today this first version of the title looks outdated and rather ridiculous for a focused research project; even if it did sound perfect at the moment. Nor did I see any problem with the theoretical side of the topic or the twists and turns that were about to happen to my thesis. Needless to say, the title of my thesis changed shortly after I encountered the first paper mentioning the Romanization debate.

This says a lot about my basic training. I barely had an idea about recent theoretical discussions of Roman imperialism and my knowledge of Roman Britain was limited to a small number of Russian publications. A similar lack of access and exposure to a wide range of sources on Roman archaeology is not uncommon to students from all over the world. Zena Kamash has recently examined the issues that surround this phenomenon. Kamash illustrates that the limited range of academic work and perspectives used within an individual's education is caused by many factors. These reasons are predominantly context-dependent and focus on constraints caused by language barriers and reliance on selection approaches for teaching material, perspectives, and topics determined through naïve processes strongly influenced by tradition and implicit bias (Kamash 2021: 33). For example, as I was educated in Russia, I was trained as a historian and had no archaeological expertise and knowledge of provincial archaeology (on relations between history and archaeology in Russia see: Klejn 1993a). This is hardly surprising since the Roman Empire, its provinces, and Roman imperialism (issues I am here dealing with) were topics traditionally studied in Russia by classical historians while classical archaeologists dealt primarily with the Black Sea region.

My theoretical 'virginity' was caused not only by a lack of education; it reflected the state of post-Soviet scholarship. In many respects, it differs greatly both from its Soviet predecessor and contemporary Western academia. While Soviet scholars viewed the Roman Empire as any other Empire in history—a predatory state that pillaged and plundered—post-Soviet researchers tended to focus on the positive sides of imperial rule. When Western academics were involved in the Romanization debate, Russian scholars barely paid attention to it and continued to use the concept as if it was

unproblematic. As a result, thirty years of contemporary Russian studies of the Roman Empire, its provinces, and imperialism appear desynchronized with the current state of research outside of Russia.

In this paper, I will look at different treatments of Roman imperialism and Romanization in Soviet academia, consider the existing tropes of Russian academic focus on the Roman Empire, and finally, discuss possible responses to the circumstances that influence this research. The text opens with a section that summarizes Soviet research on the Roman Empire and imperialism. In the next section, I will discuss some features of contemporary Russian academia. The final part of this paper contains a discussion of the ‘external’ factors that influence scholars, problems, and prospects of the discipline in Russia.

There are several reasons for me to write this paper. The most important of them is the need to overcome *Rossica nonleguntur* habit for a moment and introduce contemporary Russian scholarship on Roman Empire to foreign colleagues. But why should they be interested in it?

The obvious answer is that it is worth observing different academic traditions because it widens knowledge and stimulates research through the exchange of ideas and mutual re-evaluation of various concepts. It also helps to fill historiographical gaps and create full-scale detailed accounts of Roman imperial studies. More important is that the Russian perspective, shaped by a number of factors, may be a base for contributions to the research of Roman imperialism and deliver another example of how modern readings of the Roman past can be influenced by current politics.

### ***Cum ira et studio: A Controversial Legacy of Soviet Studies of the Roman Empire***

Contemporary studies of the Roman Empire and imperialism in Russia should be analyzed in consideration of the Soviet academic and ideological legacy. The phenomenon of Soviet Classics, a complex discipline which included Classical philology, Greek and Roman history, and archaeology of the Black Sea region, does not belong only to the shelves of historiography publications, it is also critical for understanding contemporary scholarship in post-Soviet countries (for Soviet Classics phenomenon see: Krikh and Metel 2014, 2019; Krikh 2015; Ladynin 2016; for the Soviet studies of Roman imperialism see Baryshnikov 2020). Most scholars in post-Soviet Russia (as well as in neighboring countries) were raised and educated in a Marxist-Leninist tradition of research and interpretation of the past. Many works by Soviet scholars do not occupy marginal positions within Russian-language academic tradition and continue to be read and studied in universities. These works are still included in bibliographies and

cited, though not as frequently as more recent publications. Generations of scholars in Russia, and probably in most post-Soviet countries, are familiar with these texts; this point remains true even if we speak about young scholars born after 1991.

