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# [Collective Amnesia in Ian McEwan's *Lessons*: A (New) World Order, Historical Memory and Phantom Pains of Greatness]

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**[Abstract]** *Collective memory is actualised when a social group or a nation endeavours to reconstruct significant historical events giving them a certain interpretation. Historical exploration of the sources of a new world order and its fragility involves imperialist narratives being the causes of some geopolitical conflicts. All the great empires inevitably lose their power and status, but some former empires still feel the phantom pains of their former greatness, which may have unforeseen historical consequences. Ian McEwan's latest novel, Lessons (2022), covers a long period of time to deliver a powerful meditation on history and humanity through one man's life across generations and historical (un)doings. The article focuses on the literary representation of some historical contexts and attempts at resisting collective amnesia, in order to illustrate how a blatant disregard for the painful lessons of history invites the occurrence of new cruelties of imperialist ideology.*

**[Keywords]** *dictatorship; historical context; forgetfulness; memory ignorance; upheaval*

## [1] Introduction

The presentation of historical events as an element of cultural heritage plays a decisive role in collective identification as people seek to know, confirm and decode their history, and then make others accept it and challenge its interpretations “with different attitudes taken depending on whether that past behaviour was good or bad by present lights” (Bloxham 251). From that perspective, there are works of fiction where time and space not only serve to model a particular historical context but are fundamental factors that affect the fortune of the characters – and those works provide a powerful lesson for readers. They aid readers in drawing appropriate conclusions from the past and trying to avoid future errors, devoid of the influence of any subjectivity. Among such works of fiction is Ian McEwan's *Lessons* (2022), which explores the historical context to create an exceptional backdrop for understanding the impact of different periods of history on the thoughts of both historical figures and common people. Depicted against the backdrop of historical upheavals such as the Suez Crisis, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Chernobyl disaster, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the 9/11 attacks, Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, the events of Roland Baines's life are revealed. The sequence of depicted events appears disorderly, and “[w]hile chaotic systems appear random or disordered they do contain order, an order which exists in a nonlinear form that traditional science cannot recognise” (Ward 10).

It is natural for readers to prioritise their concerns at a particular time in life, as “[a] given literary text may offer multiple meanings and that a reader's encounter with a text is affected as much by what the reader brings to the experience as by what the written text itself provides” (Trousdale and Harris 195). The research perspective for this paper has been determined by the analysis of historical events described in the novel – events that resulted in the destruction and disintegration of empires. These events serve as a powerful lesson for some nations, shaping a new worldview, but for others they remain mere pages from history. A distorted interpretation of history can result in collective amnesia, whereby groups collectively forget crucial information, leading to epistemic injustices. It is important to ensure an impartial representation of history. Researchers therefore stress that a nation's collective consciousness relies on the traces of memory collected by libraries, archives and museums. Most scholars claim that this process is objective, failing to acknowledge that it is underpinned by ideological, political, economic, cultural and social influences. The process of designating a document or object as significant always reflects the orientations and consciousness of a society's dominant groups to shape interpretations and narratives of the past (Lloyd 53).

Today, geopolitical processes are closely related to survival, which is inseparable from self-serving individualistic and self-serving interests. The boundaries of geopolitical players cannot be seen, but they exist as limits to economic and informational intrusion. The preservation and augmentation of the combined power of a geopolitical entity (economic, military, informational, and psychological) ensures not only its survival, but also intensive growth (Jones). An empire resulting from expansion is seen as a geopo-

litical area under the control of a particular geopolitical player, and it is used to serve that player's interests. As Kumar asserts, *empire* may be "the prism through which to examine many of the pressing problems of the contemporary world – perhaps even the birth pangs of a new world order" (3). The more powerful a geopolitical player, the more it seeks to expand and colonise territories, creating "the relationship between the centre and periphery, as well as between the metropolis and colony" (Engels and Monier 342). Expansion contradicts the idea of democratising international relations, while decolonisation combats post-colonial legacies and informs any approach that seeks to influence, invalidate or interfere with the diverse representations and cultural richness of indigenous peoples (Hajibayova and Buente).

