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Feminism and Aggressive Imperialism: Russian Feminist Politics in Wartime

VANYA MARK SOLOVEY

In a 2020 article discussing feminism and Russia's war against Ukraine, Ukrainian sociologist Hanna Hrytsenko touches upon a divide between Ukrainian and Russian feminists. She reports that in 2014, as Ukrainian feminists spoke of wartime rape or the fate of women soldiers in captivity, Russian feminists reacted with unanimous hostility. They defended Putin and the Russian army or maintained that war matters had nothing to do with feminism. There were virtually no Russian feminist voices in solidarity with Ukraine (Гриценко 2020; for an English version, cf. Hrytsenko 2022).

After eight years of war in Ukraine's Eastern regions, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine launched by Russia on February 24th, 2022, has sent shockwaves across the world and caused major changes in political, social, and cultural landscapes. How have Russian feminists responded to it? How is a movement that understands itself as progressive and emancipatory dealing with Russian collective responsibility for a genocidal colonial war? In the following, I consider several examples of stances taken publicly by Russian feminists and ranging from anti-war solidarity through Russian fragility to overt imperialism. The colonial nature of Russia's aggression is, I suggest, at the heart of all responses, and causes feminists to use or abuse postcolonial language in sometimes polar ways.

The Russian Feminist Movement Before the Full-scale War

In more than a decade leading up to 2022, the feminist movement in Russia grew considerably. A decentralised grassroots movement, it long acted without formal structures and beyond the realm of conventional politics, which led commentators to claim that feminism in Russia was in decline or non-existing (Johnson/Saarinén 2013, 561; Muravyeva 2018, 11; Turbine 2015, 327). In fact, the feminist movement has achieved much: it has shifted public opinion on several feminist issues and established feminism as a legitimate element of the public sphere in Russia (Solovey 2022, 209). As an alternative to the state's patriarchal cisheterosexist nationalist ideology, it has advanced a system of practices and norms centring collective care and solidarity among the marginalised. The increasing state repression has not spared feminists – one can think of Pussy Riot or Yulia Tsvetkova (*ibid.*, 111). Yet while repression against leaders can efficiently subdue centralised movements, the feminist movement's decentralised structure and absence of formal leaders have helped it remain active and even grow despite increasing state repression. Indeed, persecutions of feminists have sparked large-scale solidarity campaigns and helped further consolidate the movement (*ibid.*, 112).

Internally, Russian feminist communities have been leading largely the same debates as feminists worldwide. A key ideological divide has been over intersectionality and trans inclusion, with two opposing strands using the labels of ‘intersectional feminists’ (emphasising the social construction of gender and promoting solidarity across variously oppressed groups) and ‘radical feminists’ (insisting on an essentialist understanding of ‘woman’, refusing considerations of other oppressions, and hostile toward trans people) (ibid., 86). An anticolonial agenda, on the other hand, has not been much debated in Russian feminist scenes. Anticolonial and antiracist critiques set forth by feminists from Russia’s current and ex-colonies found little if any resonance with Russian metropolitan feminists prior to 2022 (Solovey 2019; Гриценко 2020). This lack of responsiveness to anticolonial arguments is, I suggest, a key factor for understanding the spectrum of Russian feminists’ responses to the full-scale war.

Anti-war Resistance

Feminists were among the first collective actors in Russia to articulate a clear anti-war position. On the second day of the invasion, a newly formed Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR) issued their Manifesto condemning Russia’s war of aggression, declaring that “[f]eminism as a political force cannot be on the side of a war of aggression and military occupation” and listing the setbacks to gender equality caused by wars (Феминистское Антивоенное Сопротивление 2022b; the Manifesto has been translated into English and 25 more languages, cf. Феминистское Антивоенное Сопротивление 2022a). FAR has been since initiating anti-war protests, countering Russian state propaganda with media campaigns, and providing emergency support to those affected by the war.

FAR’s structure builds directly upon previous feminist experience. It is a decentralised network that consists of autonomous cells across Russia and in other countries. Whereas it has a few public faces who provide media visibility, these activists do not make decisions for the whole network (Боброва 2022). Given the increased repression of all anti-war protest in Russia, this decentralised structure is key in enabling FAR’s operation. Another aspect in which FAR takes after previous feminist action is the use of creative protest forms and activism: from public mourning-in-protest campaigns to printing anti-war messages on bank notes (Women Against Violence Europe 2022).