It should be noted that chronologically 'Soviet Classics' does not equal the Soviet period of Russian history (1917–1991). The establishment of Soviet scholarship took place a decade after the October Revolution, in the late 1920s and 1930s. 1991 as the final year of the Soviet Classics is a rather conventional date because at least some papers published in the following years presented the results of research conducted during Soviet times.

Soviet scholarship of the Roman Empire and imperialism had several features that made it quite different from the Western tradition though one should remember there was no monolithic view of Roman imperialism among Western scholarship. Soviet studies, especially at the earliest stage of their development, were anti-imperial and anti-colonial (see for details, Baryshnikov 2020). One could not, for example, find an admiration of Roman expansion or the praising of the 'civilizing' Roman influence on savage and primitive barbarians, no sympathy for the Empire offering peace and prosperity for native people that can be spotted in some mid-late twentieth century pieces of Western scholarship (e.g. Richmond 1955: 37, 124; Frere 1987: 295; an updated interpretation of this view can be found in MacMullen 2000: 135–137). It can be highlighted with the review of the Roman history textbook written by Nikolay A. Mashkin and published in 1949 (it quickly became one of the most important Soviet textbooks on ancient history) that was criticized for 'the insufficient exposure of the aggressive nature of Roman imperialism' (Benkliev 1952: 111).

Anti-imperial rhetoric and content were determined by the general ideological paradigm of Soviet humanities and social sciences. They were viewed as tools of ideological struggle, powerful means to oppose foreign, 'bourgeois' researchers, and to prove the superiority of socialist ideals. Soviet scholars were encouraged to criticize Western colleagues, deconstruct colonial and imperial biases, question the common conclusions, and develop their own Marxist-Leninist theoretical agenda (e.g. Livshitz 1957; Shtaerman 1957; Sadovskaya 1960; Kolosovskaya 1973). According to this agenda, the Roman Empire was not only a predatory state, but within itself, it encompassed the highest stage of slavery, a formation that would be eventually replaced with feudalism. The Marxist-Leninist theory with its rigid schemes limited the theoretical potential of Classical studies and humanities in general but also stimulated studies on topics often overlooked by foreign researchers. Thus, Soviet scholars focused on issues like slavery and social-economic aspects of the Roman world, oppression of the lower

classes and subjugated people, class struggle and native resistance, and the life of rural communities.

The controversial nature of the Soviet Union and its ideology defined the controversies and paradoxes of scholarship. Researchers were expected to criticize foreign colleagues even in situations when they wanted to agree with them. The criticism often presented a mix of purely scholarly points and imposed ideological remarks that made many observations appear weaker than they actually were. Theoretical debates were encouraged but only on a limited scale so their contribution to the development of theory was also limited (e.g. Elena Shtaerman's works were rudely criticized for 'structuralism', and this unfair criticism negatively affected her theoretical research. See Lyapustina 2004: 293; Krikh 2015: 329–333). The state's ideological control restricted the choice of research aims for choosing research objects and predetermined some conclusions. The on-going issue of access to many publications and reports, and the limited possibilities of a real discussion with foreign colleagues diminished the potential of Soviet scholarship in many respects.

At its best, Soviet researchers provided a very detailed holistic approach and a fresh anti-imperialist view of the Roman Empire. At its worst, they produced pieces of propaganda lacking a high-quality analysis of evidence. In general, Soviet scholarship did not deconstruct the traditional 'Roman/barbarian' dichotomy or narratives which were built upon this base, but it offered an alternative perspective on Rome and her Empire. Elena M. Shtaerman's (1957) narrative of the Roman Empire between third–fourth centuries AD is one such example. Shtaerman's research focused on economic and social aspects of the Roman Empire and imperialism with all regions and provinces considered. Military and political histories here only served a part of the background. Romanization for Shtaerman 'was a nebulous term' used to denote 'phenomena of a secondary order' such as a spread of Roman culture (Shtaerman 1957: 255). Thus, Shtaerman's story of Roman Empire and its provinces was a story of masses and forms of bondage. It was almost free from cultural labels and rejected the colonial image of Rome as a civilizing force on a savage barbarian.

The last decades of Soviet scholarship were marked by some changes. It seems that politically motivated rhetoric in publications reduced in size and decreased in significance. Theoretical opposition to Western academia was no longer a matter of principle as Détente and Perestroika were making tensions between the Soviet Union and the USA less visible.