The literary representation of the above narratives in a work of fiction provides a suitable research space for elucidating the influence of destructive imperialist modes and their historical overcoming. Although the Soviet Union, the last territorial empire, dissolved at the close of the twentieth century, geopolitical movements driven by imperialist narratives still unsettle the fundamentals of global democracy. Unlearned historical lessons, collective amnesia, and the rise of imperialist narratives in recent decades have paved the way for the bloodiest conflict in Europe since World War II. To discuss how the rise of imperialist narratives and disregard for the painful lessons of history invite new cruelties of imperialist ideology (imperialism is implied by "impressive ideological formations" (Said 9), this paper draws on the research methods of hermeneutic interpretation, historical analysis and narrative analysis.

A masterful depiction of personal experiences against the background of historical upheavals enables McEwan to draw readers' attention to details. The novel commences with the events of 1986, and then it unexpectedly takes readers almost three decades back in time, when the 11-year-old Roland departs from Libya for a boarding school in England. Here he begins taking piano lessons from a teacher whose interest in her gifted student extends beyond the didactic. In his sweeping manner, McEwan explores themes that are often encountered in literature – lost youth, lost love, and the events that influence people's lives. Although the book has the features of an autobiography, the historical upheavals depicted in it reveal the painful lessons of history and attempts at learning them by resisting collective amnesia. Collective memory is thus a fundamental component of our political lives, since "a nation without a memory does not exist at all" (Bruyneel 236–37). And although fiction "has frequently engaged directly in politics, with novels serving both to underwrite the existing order and to act as instruments of change" (Darby 19), McEwan's *Lessons* reconsiders the established imperatives of the modern world. This article suggests that the articulation of a new world order and its historical contexts in the novel is a literary rethinking and representation of inevitable historical consequences.

## [2] (Un)recognised Subjectivity: How Collective Memory Works

Researchers take various approaches to the phenomenon of memory. According to Bergson (92), there are two principal forms of memory: *habit* and *representational memory*; the former is acquired through repetition, while the latter “refers to a function that stores all personal experiences to something external” (Zografos 32). Assmann introduces the term *communicative memory* to delineate the difference between Halbwachs’s *collective memory* and his understanding of *cultural memory*. Assmann views cultural memory as a form of collective memory that is “shared by a number of people and that [...] conveys to these people a collective, that is, cultural, identity” (110).

Problematising collective memory and highlighting it as a significant object of humanities research enables us to revisit it through historical transformations. Since in both its individual and collective versions, “memory is closely aligned with identity” (Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory* 4), it, unlike historical knowledge, is of a subjective and pragmatic nature. However, historical knowledge and memory share a common functionality, particularly in moral and ethical terms. By drawing on historical knowledge and collective memory, individuals can navigate a historical situation. Although “individual memory is based on a memory that transcends the individual” (Orianne and Eustache 3), it is founded not on learned history but on experience, including collective memory.

Drawing on the Halbwachsian concept of collective memory (Halbwachs *Foreword*), we regard it as a multi-faceted socio-cultural construct that results from the accumulation of various information connected with the past. It is established in memory influenced by the state and reflected in various forms, such as textbooks, documentaries, films, literature and poetry. The legacies of outstanding figures, particularly those in politics, are often ingrained in the collective memory of a given people, as “[t]he factors driving the memory boom put the focus on events that occurred within a generation of the present” (Verovšek 530). Individuals must comprehend their role in their nation and country, which is impossible without knowledge of their history. In this case, the importance lies in collective memory, since “a sense of collective mission presupposes shared memories of a past or pasts in which the nation was entrusted with that mission, and which shaped a unique community as the vehicle for the development and reproduction of ‘irreplaceable culture values’” (Smith 384).

Both reformers and dictators are under critical scrutiny in history: for the former, historical evaluations seek out errors and commend accomplishments, while the actions of the latter are extensively condemned and studied to prevent future mistakes. However, individuals repeatedly create tyrants, rewriting, forgetting, or disregarding historical truths, ultimately leading to the emergence of a dictator who, in their pursuit of control, becomes disconnected from reality: “Real-world tyrants were often compared to infants” (McEwan 23).<sup>1</sup> One such political figure who appears in the novel in connection with the events unfolding in Roland’s homeland is Muammar Gaddafi: “US warplanes in a raid