FAR’s antimilitarist position means both condemning Russia’s military aggression and supporting Ukraine’s right to self-defence. Whereas some Western feminists have tried to misrepresent FAR’s stance as an undifferentiated pacifism (see critique in Hendl 2022, 66), FAR has denounced this (Феминистское Антивоенное Сопротивление 2022d). Beyond public declarations, FAR also engages in practical solidarity by helping forcibly displaced Ukrainians leave Russia and raising funds for humanitarian needs (Феминистское Антивоенное Сопротивление 2022c).

What sets FAR apart from most earlier feminist activist initiatives in Russia is an emphasis on anticolonialism. FAR has a dedicated Decolonial Section (Боброва 2022) that has published a “Call of national minorities” linking anti-war and anticolonial resistance (Феминистское антивоенное сопротивление 2022). The text suggests a reappropriation of racial/colonial slurs, which some activists have criticised. Still, bringing together feminist and anticolonial perspectives seems a crucial endeavour today, as ever more anticolonial initiatives emerge in Russia inspired by Ukraine’s anticolonial resistance (Cultural Survival 2022).

Russian Fragility and Self-victimisation

Amidst a colonial war, it is not surprising that decolonial concepts are being sought after, used, and abused to justify opposing political arguments. In April 2022, Bella Rapoport, a controversial public feminist, published an essay entitled “Sanctions as a colonial practice” (Рапопорт 2022).¹ In it, she describes both economic sanctions against Russia and instances of refused collaboration with Russian academics as “punishment” inflicted by the “West” on Russians who supposedly “haven’t done enough to prevent” the war (ibid.). According to Rapoport, Russia’s relationship to the ‘West’ is one of “colonial dependence” (ibid.). Echoing decolonial theorist Madina Tlostanova and her concept of Russia as a subaltern Empire, both subject and object of coloniality (Tlostanova 2006, 638), Rapoport mentions fleetingly “colonial relations... within the Russian Federation and outside, with its neighbours” (Рапопорт 2022). Yet her focus remains on the ‘West’ and the injustice of “punishing” those Russians “who have a conscience”, activists who have been fighting Putin’s regime for years and who felt shock, pain, and guilt over the war in Ukraine. Rapoport condemns “West-centric colonial thinking”, Western arrogance and righteousness, and even describes sanctions as a form of “violence” (ibid.).

Paradoxically, feeling guilt for Russia’s war of aggression does not prompt Rapoport to solidarity with Ukraine. In fact, but for a perfunctory reference in the first sentence, Ukraine is conspicuously absent from the text. Rather, the author translates her guilt into disidentification with the imperialist regime. This sentiment has been widespread among Russians. Liberal politicians in exile have even suggested issuing ‘passports of good Russians’ to distinguish those who should be exempt of sanctions (Utgof 2022). Self-identification as a ‘good Russian’, someone who supposedly bears no responsibility for the war, results in a self-victimisation whereby one’s suffering from being denied “the chance to consume like a Western person” (Рапопорт 2022) overshadows the experiences of being bombed, having one’s house destroyed or one’s family torn apart by the war.

What might be called Russian fragility – an oversensitivity to any suggestion of responsibility for imperialism – is something self-designated ‘good Russians’ have in common with the regime they seek to disengage from. Just as Rapoport, Putin

constructs Russia as a victim of unfair treatment by the ‘West.’ In a programmatic speech in October 2022, he twisted the postcolonial discourse in the same way to attack ‘Western colonialism’; he also spoke of Western economic sanctions as a form of punishment (Президент России 2022). Constructing Russia as a ‘global anticolonial leader’ has been described as Putin’s new approach to seeking international anti-Western alliances (Pertsev 2022).

These appropriations of the postcolonial discourse suggest the need to carefully rethink and refine the decolonial concept of subaltern Empire. Above all, a distinction should be clearly drawn between real colonial violence of the kind Russians are now inflicting upon Ukraine and Western cultural hegemony or Russians’ feelings of inferiority which are not rooted in violence or material oppression.