Changes in Soviet Classics throughout the late 1970s and 1980s can be highlighted by the reshaping of the Romanization concept. Whilst not a very valuable term for

Shtaerman in 1957, it became a rather helpful word that was used to explain the ways in which Rome succeeded in integrating conquered regions into the world of Empire. Romanization itself was understood as a process of cultural interaction and synthesis of Roman and non-Roman elements (e.g. Kolosovkaya 1985: 167; Shkunaev 1985: 258; some passages sound similar to the views expressed a bit later by Millett 1990). Such an understanding of Romanization was formulated by Georgy S. Knabe in the early years after the fall of the Soviet Union:

‘Romanization is usually understood as a process of the creation of the specific civilization (where native elements interacted with Roman ones, blending into a dual economic, administrative, legal and cultural body) on the territories conquered or influenced by Rome’ (Knabe 1993: 644–645).

Such an approach showed little Marxist-Leninist influence and resembled a cultural-historical view of Roman imperial history.

And then the Union fell.

### **After ‘The End of History’: Some Remarks on Russian Scholarship of the Roman Empire and Imperialism**

Contemporary Russian scholarship has produced a number of works dealing with various aspects of the Roman Empire, Roman provinces, and imperialism. Sadly, due to the language barrier, many of them are unknown to academics who have not been educated in Russian or non-Russian readers. This feature is closely linked with the problems of the non-presence of Russian-speaking researchers in Roman archaeology and the omission of Russian publications in higher education reading lists (Kamash 2021: 11–12, 33). Thus, some short remarks are necessary to show the current state of Russian academia.<sup>1</sup>

The post-Soviet period of scholarship can be loosely divided into two phases. The first decade after the fall of the Soviet Union presents the direct continuation of the previous studies; most conclusions and methods remained the same while ideological components ceased to be. The beginning of the new century is marked by the increasing activity of the younger generation of scholars who were educated in the Late Soviet period and started their research careers in the early period of the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, the number of scholars who study these issues remains limited, as does the number of their published works. The landscape of Roman studies looks more like a sparsely populated desert than a bustling town. There is some hope, however, for change here, mostly connected with the Nizhny Novgorod State University where

various studies of the imperial history of Rome are conducted by Alexander Makhlayuk, Konstantin Markov, and Andrey Negin.

A quick glance at the corpus of publications shows that Russian scholars deal with a range of topics related to the Roman Empire. The majority of studies focused on the political, military, and ideological aspects of imperialism and empire (e.g. Smyshlyaev, 1991; 1997; 1999; 2001; Makhlayuk 2006; 2010; 2013; 2013b; Makhlayuk and Negin 2009; 2021; Bannikov 2013; Markov 2013; 2015; 2017; Smyshlyaev 2017; 2018). Considerable attention is also paid to the Early Empire, especially the Augustin Period (Tokarev 2011; Tariverdieva 2015a; 2015b; Mezheritskiy 2016; Makhlayuk 2017; 2019; Tariverdieva 2017). Provinces and regions of the Roman world represent less frequent objects of research, as do economic and cultural history. Limited attention was paid to the western territories of the empire, namely Spain, Gaul, Britain, and Germany (Martemyanov 1994; Gurin 2001; Tikhonova 2005; Martemyanov 2010; Mezheritskiy 2011; Tsirkin 2011; Kulikova 2012; Martemyanov 2017; Saprykin 2018.). The topics of slavery and social struggle have today lost their popularity, though not entirely (e.g. Durnovo 2004). Overall, publications about the Roman Empire, its regions, and imperialism are patchy. There is an evident lack of focused interest, likewise the absence of works devoted to some provinces (for instance, North Africa and Dalmatia) or debate on theoretical topics; one of the rare exceptions are the papers by Alexander V. Makhlayuk (Makhlayuk 2014; 2021). A lack of engagement with theory is especially visible when one looks at the provincial studies. Here Romanization occupies a special place, being used as a universal term for constructing narratives about sociocultural and political change in different regions of the Roman world. The term is used with different meanings: as a mutual interaction between cultures, as a deliberate policy launched by Rome, as a spread of Roman culture and civilization, or as a mix of all mentioned interpretations (e.g. Shirokova 2016; Saprykin 2018). Though this approach is not used to praise Roman imperialism it certainly lacks Soviet anti-colonial roots and is not affected by modern post-colonial trends either.