on Tripoli, Libya, destroyed his old primary school but failed to kill Colonel Gaddafi” (23). Depictions of events related to Libya repeatedly arise in the novel, as the protagonist in *Lessons* was born and spent his early years there. In 1943, following the defeat of the Italian-German coalition forces, Great Britain and France occupied Libya. Since 2011, the country has become involved in a proxy war, with regional and international powers competing, aided by internal forces, to safeguard their interests within the oil-rich North African country. The Americans dispatched their units for manoeuvres: “The plan was to be ready for the day when the Egyptians, backed by the Russians, attacked Libya from the east” (41). Remaining within the sphere of interest of certain political governments, Libya seems to fall outside the purview of concern for the citizens of these nations: “Few people in Britain knew of Libya. Fewer knew of the British army contingent there” (37). On April 15, 1986, the United States launched a series of air strikes on Libya in response to statements made by the Libyan leader asserting Libya’s superiority among other North African countries. Under the rule of empires and dictatorships, dissent is often met with the mass destruction of the populace. Gaddafi’s overreaching ambition to form an anti-American coalition resulted in the country’s downfall and his own violent demise: “In a few years King Idris would be overthrown in a coup and a dictator, Colonel Gaddafi, would take his place. He would order the execution of thousands of dissident Libyans in Abu Salim” (106).

Over time, the events depicted in the novel may have prompted the direct participants and forced witnesses to form memories. Any subjective moral assessments of violent offenders and the perception of the crimes by those who were coerced into participating are largely absent from memory. Although “memory as a study of collective mentality provides a comprehensive view of culture and society” (Confino 1389), the non-use of such stories by historians and reluctance to engage with them is a form of social group amnesia, which can result in a collective forgetting of ‘uncomfortable’ past events. The resuscitation of these stories from non-existence is necessary to prevent this ‘amnesia’. However, this must be done objectively and without subjective evaluation – yet “there can be no history of ‘the past as it actually did happen’; there can only be historical interpretations, and none of them final; and every generation has a right to frame its own. But not only has it a right to frame its own interpretations, it also has a kind of obligation to do so; for there is indeed a pressing need to be answered” (Popper 473). Even if one tries to distance oneself from the events occurring in the world, they affect everyone’s life in some way, inducing feelings of guilt regarding inadequate attention and participation in the country’s life, especially regarding political engagement: “Now, to read a report of a speech by Reagan or Thatcher or her ministers made Roland feel excluded and guilty for not paying attention” (23). Such non-involvement in social and political life is shown by McEwan’s main character: “He had thought he could burrow down but the world had come to find him” (27).

Accusing representatives of various political forces of lost hopes and committed or imagined crimes is the easiest way to justify one’s inaction: “What was good for a politician’s idea of the masses might not be good for any individual, especially for him. But

he was the mass. He would be treated like the idiot he always was” (27). It is worth considering that the foreign policy of a state affects the lives of its ordinary citizens, their wealth, and their future: “That was it, and that was how it was going to be. This was what the far-off belligerent gods, Khrushchev and Kennedy, had arranged for him” (135). One cannot remain indifferent to the events taking place in a given country, because the discussion of ideas leads to the fact that “parties to political conflict ought to deliberate with one another and through reasonable argument try to come to an agreement on policy satisfactory to all” (Young 671). Citizens’ way of life is reflected in their appearance and behaviour: “What lay between them was a vast and invisible network – its interlacing origins mostly forgotten – of invention and belief, military defeats, occupation and historical accident” (153). The subjectivity of memory refers to the individual assessment and interpretation of events from the past, and “[m]any forms of habitual skilled remembering illustrate a keeping of the past in mind that, without ever adverting to its historical origin” (Connerton 72). This can be influenced by changes in environmental evaluations as well as by the evolution of a person’s worldview and values. The understanding that both personal decisions and global politics impact the lives of people is reflected in the text’s use of conditionals: “If Hitler had not invaded Poland [...]. If the young Jane Farmer had done as she was asked [...]. Then, if Khrushchev had not placed nuclear missiles on Cuba and Kennedy had not ordered a naval blockade of the island...” (141). Such a sequence of disordered events is known as the butterfly effect, which suggests that “small or seemingly insignificant causes can lead to large and dramatic effects” (Ward 10). However, as Silverman stresses, “[t]he memory wars of recent years are the consequence of an invidious politicization of memory in the age of (often) crude cultural differences” (21).

