

DECOLONIZATION IN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

The Art Exhibition Өмә [ome]; Bashqort for "Collective Self-Help Practices", Kunstraum Kreuzberg, 11.03.-29.05.2023

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Photo credit: Figure 1.1, Victoria Sarangova, "Heimatland", 2022, Өмә, exhibition view. Alexander Anufriev/nGbK / Victoria Sarangova, [Free access - no reuse](#)

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In spring 2023 the $\Theta m\grave{a}$ exhibition took place in Kreuzberg, Berlin and received a great deal of media attention. The exhibition not only exposed the reproducibility of Russian imperialism, describing the war in Ukraine as colonial, but also made political demands regarding territorial independence.

Introduction

In spring 2023 an [exhibition](#) took place in Berlin, which brought the ethnic diversity of the Russian Federation closer to the public while simultaneously presenting it with a political-decolonial perspective. There are between 145 and 190 different ethnic groups and peoples living in the Russian Federation, and they have a history of life and survival in the former Soviet Union and, before that, the Russian Tsarist Empire, that stretches back hundreds of years. 44 of these are officially "indigenous peoples" (korennyje maločislennyje narody), that is, ethnic groups that already lived on the territory of the present-day Russian Federation prior to colonization in the 16th century. Addressing this diversity, the exhibition is the first of its kind to focus on potential decolonization tendencies within Russia that were mentioned in the taz article, "Against the Russian Federation" ("Wider die Russische Föderation") by Oleksiy Radynski.

The exhibition by the anonymous curator collective "FATA", which was held in Berlin, took place as part of a residency for women, non-binary and trans people in Russia in 2021. When full-scale war broke out with Ukraine, the Russian feminist protest movement became one of the driving forces behind the anti-war resistance, and quickly formed an alliance with decolonial activists. In 2023, in order to implement the project in Berlin, the organizers and artists adapted the concept to decolonial issues. Feminist themes were supplemented with an examination of Russian and Soviet colonialism. With a few exceptions, all of the participants in this exhibition come from different republics of the Russian Federation. Only three of the 30 participants exhibited under their real name: Victoria Sarangova, Polina Osipova und Neseine Toholya.



Figure 1.1, Victoria Sarangova, "Heimatland", 2022, Омә, exhibition view. Alexander Anufriev/nGbK / Victoria Sarangova, Free access - no reuse

Decolonialism in the Russian Federation

It is possible to discern an increased interest in postcolonial and decolonial perspectives on Russia that goes back at least ten years. The conceptual blurring in the use of these concepts (as well as that of post-imperialism) is characteristic for this debate, but is due less to a lack of historical knowledge – the Soviet Union had no internationally recognized colonies – than to the plurality of the underlying political motives. Postcolonialism is concerned with the long-term effects of imperial and colonial strategies, and while decolonialism also has a distinct emancipative aspect, the meanings of these concepts often overlap. Two scientists from the Russian Federation who are also well-known abroad for their postcolonial and decolonial perspectives are [Alexander Etkind](#)

Alexander Etkind

Alexander Etkind (Professor at the Central European University in Vienna) is a psychologist and cultural and literary scholar. He is the author of several monographs in Russian and English on Russian history and culture. His book *Internal Colonization, Russia's Imperial Experience*, which contains a critical appraisal of the history of imperialism in Russia in the 19th century and popularizes the concept of "internal colonization" in a Russian-speaking academic context, appeared in English in 2011 and in Russian in 2013.

und [Madina Tlostanova](#)

Madina Tlostanova

Madina Tlostanova (Professor at the Swedish University of Linköping) is a literary scholar, a writer on decolonialism and an essayist. Tlostanova is one of the most prominent Russian-language, trans-diaspora, decolonial authors. In 2022, together with Walter D. Mignolo, she published *Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and the Americas*. Tlostanova problematizes the Russian literary canon and writes about decolonial feminism and aesthetics in a post-Soviet context.

. Moreover, the journal *Ab Imperio* has been publishing articles on the history of imperialism and nationalism in the post-Soviet context since 1999. In 2020 the journal *Novoje Literaturnoje Obozrenije* issued a special edition on the theme “The Post-Soviet as post-colonial” (Постсоветское как постколониальное), which explored the extent to which postcolonial theories were applicable to post-Soviet realities.