I feel that several factors are determining such disfavor for conceptualizations and theoretical debates. One of the most significant is the legacy of the Marxist-Leninist paradigm. For Soviet academia, it was an officially imposed theoretical agenda with scholars expected to work within its framework. For historians, archaeologists, and philologists, it defined general understanding and interpretation of Greek and Roman history no matter what their personal views were.

From the beginning of the 1990s Classical studies, as well as Russian humanities in general, got rid of the Marxism-Leninism paradigm. For some scholars, it was a relief. Leo S. Klejn, a leading theoretical archaeologist of the Soviet Union and Russia, wrote:<sup>2</sup>

‘The Marxist archaeology... was an intangible ideal, a myth. It never existed, it never could exist. The archaeology influenced by Marxism existed, it was the archaeology, subjugated by utopian dogma and political situation. Sometimes this benefited the archaeology, but more often harmed, destroyed its scientific nature. Such a Marxist archaeology was not needed either’ (Klejn 1993b: 78–79).<sup>3</sup>

Such words could be said by many classical historians, archaeologists, and philologists. Other scholars, like Elena M. Shtaerman felt that Marxism was somehow distorted in the Soviet Union but still had enough power and potential for modern academia. In one of her last papers (published 12 years after her death) she admitted that:

‘It cannot be ignored that the fault for negative attitude towards Marxism lies with ourselves, who often compromised it in the eyes of our critics and supporters. ... An undeniable damage was delivered by the hegemony of the concept of ‘slavery as a formation’ that became an undisputed dogma in the academia’ (Shtaerman 2003: 22).<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, after some critical reading of key Marx, Engels, and Lenin works, the author concluded that:

‘... Marxism, void from the distorting layers, produced by various political conditions, can explain the history of the Ancient world better than any other theory’ (Shtaerman 2003: 29).<sup>5</sup>

The rejection of the past orthodoxy can be illustrated with the two books by Yulia K. Kolosovskaya. One, ‘*Pannonia I–III AD*’, was published in 1973 and presents a detailed account of the provincial development with Marxist theory as a foundation. It is evident in the very first sentences of the book:

‘The patterns of the development of slavery as a formation on its last stage of the existence can not be discovered without studying of general and particular features of structures and evolution of regions of Roman Empire’ (Kolosovskaya 1973: 3).<sup>6</sup>

The monograph is focused on social and economic aspects of Pannonian history, with a special critique of ‘bourgeois historians’ who studied political history and Romanization of the region for their biased approach (Kolosovskaya 1973: 11). References to Marx’s works can be found at the beginning of the book (Kolosovskaya 1973: 5; there are seven references to Marx and Engels in total); however, a different case is presented in Kolosovskaya’s *Rome and the World of Tribes in Danube Region I–IV*



*AD*, published in 2000. The formation theory and slavery mode of production are not mentioned in the introduction, and one can see from the beginning of the book that the research is focused on military, political history, and Romanization (Kolosovskaya 2000: 5). While the 1973 monograph is about rural and urban communities, the 2000 text is centered around provincial and tribal elites. Such differences clearly show the change in academic discourse.

Numerous and obligatory references to Marx, Engels, and Lenin disappeared from academic texts. Anti-colonial sentiments were abandoned and the scholastic interest in resistance and social struggle issues decreased. The most crucial consequence was the rejection of attempts to bring theory into publications and the visible avoidance of theoretical debates (Krikh 2014; Ladynin 2016: 10). The overwhelming majority of publications show that scholars prefer to focus on data and avoid thorough discussions of research agendas. For example, theoretical discussions appear usually as historiography papers and chapters and are often separated from the core of research (Smykov 2010; Baryshnikov 2012; 2015; Makhlayuk 2013a). In the case of Roman studies, this also led to the revival of old, pre-revolutionary views of the Roman Empire as a superior state that not only conquered but also civilized masses of barbarians. The degree of development for non-Roman peoples is again measured by the universal 'Romanization' tool that separates more Romanized (and developed) people from less Romanized (and thus underdeveloped) ones. Moreover, the cautious attitude to the contemporary concepts that have political and social implications (such as gender, identity, and globalization) may be somehow related to the rejection of previous Marxist theory.