Before the outbreak of World War I, no one believed that such a conflict was possible: “Each country said it didn’t want war, and then they all joined in with a ferocity the world was still discussing and trying to understand” (111). But this tragic event ended empires. Following their decline, new nation-states emerged; however, not all of them were democratic. Even though some individuals attempt to re-establish or establish an entirely new empire haunted by the memory of former ‘greatness’, it is the general populace that endures the most suffering, as “arguments among the Greek gods had serious consequences for mere humans below” (43). It is widely recognised that “[w]ar crimes are among the oldest core crimes under international criminal law” (Nuotio 313). As history has shown, unpunished crimes can evolve into a global evil:

At the end of World War II [...] one of the League’s final acts was to expel the Soviet Union. The reason for the expulsion was the Soviets’ violation of international law by invading Finland in November 1939. The Soviet Union ultimately found itself among the victors of the war, dealing out punishment to the losers. The Soviets’ own war crimes were never investigated and at least the most serious never made it to court. The Soviet Union’s security agency massacred practically the entire officer corps of the captured Polish army in a forest near Katyn in 1940. This may well be one reason why to this day there is very little sympathy among the Polish for

Russia's actions in Ukraine. They are all too familiar with the reprehensible war tactics for which both the Soviet Union and Russia are known. (Nuotio 313)

Those crimes have not been internationally condemned, which may have contributed to their recurrence in Chechnya, Syria and Georgia: "The government's most despicable crimes – crimes that massively outstrip every human standard..." (78). Additionally, in 2014, Russia invaded Crimea without facing severe sanctions. Unpunished wrongdoing poses a threat to other nations, as demonstrated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which was the largest attack on a European country since World War II. An excessive focus on one's own ideas permits malevolence to flourish. Silence alone can transform the world into a state of torment where "no one could be exonerated because every man 'is guilty, guilty, guilty'" (79).

Fictional narratives provide room for alternative interpretations and fill the discursive void of collective amnesia and generational memory by representing individual experiences.

### **[3] A Dictatorship of Evil: Revealing the Errors of the Past**

The most efficient approach to establishing a fair democratic society is to analyse historical records in order to identify the causal relationships between past events and the current situation. Neglecting these cause-and-effect connections increases the chance of repeating past errors, which can be attributed to the many societal histories that are scarred by numerous traumas. Understanding the relationship between cause and effect in social processes is important in preventing the formation of alternative history (Hellekson 10). Misunderstanding cause-and-effect relationships ultimately culminates in the reoccurrence of the errors of the past. This occurs due to multiple historical traumas experienced by society. Nations that have endured dictatorial regimes often attempt to erase memories of traumatic events, as "[h]uman biological memories are condensed, selective, and malleable" (Tanesini 196). This state resembles the well-known post-traumatic syndrome effect, which we believe has the potential to impact both individuals and communities.

Recent work in cognitive psychology strongly suggests that memory also serves very different purposes, and that its primary epistemic function is to help us plan future activities (Schacter 10). To build a future avoiding repetition of the mistakes of the past, the first step is to acknowledge these mistakes without resorting to collective amnesia, since

[m]emory is an open process of reinterpretation that unties its knots so that events and understandings can again be undertaken. Memory stirs up the static fact of the past with new unclosed meanings that put recollections to work, causing both beginnings and endings to rewrite new hypotheses and conjectures and thereby dismantle the explanatory closures of totalities that are too sure of themselves. (Richard 17)

A considerable cohort of citizens of Nazi Germany were disinclined to admit to the mistakes of the past, opted for collective amnesia, experienced phantom pains of lost hegemony, and endeavoured to resurrect the German Reich. A similar phantom pain was encountered by some citizens of the Soviet Union. This approach stemmed from a mythologised view of the past, predominantly manifested in a succession of simulacra. In the context of the information society, such mythologising gains the status of a particular hyperreality, which significantly influences what is conventionally regarded as reality. Even today, a significant number of people live in the past. They still reside in colonies constructed by former empires, and given its connection to issues of decolonisation, the question of cultural identity cannot be ignored. Those seeking to decolonise must search for their own authentic cultural identity. The memories of these people do not correspond to real history, and they become a field of conflict because different social groups (or even nations and states) often construct their own version of memory about the same events of the past; “what experience and history teach us is this – that nations and governments have never learned anything from history [...]. Each age and each nation finds itself in such peculiar circumstances, in such a unique situation, that it can and must make decisions with reference to itself alone” (Hegel 21). Some citizens have created a dilemma by juxtaposing Nazi and fascist ideology with Soviet ideology whilst also ignoring the atrocities committed by the Soviet Union: “... to remember the Moscow show trials or the imposed Ukrainian famine was to ‘align’ himself [...] with fascism” (157). The Great Famine, also known as the Holodomor, is deeply ingrained in the collective memory of Ukrainians, and it is a significant part of national history. The comparison between the past and present reveals the idea that the past still influences the present through its unforeseen consequences. As Hirsch observes, ‘postmemory’ describes “the experiences of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of previous generations shaped by traumatic events that can neither be understood nor recreated” (Hirsch 662).