Supporting Imperialism

While some feminists might align with the Russian state inadvertently, others do so quite deliberately. Womenation, a group that calls itself radical feminist, published a statement on the social medium VK on 19 February 2022, a few days before the full-scale invasion. This is its opening line: “The platform’s administration strongly condemns the actions of the Ukrainian government aimed at escalating the armed conflict in the Donbas²” (Womenation quotes (18+) 2022). The authors follow by declaring their full support for “the state leadership of the Russian Federation, of the Donetsk and Luhansk National Republics” (ibid.). The Ukrainian state, they claim, is controlled by the US as part of a ‘neocolonial regime’ the latter maintains across Europe (ibid.). They attack Ukrainian feminists who took part in the 2014 Revolution of Dignity (also called Euromaidan) and Russians who support Ukraine, accusing them of serving men’s interests, foolishness, and lack of principles. Neither group, according to them, has the right to call themselves feminists.

The text fully adopts the language and claims of Russian official propaganda. Again, an appropriation of postcolonial language is noteworthy. Another element are conspiracy narratives: for instance, the very existence of the Ukrainian state is associated with US interests in controlling the oil and gas market in Europe. The statement also makes ample use of hate speech, repeatedly referring to the Ukrainian state as “the would-be Kyiv Reich” and describing Ukrainian feminists as “militant patriarchal cows in nationalist coats” (ibid.).

Most of this is not new. Hate speech, harsh attacks on other feminists, and conspiracy narratives have all been part of Womenation’s repertoire long before 2022. Founded in 2013, Womenation has focused on denouncing intersectionality and spreading anti-trans and anti-sex work propaganda (Solovey 2022, 86). The prevalence of these topics on Womenation’s resources and their persistent vehemence toward their opponents qualify them as a hate group, just as many other trans-exclusionary (TERF) and sexworker-exclusionary radical feminist (SWERF) organisations (cf. Pearce/Erikainen/Vincent 2020a; Koyama 2020).

Yet why does Womenation choose to align itself with the Russian state? How does it reconcile feminism with supporting a regime that has promoted patriarchal ideology, increasingly restricted women's rights, and glorified violence? I suggest that an answer to this can be discerned if we consider one more agenda point Womenation has in common with Putin's regime: anti-trans hostility.

For the Russian state and elite, anti-trans hostility is a key element of their overall anti-gender politics. Both the Russian state and Russian oligarchs are major funders of the global anti-gender movement (Datta 2021, 177; Graff/Korolczuk 2022, 47). Putin, who uses anti-gender language systematically, has made a point of ridiculing trans existence, e.g. referring to trans people as "transformers" (Meduza 2019). The new Russian anti-LGBT law adopted in 2022 explicitly targets trans people: besides prohibiting awareness-raising on LGBT issues in general, it specifically bans informing children on gender transition (TGEU 2022).

For Womenation, anti-trans hostility is their main *raison d'être*. As with other TERFs, it veils a fundamental refusal to acknowledge difference of experience and, crucially, others' oppression that is different from one's own (Koyama 2020, 738). In short, TERF ideology is about holding on to one's privilege. This is what makes TERFs close to anti-gender conservatives and fundamentalists, as researchers have observed (Hines 2020, 707; Pearce/Erikainen/Vincent 2020b, 885). While I do not claim that TERF ideology always correlates with supporting Russia's war of aggression, holding on to privilege in the case of Womenation and several other Russian TERFs does translate into overt imperialism.

Overall, just as other Russian communities, Russian feminists have split over Russia's war against Ukraine. While some speak out and act in solidarity with Ukraine, others align themselves with the imperialist state either openly or latently, through a politics of Russian fragility. Discursively, this split manifests itself in an implicit debate over the anticolonial or decolonial agenda. Russia's colonial war and Ukraine's anticolonial resistance have sparked a strengthening and ever more visible anticolonial movement, most notably in Buryatia, Sakha, and Tuva (Cultural Survival 2022). Feminists are part of this movement, linking anticolonialism to solidarity with Ukraine. Meanwhile, the Russian state is attempting to appropriate and twist the postcolonial discourse to justify its aggression with a supposed resistance to 'Western colonialism'. The same abuse of post- or decolonial concepts is done by those Russian feminists who side with the state openly or seek to absolve themselves of collective responsibility through self-victimisation.

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Notes

- 1 An English translation of the essay has equally been published (Rapoport 2022), yet it is abridged and rather inexact, which is why I have re-translated the quotes cited below.
- 2 For all Ukrainian toponyms, I use Ukrainian rather than Russian transliterations as a sign of respect, even if the sources cited do not.