In my opinion, Marxist theoretical legacy of the Soviet period remains relevant, at least in some respects. I believe that careful examination of the ideas and observations made by Marxist scholars in the Soviet period may contribute to contemporary agendas in imperialism studies. Some preliminary remarks have been made recently with special attention to the works by Shtaerman and Sadovskaya (Baryshnikov 2020: 258–261) but there is much more to be done. The Soviet academic experience can also teach us an important lesson about the values of theoretical pluralism and academic independence from bureaucratic control and can demonstrate the advantages, flaws, and possible limits of linking the past with contemporary politics and ideologies. The current rise of interest in Marx and Lenin's theoretical heritage among younger generations makes reflection and understanding of Soviet experience in scholarship a truly pertinent challenge (Chesnokova 2019; Lebskiy 2019). Using the popular psychology language one can say that it is time to stop denying Soviet Marxist theoretical legacy and embrace it.

Another factor contributing to the current situation in studies of the Roman Empire, its provinces, and Roman imperialism is constituted by institutional and discipline

features. These topics are studied mostly by historians, thus, written sources (works of ancient writers and inscriptions) constitute the most significant group of material for researchers. That does not mean that these scholars do not know how to deal with the archaeological evidence; they do,<sup>7</sup> however, in most cases archaeological sources remain sidelined. For this, different reasons can be stated. Firstly, the situation of access to archaeological reports in Russian libraries is far from perfect, though the development of open access publications and existing web resources do seem to cause a positive effect. Secondly, there is a considerable lack of specialized Roman archaeology (and specifically Roman provincial archaeology) training at Russian universities as classical archaeology courses and fieldwork projects mostly focus on the Black Sea region and its communities of different periods.<sup>8</sup> It also should be noted that theoretical archaeologists, both of the USSR and Russia, paid no attention to Roman provinces and imperialism, thus ignoring such issues as the Romanization debate. Leo S. Klejn can be the best example here. The leading theoretical archaeologist occasionally used the term ‘Romanization’ without any critical remarks or references to the Romanization debate (e.g., Klejn 2007: 127). Though it should be noted that it seems that Roman archaeology was not the topic of his primary concern.

Nevertheless, it is not surprising that scholars prefer to work with sources they know better and apply agendas they understand, rather than discuss issues demanding another sort of expertise. There is a new hope that things will soon change due to the establishment of the Centre of Classical and Oriental Archaeology at the Higher School of Economics University in Russia (CCOA 2019).<sup>9</sup> If the development of contemporary scholarship were affected only by internal forces one would be optimistic about the prospects of Russian academia. There are good empirical studies, which lean towards internationalization that foster links with foreign academics and institutions. There is also an increasing interest in reflecting the heritage of Soviet Classical studies. Sadly, other ‘external’ factors also influence studies of the Roman Empire and imperialism, as well as Russian Classics and the Humanities in general, which has a negative effect.

### **A Bleak Midwinter at Imperial Ruins**

It should be emphasized that the main points of this section must be viewed as preliminary observations only and may serve as an invitation for future discussion. It is evident that political, social, and economic factors influence the existing scholarship and, in some respects, shape its results and prospects. Issues like non-academic drivers of studies, gender, and age are aspects of contemporary Roman studies that are rarely taken into consideration and have not yet been debated. Hopefully, this lack of self-reflection and self-analysis will soon be solved.

Politics and ideology seem to be abiding forces that shape our interpretations of the Roman Empire and imperialism and there are a lot of publications dealing with this issue (e.g. Hingley 1996; 2000; Mattingly 2014; Gardner 2017; Hanscam 2019). Contemporary Russian political discourse presents a complicated phenomenon of controversial rhetoric, ideology, and inconsistent practice of a neo-imperialist state. For instance, it seems to be a blend of various types of nostalgia: one for the pre-revolutionary Russian Empire and another for the Soviet Union. There are plenty of works dealing with the Soviet nostalgia phenomenon (e.g. Klumbyte 2008; White 2010; Krivkovic 2014). Sadly, it seems that the ways official propaganda and public discourse interpret and transform the images of pre-revolutionary empire are not yet studied at a sufficient scale. The latter is quite selective and fits the official politics of cherry-picking certain useful parts from the Soviet past and neglecting or blaming others. One may note a slightly ambivalent but generally favorable attitude towards Stalin in the official discourse and compare it with negative expressions from the current president about Lenin, whose strong anti-colonial and anti-nationalist views seem to be inconvenient for the elite. In general, the state media and elite proclaim Imperial Russia as a strong and powerful empire bringing civilization to peripheral regions and selflessly helping brother Slavs. Soviet experience is sometimes reshaped as an experience of Empire where Russians did their best to develop other regions. At its core, it is a nostalgia for the powerful country and the empire as a 'good' historical force that civilized and improved the lives of subjugated regions and people.<sup>10</sup> The potentially dangerous impact of such imperial images can be seen in the current political situation, and it makes the recent discussion of the dark sides of Roman imperialism sound more important than it may have seemed before (Fernandez-Götz et al. 2020a; 2020b; Gardner 2020; Versluys 2020).