After World War I, the German Empire collapsed, but the phantom pain haunted Germans for a long time, ultimately leading to the outbreak of World War II. Not all German citizens were poisoned by Goebbels's propaganda, however; those who resisted included “a brave group of anti-Nazi students, the White Rose, working out of the University of Munich” (68). Opposition to an oppressive regime is a brave attitude: “How perilous, what courage, to call the Third Reich ‘a spiritual prison [...] a mechanised state apparatus lorded over by criminals and drunkards’” (78) or write that “every word that Hitler utters is a lie [...]. His mouth is the stinking gate of hell” (78). The struggle by non-violent means against an openly hateful machine rarely leads to victory: “It was a non-violent intellectual movement [...] main members of the group were rounded up by the Gestapo, tried in a ‘People’s Court’ and beheaded” (68). However, the instinct of self-preservation forces people to quietly sabotage themselves to save their own lives, since a living creature feels an attachment to itself and an impulse to preserve itself. This behaviour is based on humans’ “animal nature and draws on the omnipresent tendency to maintain one’s own life” (Vacura 602): “In the face of total and vicious state power, all

that was available was ‘passive resistance’” (79). McEwan very aptly points out the number of Germans who actually resisted the propaganda, for example “Heinrich Eberhardt, one of the few hundred Germans among millions to have resisted the Nazi tyranny” (88). After the end of the war, Germans felt an overwhelming desire to be rehabilitated for all the crimes that had been committed in their name for the glory of the Reich: “There was hunger for the redemptive testimony of “good” Germans during the war. The race was on to catch them all before they died” (172). This course of events provoked the opposition of yesterday’s like-minded people, because the social purpose of memory is to create and strengthen social bonds. When people have agreed on the past, their shared memories strengthen the sense of belonging of individual members of social groups. The flexibility and selectivity of memory favour agreement; they are therefore adaptive properties, although they can undermine the reliability of this ability (Tanesini 197).

The influence of propaganda can be both objective and selective in relation to the given facts, encouraging emotional irrational perception, using hidden meanings, and so on, since “in defining propaganda, the focus should be on how it affects an audience, how it is perceived, not on its production” (Badalamenti 154). The awareness slowly comes to the deceived people who have long been poisoned by myths of their own greatness, as happened to the Germans when everyone “was still just waking from the nightmare to which they had all, or almost all, contributed, would be inspirational, a revelation, the beginnings of redemption” (82). Is it possible to forgive the crimes committed by the Nazi government with the connivance of the people? The protagonist of the novel asks this question as he watches his father-in-law try to whitewash the representatives of his nation, but he concludes: “...not a score of White Rose movements, a million saboteurs, a trillion ill-tooled screws, could redeem the industrialised savagery of the Third Reich” (172). The Soviet Union disseminated false narratives about the country’s freedoms, leading many people around the world to believe in a ‘heaven on earth’. They tried to enter the ‘socialist Eden’ but the country was closed to visitors. Only those who knew the real situation could judge the events: “In the general discussion, Roland spoke of gross abuses in the GDR and, by reports, of violations of basic human rights across the Soviet Empire” (156). The intense confrontation between the USA and the Soviet Union that was manifested in the Cuban Missile Crisis was supported by the citizens of both countries precisely because of propaganda. After the victory of the Soviet Union and its allies in World War II, the confrontation with Germany continued: “...German TV channel persuaded itself that the radioactive miasma would contaminate not the West but the Soviet Empire alone, as if to take revenge” (60). One of the most effective tools of totalitarian regimes is the *divide and rule policy*, manifested in the actions of the government when the citizens of the country are pitted against each other. Each country in the confrontation depicted itself as the fiercest enemy: “And the Russians are liars and thugs. You’re quite right to be frightened” (125). World War II allies became enemies: at the American airbase at Lakenheath, there was “a fleet of giant B52 planes armed with nuclear bombs to deter or destroy the Soviet Union” (103), “...the Americans had revealed to the world Russian nuclear missiles on Cuba, only ninety miles from the Florida coast. Intolerable, everyone agreed” (108).