Regarding the decentralization of contemporary art in the Russian Federation, there has been a museum of contemporary art called “Zaman” in Ufa (the Republic of Bashkortostan) focusing on the art and culture of the Volga, Kama and Ural regions since 2019. Furthermore, there is also a rapidly developing artistic movement of ethno-futurism, which is concerned with the revitalization of the art and culture of the Finno-Ugric peoples of the Russian Federation. Created during the “[Parade of Sovereignty](#)”

“Parade of Sovereignty”

The “Parade of Sovereignty” marks the political process of the proclamation of sovereignty in the Soviet Union and the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) in the years 1988-1991.

in the 1990s, it opposes assimilation and creates alternative visions the future.

The *Θmə* exhibition was put on by artists seeking to express their experiences of dealing with their own individual history. Their personal (family) histories are linked to the history of repression by the Soviet Union, although the relationship between these positions and decolonization is not as obvious as the curator collective would have one believe, and will therefore be explained below.

Remembrance

An important subject for the works presented in the exhibition is the politics and culture of remembering the crimes of Stalinism. The Berlin-based artist Victoria Sarangova deals with this in her work *Heimatland 2022* (Fig. 1.1, “Homeland 2022”), which is about the deportation of the Kalmyks between 1943 and 1956. Together with Crimean Tatars, Ingush, Chechens, Volga Germans and others, Kalmyks were deported from their homelands on ethnic grounds,

and this led to the loss of their national self-determination. In an attempt to reconstruct the family history of her deceased mother, Nadezhda Sarangova, the artist consulted the [website ↗](#) of the non-profit organisation “International Memorial” and searched there for her family name. In the course of her research, she confirmed that 194 further people with the same name were on the list of the deported, which clearly illustrates the scale of the deportation. This finding became the starting point for her artistic project. She began to embroider the entries about the Sarangovs that she had found on colored pieces of fabric inspired by Tibetan prayer flags (Fig. 1.2). The work is ongoing and as soon as all the flags are embroidered, they are to form part of an installation in the Kalmyk Steppe in the shape of an Obo (Owoo), a traditional style of construction used by the Kalmyks for gatherings and collective mourning (Fig. 1.3). With this, Sarangova will create an alternative memorial to the mourning, since her concept stands in stark contrast to the official national monument Exodus and Return in the city of Elista, Kalmykia (Fig. 2). The bronze part of this monument was conceived by the Soviet-US sculptor Ernst Neizvestny (1925–2016) in 1996, in the modernist style. While the Neizvestny Monument primarily represents the unified memory of the deportation of the Kalmyk people as a whole, Sarangova’s work is more concerned with personal and family memory, in which the listing of names plays an important role.

Sarangova’s work also addresses the question of the exact circumstances surrounding the deportations, since often this information is missing. In most cases the lists on the Memorial website only give scant details: date and place of birth, the verdict “Expulsion on ethnic grounds (Kalmykia)”, date and place of death. By embroidering the information, in one sense the artist is appropriating the language of bureaucracy and facts. However, her embroidery can also be seen as an attempt to inscribe something personal, nurturing and vital into the almost anonymous, abstract and official memory.



Alexander Anufriev/nGbK / Victoria Sarangova, [Free access - no reuse](#)

Figure 1.2., Victoria Sarangova, "Heimatland", 2022, 3D model, Омә, exhibition view.



Alexander Anufriev/nGbK / Victoria Sarangova, [Free access - no reuse](#)

Figure 1.3, Victoria Sarangova, "Heimatland", 2022, embroideries, Өмө, exhibition view.



Alexander Maltsev / Ernst Neizvestny, [Free access - no reuse](#)

Figure 2, Ernst Neizvestny, memorial "Exodus and Return", 1996 (Elista, Kalmykia), back of the memorial.