In this dialogue, there is a lack of direct historical links with Rome and her empire. An old concept of Moscow as the Third Rome had lost its popularity long ago and now belongs to History textbooks. Thus, Rome cannot be viewed as an ancestral empire in Russian history, and the references to its imperial past are not frequent. Still, there are two interesting and naïve cases showing how imperial nostalgia blends with the popular image of Rome and loyalty to the current president.

In 2015 a bust of President Putin dressed as a Roman emperor was set up not far from the small village of Agalatovo, in the Leningrad region.<sup>11</sup> This monument was set up by a local Cossack community that reportedly wanted to express their gratitude to the president for the events that have recently occurred in the Crimea.<sup>12</sup> Another Roman-style monument appeared in Saint-Petersburg four years later, situated near the mall 'Europe'. The latter monument stands as a loosely made copy of Augustus of Prima Porta.<sup>13</sup> The face of the statue bears more resemblance to President Putin, however,

than the first princeps of Rome. Both cases present a situation where the public image of Roman imperial power is mixed with the perception of the current state leader. Motives may differ but the results look like a freakish and deliberate folk-Romanization of the president's visual depiction. The bust and the statue express a popular view of a strong and 'good' emperor and demonstrates how 'an imperial nostalgia' absorbs stereotypes and images from different times and contexts. It can be suggested that growing imperial sentiment and the further expansion of neo-imperialist politics will make the positive perceptions of the Roman Empire and imperialism stronger, not only in popular opinion but in academic publications as well.

Political background and ideological discourse may also affect Russian Roman imperial studies. Social and economic factors play a very important role and can undermine all positive changes brought by the internal evolution of scholarship. One of the most striking features of modern Russia is that it is—despite all resources and ambitions— an extremely unequal country. The majority of wealth is owned by very few people while many Russian citizens try to make ends meet (Mareeva and Slobodenyuk 2018; Mareeva and Lezhina 2019). Unequal distribution of wealth is burdened with other inequalities, of which gender and age inequalities (the latter became more complicated with the recent pension reform) are the most visible.<sup>14</sup> Historians and archaeologists of all kinds, as one can imagine, do not occupy the top positions in the existing hierarchies of wealth and power. Studies of Roman imperialism and other aspects of Roman imperial history do not look very important for governmental officials and do not occupy primary places in university curricula. Thus, the job market is tight, wages are quite low, and researchers must acquire additional jobs to earn a living (cf. Makhlayuk and Gabelko 2013: 19–20). The lasting social and economic effect of the Coronavirus pandemic will likely make things even worse.

The state economic policies do not solve most of the social and material problems but multiply them. Neo-imperialism in foreign policy goes hand in hand with neoliberalism in the economy. One of the main features of the last decade is the 'optimization' of education; the process of cutting funds and reducing staff numbers to minimize costs and make up a false picture of rising wages per worker. I have personally witnessed this in the state university of Kaluga, my hometown. In 2012 there was a Faculty of History with two departments—a department of World History and a department of Russian History—with 20 lecturers and professors overall. After seven years of 'optimization', the faculty was reorganized and became a part of the Institute of History and Law. The new department for History, Political Science and Philosophy was established with only eight lecturers and professors. By the beginning of September 2021, this number was reduced to only six. Obviously, such an 'optimization' has not improved the educational

provision at all.<sup>15</sup> In Britain, the closure of the University of Sheffield's Archaeology Department and the recent announcement of the University of Worcester demonstrate that these problems are wider and deeper than it seems. Such situations require the solidarity and compassion of researchers from all over the world.