The US contribution to the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany was neutralised; shared memories of people and episodes became highly selective and misleading, facilitating the spread of ignorance, since "[e]very society sets up images of the past. Yet to make a difference in a society, it is not enough for a certain past to be selected. It must steer emotions, motivate people to act, be received; in short, it must become a sociocultural mode of action" (Confino 1390). The most brutal wars begin with the death of those generations of people who have experienced the horrors of previous wars: "Now, in the eighties, the wartime generation was beginning its decline. It might take forty years, even more, for its last survivors to vanish" (93). Perhaps the memory of the war that had just ended the Cuban Missile Crisis prevented a new bloodbath. The realisation that the new type of warfare would not be fought by traditional methods, but would result in "everything to be blown away, a world wiped clean" (109), forced governments to reconsider their actions and stop: "President Kennedy had announced a 'quarantine' around Cuba; Russian vessels with their cargo of nuclear warheads were heading towards a flotilla of American warships. If Khrushchev did not order his ships back they would be sunk, and the Third World War could begin" (109). However, the main achievement was that the leaders were able to finally reach an agreement and stop a possible World War III, so the world breathed a sigh of relief: "The general view was that President Kennedy had saved the world" (128). Nevertheless, one person is not able to change the course of history without support. For instance, Mikhail Gorbachev was called the most trustful politician in the Soviet Union, yet he appeared to be "... an innocent fool to believe that with his glasnost and perestroika he could liberalise to a minimal controllable extent the tired old tyranny..." (190). In the end, Gorbachev was condemned on both sides of the ocean, and his attempts at rebuilding the country were a failure: "A columnist asked what happened to Gorbachev's policy of openness. It was always a fraud" (29).

To keep different peoples in one state, empires use religions or ideologies that are not related to ethnicity. One of the traits of humanity is our ability to adapt to different circumstances. It is hard to imagine that the German nation, poisoned by propaganda, realised its mistake immediately after the surrender, moreover "[t]he stress on rethinking historical and political responsibility as implication highlights the need to hold implicated subjects accountable in both moral and political registers" (Rothberg, *Implicated Subject* 200). Nevertheless, the thirst for survival forces people to feign remorse: "Three years before, these clerks might have felt obliged to spit at the mention of the White Rose" (76). The wish to live a normal life, without feeling the errors of the past, and avoiding remorse, leads to forgiveness and forgetting: "We have to forgive the fathers or we'll go mad. But first we have to remember what they did" (173). However, collective amnesia cannot lead to forgetting, since the past remains in the minds of those who have been victimised, so it is crucial to acknowledge and remember it – and according to Yamazaki, there is only one way to do that:

*Apologia* may include an apology – that is, an admission of responsibility and regret – but it may also include denial, justification, and counterattack. What is essential is the

defensive nature of the rhetoric, in response to accusations of wrongdoing or attack on reputation. [...] Unlike other *apologia* strategies, apology is self-denigrating and does not attempt to deny or mitigate responsibility. (Yamazaki 2)

Empires do not fall at once. Instead, they typically experience a sequence of events that eventually trigger a catastrophic avalanche, capable of annihilating everything in its path. Remembering specific political projects is the basis of the struggle against the colonial order. The totalitarian machine begins to collapse when isolated cases of confrontation between people, such as “...Jan Palach, the student who set himself on fire in 1969 in Wenceslas Square in protest at the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia” (151), turn into a wave of confrontations. This episode proves that “[d]ecolonization is the veritable creation of new men. But this creation owes nothing of its legitimacy to any supernatural power; the “thing” which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself” (Fanon 36–7). The dictates of totalitarian countries extend not only to their citizens, but also to the citizens of their ‘colonies’ who tried by all means to avoid ‘help’ through “[a]nti-Soviet demonstrations in Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia” (178). Forming alliances in search of protection was the next step for countries that had freed themselves from the yoke of totalitarian regimes: “The old Warsaw Pact countries had suffered years of Russian occupation, violently enforced. They had good cause and every right to make their own choices” (358). The rise of the Soviet Empire and the spread of communist regimes after World War II forced the United States to lead an alliance of democracies during the Cold War “to rein in the anarchic tendencies of markets and behaviours in civil society” (Lipschutz 233). Observing the lives of the inhabitants of countries where dictatorships flourish and those where confrontations take place, one comes to understand that “all citizens deserve the regime they are willing to endure...” (78).