Physicality

The sculptural work *Weiche Serie* ("Soft Series", 2023) by the Bashkirian artist with the pseudonym Gul Zeile was presented in a central position under a glass vitrine (Fig. 3.1). The work consists of a female body made from felt that is in a state of decomposition or

dismemberment. Individual body parts can be made out, such as legs, head, internal organs and a pool of blood. And yet, the red and blue threads in the pale felt, representing the veins or wounds, appear decorative, and the softness of the material creates an effect of warmth. Moreover, the body is clearly hybridized and fused with pieces of clothing. The feet have heels and are curved into the shape of shoes (Fig. 3.2). The figure wears a headdress, and her upper body merges with a blanket. According to the exhibition brochure, the installation refers to anatomical cabinets from the colonial era, in which models of human bodies were stored for teaching purposes for doctors and medical students. The objects, which served purely practical purposes, nonetheless had a certain aesthetic, and under the guise of science often reproduced a patriarchal perspective on the female body (Figs. 3.3; 3.4). The exhibition organizers explain that the work of Gul Zeile addresses the effects of exploitative physical labor and colonial oppression without a specific temporal or historical focus. The work can, however, also be interpreted as an attempt to foreground empathy and tenderness in the representation of lived injustice. This impression, which is created not least through the materials used, highlights the two contradictory character traits of human beings: empathy and monstrosity. Since the work does not specify a particular geographical or historical context, it can be read as a reference either to colonialism and capitalism emanating from the West, or to oppression emanating from the Soviet Union.



Alexander Anufriev/nGbK / Gul Zeile, [Free access - no reuse](#)

Figure 3.1, Gul Zeile, "Weiche Serie", 2023, Омә, exhibition view.



Alexander Anufriev/nGbK / Gul Zeile, [Free access - no reuse](#)

Figure 3.2, Gul Zeile, "Weiche Serie", 2023, Омә, exhibition view.



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Figure 3.3, Gul Zeile, "Weiche Serie", 2023, Омә, exhibition view.



Alexander Anufriev/nGbK / Gul Zeile, [Free access - no reuse](#)

Figure 3.4, Gul Zeile, “Weiche Serie”, 2023, Омә, exhibition view.

A sense of home

Nesine Toholya has exhibited drawings on large sheets of paper in a small, separate room. The work *Uferstraße* (2023) (“Embankment Road”, Fig. 4.1 – 4.4) is an exhibition about a street in their hometown of Yar-Sale in the autonomous region of Yamalo-Nenets. Toholya’s street is represented as a sequence of photographs of individual residential houses shot from the front. In this work of art, black-and-white photocopies have been enhanced through colored drawings, glitter and photocopies of human figures. For almost every house, the artist tells a different story; each house has its own energy, eyes or faces, moons and suns. Views of present-day Yar-Sale, where all the houses are colorful and appear modern, indicate that Toholya deliberately used black-and-white photographs in order to create a sense of nostalgia and to refer to the aesthetics of remembrance. A great deal of emotion can be seen in the depiction of her home street – a longing for that which is familiar and yet unknown. Although this does not appear to be the subject of her work, there were several gulags in the autonomous region of Yamalo-Nenets and near Yar-Sale. The thousands who died or survived here were deportees from the whole of the Soviet Union’s sphere of influence (Rumanians, Moldovans, Tatars, Ukrainians, Jews, Russians and Volga Germans), who, together with the indigenous population, including the Nenets, made up the community in such places. The work

of this artist reinforces the feeling that the history of Yar-Sale is made up of a multitude of very different stories that nonetheless all converge in this little street.

“Decolonization is not a metaphor!”– or is it?

The text accompanying the exhibition presents a radical decolonial perspective from the curator collective. It is explicitly expressed in the reference to the text by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, which is often cited in the current discourse around decolonization, and its proclamation that “decolonization is not a metaphor”: decolonization can be nothing other than the actual return of the whole land and the renunciation by the settlers of the stolen land. Eve Tuck, a scholar of indigenous studies and an [Aleut](#)

Aleut

The Aleuts are an ethnic group located between the USA and the Russian Federation

, and the ethnologist K. Wayne Yang are here referring to the settlers who, in the course “discovering” North America, occupied the land of the indigenous population. According to Tuck and Yang, decolonization should not become a mere metaphor, that is, it should not stand for activities or processes that do not lead to the return of the land. If we consider the long list of social and political movements that the authors denounce, as well as the scholarship itself, then we must assume that the authors consider not only the settlers to be problematic but all forms of society with pluralistic politics. The proclamation, “decolonization is not a metaphor” is a cipher for an unwillingness to compromise, something which has a utopian objective: “Decolonization offers a different perspective to human and civil rights-based approaches to justice, an unsettling one, rather than a complementary one. Decolonization is not an ‘and’. It is an elsewhere.”