These social and economic trends affect scholarship, fostering the dependence of scholars on employer and state funds. Opportunities and the freedom of academic thought are now limited not by Soviet ideology but by the practice of capitalism. The existing social and economic conditions threaten the future and prospects of studies on the ancient world in general (and the Roman past in particular). Those who are now choosing to study the Roman Empire must realize that no money or honors are waiting for them. Should one, therefore, expect theoretical rethinking and fruitful debates when there are no signs of a growing and flourishing academic community?

One may draw rather pessimistic conclusions from this, and it would be justified. The fact is that the few Russian scholars who study the Roman Empire, its provinces, and imperialism are overworked, underpaid, underprivileged, and subaltern. Sadly, there is no sign in the foreseeable future that the situation will change for the better.

Though the lack of financial resources and status are not very inspiring, paradoxically one may also find this situation beneficial for contemporary Russian scholarship. Being the outcast and reject is always uneasy but even such a position has some advantages. Without an officially imposed image of Rome and close attention from bureaucrats, it is possible to have some freedom of research and to ask previously awkward questions about painful issues of modernity, imperialism, wars, propaganda, inequality, and injustice. After all, being punk means that you do not have to feel obliged.

Of course, this freedom of research does not solve the existing political, social, and economic threats towards scholarship but it does help towards dealing with them and persist despite them. Those who study the Roman Empire and imperialism still have to face these threats and take the theoretical challenges of re-thinking the Soviet legacy, reflect on their own methodology and concepts, and come to a new understanding on the essence of Roman imperialism. I think that there are two main strategies for this. The first is to adapt to the current conditions to try and do the best despite the lack of financial resources, social uncertainty, and a public discourse filled with imperialistic propaganda. This strategy is suitable for a single researcher. With some luck, it is possible for a scholar to contribute to the ongoing discussion, foster international links, and gain some sort of reputation. At least, this strategy will help to preserve the knowledge and keep the academic tradition alive, and pass the torch to future generations. The second strategy relates to social activism and the self-organization of the academic community. It is only through collective efforts better social and economic conditions

for scholars can be achieved. Communities of academics, once organized, would then have more opportunities to be incorporated into international research networks. This strategy requires solidarity and many more collective efforts, and it may be a harder, more difficult, road to take. Nevertheless, I believe that the collective effort strategy is the best way for those who study Roman Empire, as well as for historians and archaeologists in general. Only united and self-organized communities will have a chance to stand for the rights of researchers in worsening economic, social, and political circumstances, represent their interests and create new opportunities for the future.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I owe an apology to my Russian colleagues for skipping important details, giving only a limited range of references and compressing the information. For the context of the development, contemporary issues and problems of Russian Classics see Ivantchik 2015. Despite the visible simplicity of the term 'Russian scholarship' it is difficult to define it properly. The national and state borders do not fully overlap the intellectual borders of the academic phenomenon. I have taken the liberty of including some Ukrainian colleagues (late A.P. Martemyanov, A.N. Tokarev) into the number of 'Russian scholars' due to the fact that their works fit the general academic tradition, written in Russian and available to Russian readers. Meanwhile, it seems reasonable not to include in this section Russian scholars (like G.M. Kantor, T.A. Ivleva) who are working abroad for a long time and are not directly affected by most of the 'external' factors listed below. I also have to omit the works dedicated to specific subjects and connected with the history of Roman Empire (in particular, publications on Late Empire, Early Christianity, on the development of ancient geography in Roman times). They do not usually deal with the issues of Roman imperialism and deserve a separate paper (or even a series of papers).
- <sup>2</sup> Every Russian passage is translated by the author of the paper.
- <sup>3</sup> «Марксистская археология... была лишь недостижимым идеалом, мифом. Она никогда не существовала и не могла существовать. Археология, находившаяся под воздействием марксизма, существовала — это была археология, подчиненная утопическим догмам и политической конъюнктуре. Иногда это шло ей на пользу, но чаще вредило, разрушало ее научность. Такая марксистская археология тоже не нужна». About Klejn's view of Marxism and Marxism-Leninism see: Tulchinsky 2020: 179–180.
- <sup>4</sup> «Нельзя, однако, не признать, что в значительной мере вина за подобные оценки марксизма лежит на нас самих, нередко компрометировавших марксизм в глазах наших зарубежных оппонентов (а отчасти и единомышленников). ... несомненный вред принесло господство в нашей науке ставшего непререкаемой догмой понятия «рабовладельческая формация».
- <sup>5</sup> «... марксизм, очищенный от наслоений, вызванных разными конъюнктурными моментами, лучше любой иной теории может объяснить историю античного мира».
- <sup>6</sup> «Закономерности развития рабовладельческой формации на последнем этапе ее существования невозможно выявить без изучения общего и особенного в структуре и путях эволюции отдельных областей Римской империи».
- <sup>7</sup> Some excellent studies based mostly on archaeological sources can be named here: Negin 2010; Ivantchik 2013; Negin 2014. It is worth noting that there are also regular special, 'Roman', volumes of high-profile 'Stratum plus' journal that is published in Moldova in Russian. Each of them includes papers dealing with various issues and regions in Roman period.
- <sup>8</sup> As far as I know, the only special Roman archaeology course is taught in Saint Petersburg by Alexander M. Butyagin; though I need to stress that my knowledge about this matter is limited and I may be mistaken here. It is worth mentioning that there are some several independent scholars, namely Ildar Kayumov and Dmitri Karelin, who are involved into the international academic network, participate in Limes and ROMECON conferences on a regular basis but at the same time are separated from training History and Archaeology students. This is another issue that should be solved in the future.
- <sup>9</sup> The Centre states the significance of the complex approach to research and aims to train students capable to study both written and archaeological sources. Potentially the activity of the Centre may bring historians, classical philologists and archaeologists closer as well as stimulate the exchange of ideas and theories. The works by one the Centre's leading researchers, V.I. Mordvintseva (e.g. Mordvintseva 2018), with significant theoretical contributions may be especially helpful and inspiring for historians studying cultural aspects of Roman Empire and imperialism.
- <sup>10</sup> Such a surreal mixture of imperial images and Soviet nostalgia used by the propaganda should neither surprise, nor fool anybody. In this case, the words of Vladimir Lenin, written in 'The Three sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism' (1913) remain true: 'People always have been the foolish victims of deception and self-deception in politics, and they always will be until they have learnt to seek out the interests of some class or other behind all moral, religious, political and social phrases, declarations and promises.' An old Marxism-Leninism seems to be more relevant than one could have thought.
- <sup>11</sup> Pod Peterburgom kazaki otkryli pamyatnik Putinu. Available at: <https://lenta.ru/news/2015/05/17/putin/>.
- <sup>12</sup> It was said that the Cossacks intended to set up additional monuments. One of them was designed to commemorate a