The real triumph of democracy over empires was the unification of Germany and the fall of the Berlin Wall, which gave rise to hopes for a better future around the world; rather than being a struggle against the old, decolonisation is a process of creating the new:

A peaceful Germany would be united. The Russian Empire was dissolving without bloodshed. A new Europe must emerge. Russia would follow Hungary, Poland and the rest to become a democracy. It might even lead the way. It was not so fantastical to imagine driving one day from Calais to the Bering Straits and never showing a passport. The Cold War’s nuclear menace was over. The great disarmament could begin. History books would close with this, a jubilant mass of decent people celebrating a turning point for European civilisation. The new century would be fundamentally different, fundamentally better, wiser. (202–3)

In this context, it would be appropriate to quote Andrews, who insists on the need “to destroy the myth that the West was founded on three great revolutions of science, industry and politics” and “to trace how genocide, slavery and colonialism are the key foundation stones upon which the West was built” (xiii).

The first years after the fall of the Berlin Wall were marked by a victory for democracy which led to a series of events that took place around the world:

Germany was united, the Soviet Union had vanished. Already, eight nations of its Eastern European empire had joined the European Union with a couple more to follow. Military spending was down, though nuclear weapons remained. There was an academic consensus that democracies never invaded other countries – and that was cited around the table. After centuries of war, ruin and torture, Europe had found a permanent peace. (247)

Unfortunately, many of the dreams remained only dreams, and the building of a happy future was hindered by phantom pains for lost greatness: “It was merely a peak. Now, from Jerusalem to New Mexico, walls were going up. So many lessons unlearned” (423). Development through democracy did not become the decisive path for some countries, as became evident from the course of events: “There were nations run by well-dressed criminal gangs intent on self-enrichment, kept in place by security services, by the rewriting of history and passionate nationalism. Russia was just one” (424). The story continues as a farce. Writers refer to historical events as reminders of past events and force their readers to count the lessons of history to avoid past errors, but for some, these lessons remain unlearned.

## [4] Conclusion

Imperialist ambitions of dictatorial regimes pose a threat to the democratic values and freedoms of the modern world. The articulation of imperialist narratives in the public space reveals the desire to expand foreign territories and extend spheres of influence - and it also demonstrates attempts to revive imagined former greatness, which sometimes leads to unforeseen historical consequences. Such a model of political ‘diplomacy’ is dangerous not only because it destabilises the global world order through violations of international law, but also because of its bloody actions and human casualties. At the same time, decolonisation is a process of creating the new, bringing together western and eastern or northern and southern approaches in order to facilitate a more complete way of looking, perceiving and acting.

The historical context that shaped the imperialist worldview is the prism through which the idea of empire can be viewed as a leading historical imperative aimed at achieving a certain geopolitical goal. The uniqueness of each historical experience explains the diversity that can be found in the analysis of this historical and political phenomenon. At the same time, the literary representation of the above idea helps to emphasise the dangers and negative consequences that adherence to imperialist ideology leads to. Having been published under a telling title, McEwan's *Lessons* invites the reader to journey through the 70-year post-war era of the world together with the book's protagonist. The historical upheavals which accompany Roland, and which are firmly incorporated into his life, not only represent the historical and artistic background of the novel, but

also create an essential frame for reflecting deep internal and external crises. The novel appears to be written in fragments, with events depicted from various perspectives, making readers piece together the information and form their own conclusions.

Collective memory has theoretical and practical significance, since it describes a unique phenomenon – the fundamental power of social groups and nations to preserve and reconstruct memories of historical experience. The novel teaches us not to disregard the painful lessons of history and not to ignore the past. The inevitable fall of empires can be seen as a kind of historical metaphor imbued with various historical, social, and political meanings. Resisting collective amnesia is explored by McEwan in the context of the emergence of individual and group identity, as well as the question of historical experience. *Lessons*, as a kind of historical exploration of the sources of a new world order and its fragility, appears to represent a kind of warning from a historical perspective. Each empire has its imperialist project, its historical rhythms of development, and its resulting triumph and degradation. Therefore, in general, the imperialist project is essentially a plan to fight and achieve world domination.

## [Notes]

1 When quoting Ian McEwan's *Lessons* (2022), only a page number appears hereafter.

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