The FATA Collective attempts to present “indigenous peoples” (korennye narody) as representatives of the radical decolonization movement in the Russian Federation. They thus become a cipher for a utopia whose courses of action are clearly outlined (if only ex negativo). The main problem with the exhibition is less in the concept of a utopia – after all, it produces powerful and inspiring images – than in a potentially one-sided representation of the reality. It would be quite reasonable, for example, to enquire into the diversity of perspectives, opinions and memories within the indigenous population. Are there disagreements regarding the culture of remembrance within the communities? Are there positions there that do not coincide with the political orientation of the exhibition? A more realistic portrayal of the situation showing the different peoples in the Russian Federation as contradictory would undoubtedly be less convenient, since it would also need to include assimilated or Russian positions. It would, however, make it possible to retain an openness

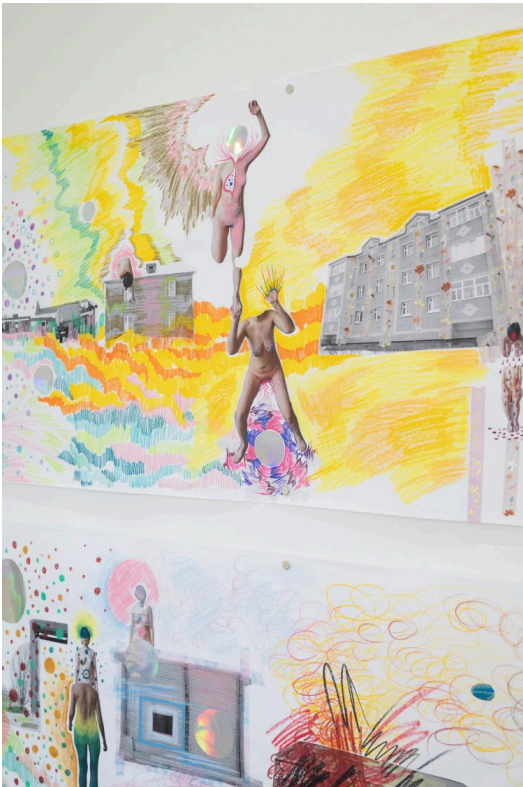
towards different, more complex and more protracted political options.

In any event, the works displayed could and should be appreciated independently of the narrow curatorial and activist-oriented context in which they are presented. They have the potential to illustrate the differences and the individuality inherent in artistic execution. The works articulate the recognition that a confrontation with the full extent of the violence experienced involves a risk: that of paralysis in the face of a truth that cannot be reconciled with humanity. For this reason, the motto used for the exhibition, "Decolonization is not a Metaphor", seems like a poignant image for the far-reaching consequences of a full confrontation with the past. The fact that such a confrontation is frightening for the victims is understandable, and yet it is also courageous and inspiring to see the artists venture to the edge of the abyss in order to show us what they suspect is there.



Alexander Anufriev/nGbK / Neseine Toholya, [Free access - no reuse](#)

Figure 4.1, Neseine Toholya, "Uferstraße", 2023, drawing (mixed media), ӨМӨ, exhibition view



Alexander Anufriev/nGbK / Neseine Toholya, [Free access - no reuse](#)

Figure 4.2, Neseine Toholya, "Uferstraße", 2023, drawing (mixed media), Омск, exhibition view



Alexander Anufriev/nGbK / Neseine Toholya, [Free access - no reuse](#)

Figure 4.3, Neseine Toholya, "Uferstraße", 2023, drawing (mixed media), ӨМӨ, exhibition view



Alexey Markin / Neseine Toholya, [Free access - no reuse](#)

Figure 4.4, Neseine Toholya, "Uferstraße", 2023, drawing (mixed media), Омск, exhibition view

English translation: [Gwen Clayton ↗](#)