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## A Meditation on Colonialism



Photo by [Sarah](#)

Polish-British author Joseph Conrad wrote that colonialism is not a pretty thing when one looks at it closely. Conrad, a subject of two colonial empires, well understood the institution's grotesque features.

When a group of people, let's call them Group A, occupies the territory of another population—we can call them Group B—and implants its own people on Group B's land, social relations rapidly deteriorate. A person can comb history books and find precisely zero exceptions to this.

The oppression and conflict that Conrad said invariably came from various forms of colonialism 100 years ago equally apply to the twenty-first century. I especially have in mind Israel's illegal occupation of the remaining 20 percent of historic Palestine (Gaza,

the West Bank, and East Jerusalem) and Russia's illegal occupation of about 25 percent of Ukraine (the Donbas region in the east and the Crimean Peninsula).

Here are some typical features of colonial expansion:

Group A steals much of the land that has been consigned to Group B by international law, consensus, convention, or treaty. But Group A gives all those things two enthusiastic middle fingers. Its leadership wants what it wants and sends in the troops. They throw many people from Group B out of their homes, and where they end up is none of Group A's concern.

For those from Group B who get to stay in their homes (for now), soldiers from Group A can with impunity come into those homes and take away whomever they wish without charge. Detainees can be gone for days, months, or years. The captives can be children or grown-ups. They can be students, militants, soldiers, protestors, professors, bakers, nurses, or farmers.

Some return with physical marks on their bodies. Then, of course, there is the inevitable sexual violence. Many return with deep psychological scars. They are sometimes not recognizable to others and often not even to themselves. Some never return in any sense to the lives they led before the men wearing foreign uniforms and insignia showed up on their doorstep.

Group A's army also allows its civilian settlers, many of whom are religious fanatics, or uber-nationalists (there is little difference between them in my view), or people who just want a pleasant life subsidized by their state, to harass, beat, steal from, and shoot at civilians from Group B.

The army also lets them commit arson, burning homes and the people inside them. If Group A can't have it, they will burn it down.

Also, Group A's army uses civilians from Group B as human shields when they want to go into areas where Group B's civilian population, after years of abuse, has cultivated a deep hatred for the soldiers of Group A.

Group A's army and government severely restrict the movement of Group B's people. There are curfews. There are also roads and facilities for its own citizens, but people from Group B are suspect and are not allowed to use those designated roads or facilities. If they use them, they will be punished.

After all, Group B is less than human. Some places are fit for people, not two-legged beasts.

Group A recruits some from group B to be police, to surveil their own population. They collaborate so they can have a molecule of power and privilege, anything that elevates them a millimeter above the collective heads of the other two-legged beasts.

Group A's leaders encourage defaming, impeding, or destroying the cultural practices and artifacts of Group B. They ransack, bulldoze, or burn cultural centers, places of worship, museums, schools, and community centers. Whatever preserves a people's memory or propels their culture into the future has to be dissolved. At the very least, those cultures are interrogated and found to be substandard.

Members of Group A believe that Group B has no identity. Pseudo historian and amateur ethnographer Vladimir Putin said there are no Ukrainians. That is a strange statement given that he is at war with Ukrainians, not faceless, nameless phantoms. Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, an extreme right-wing figure who has helped to author Palestinian suffering and dispossession, claims there is no such thing as a Palestinian. One wonders whom he has worked so hard to expel. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also implied that there are no Palestinians when he said that a group of people called Palestinians have no right to a state.

Group A can then endow itself with a rationale: Non-people don't have a claim to anything. Only human beings can own land and houses. Only people can have a country.

Italian writer and Holocaust survivor Primo Levi said that it's far easier to do horrible things to those who have been turned into non-people. I don't know if Netanyahu has read him, but it seems that the Israeli prime minister regularly puts a version of the dehumanization that Levi observed into practice. In fact, Netanyahu has made a career of it.

However, all this cannot go on forever, so a minority of people from Group B sometimes do horrible things to the soldiers or civilians of Group A. They do it out of vengeance, the pain of irrevocable loss, or a doomed attempt at deterrence. At root, there is the desperation of a people with little or nothing left to lose.

Speaking of writers, if Putin ever read Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky's work, he read it poorly. Dostoevsky's novels feature characters who feel they have little left to lose. When people's lives are denuded of meaning and severed from human connection, they can become very dangerous. Powerful sociopaths, like Putin and Netanyahu, are often blind to this simple fact of cause and effect.

So, it's not about religion or some genetically endowed hatred for Group Such-and-Such. It's the conditions that Group A creates and imposes, and their demonization of an entire

(non-) people that compels a fraction of Group B to take it upon themselves to wield a knife, fire a gun, or strap on a bomb.

In addition to dealing with desperate individuals, if a colonizer only manages to dominate part of a place or incompletely suppresses it, and that place still has an army, then they are up against lots of angry, traumatized people who have guns and training. Currently, Putin is facing this dilemma.

Group A always prefers expansion over the security of its people. It is willing to expose them to severe threats so it can get what it wants. And what it wants is to grow in its rapid, chaotic, unmeasured manner, like a collection of cancer cells, even if the malformed mass kills off some of its own. Planners know the risks, but they are willing to accept them even though most of the rest of us do not.

Colonialisms past or present produced and continue to produce control, power, and wealth. They also generated and continue to generate oceans of violence and misery.

You do not, dear reader, need to be a trained historian or political scientist (I am not) to apply these scenarios, to one degree or another, to what is happening today in various places around the world.

Sometimes, there is little we can do to stop human rights abuses and violations of international law that are the results of colonialism; at other times, there is much we can do. In the cases of Ukraine and Palestine, there is much we can do.

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