famous Cossack commander, ataman Petr Krasnov. During the Russian Civil War he was a leader of the anti-Bolshevik movement; later he became a supporter of Adolf Hitler and served as a nazi collaborator. If true, it tells a lot about the people who view Russian president as a Roman politician.

<sup>13</sup> V statue rimskogo imperatora usmotreli Putina. Available at: <https://lenta.ru/news/2019/12/12/imperator/>.

<sup>14</sup> On the 19<sup>th</sup> of June 2022 the statue was attacked by unknown people calling themselves 'A Committee of Republican Socialists' who shot at it with paintball guns. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifoj6doMIQU>  
On the issue of gender inequality see Rudakov and Prakhov 2019. Rosstat (Russian Federal State Statistics Service) states that in the first nine months of 2019 the average salaries of the researchers, lecturers and professors is between 94 725 (for researchers; approx. 1350 euros) and 86 053 (for lecturers and professors; 1240 euros) roubles. Nevertheless, the average salaries do not reflect the reality very well (Rosstat 2019). Regarding salaries of the universities the main conclusions of G. Androushchak and M. Yudkevich remain true (2012). For the consequences of such situation see Gounko 2014.

<sup>15</sup> In 2019 there were strong rumors about the 'optimization' of the Faculty of History of Saint-Petersburg State University, and at Tanais Archaeological Reserve Museum where a new director tried to cut the research activities in favor of the entertainment of visitors, which caused a scandal. This ended with a number of well-known and qualified researchers fired. These cases show that no one can feel safe about their jobs and future (Kolobova 2019; Tsareva 2019).

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One more thing should be said. The first draft of the paper was written in 2019–2020, and the final version was submitted in December of 2021, two months before the outbreak of Russian-Ukrainian conflict. As a communist and an internationalist, I do not support any kind of imperialist actions. All of them end with the same results: poverty and death of the innocent working class people. This is my very own and personal position. I am fully responsible for it and my words should not be taken as the position of any of my colleagues or the institutions I am affiliated with as an employee.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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