

Waldemar Kuligowski

Faculty of Historical Studies, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

Translated by Katarzyna Szuster-Tardi

The Polish Hearts of Darkness. Postcolonial Dimensions of History and Culture

Postcolonial studies in Poland have two dimensions. One of them focuses on the reception of world research in this area. Although the first translation of Said's *Orientalism* was published as early as 1991 while Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and the book *The Location of Culture* by Homi Bhabha both came out in Polish in 2010, the state of knowledge on postcolonial theory leaves much to be desired. But let us not dwell on this.

The second dimension refers to the (im)possibility of applying postcolonial concepts to the context of the Polish culture and history. Clare Cavanagh's observation is relevant here that: "The disregardability of Second World colonies is especially surprising, given the import of Joseph Conrad née Konrad Korzeniowski, to postcolonial criticism. *Heart of Darkness* (1898) is a key, if controversial, text for postcolonial critics, while the connection between the novel and the country that Norman Davies has called 'the heart of Europe' [85] remains at best sketchy." Conrad's life and career path, which took him from 'the heart of Europe' to 'the heart of darkness' was not only an escape from an imperialistic Russia (although this fact alone would suffice to connect him with postcolonial thought). Conrad also consciously severed his ties with Polishness as an imperative of unconditional love of one's homeland, which he described as "monstrous" [Najder 143]. Consequently, it appears that one of the most iconic authors for postcolonialism struggled with two types of subordination. One was of a political and military nature (Russia), whilst the other pertained to culture and loyalty (Poland). Hence, in this context, the question "Can a subaltern speak?" [Spivak] takes on a surprising dimension.

An attempt at presenting postcolonial studies as a tool for rethinking Polish culture and history first requires a confrontation with certain deeply-rooted beliefs. One of them claims that since Poland was not an imperialistic country and had no colonies, it need not account for a shameful past. Consequently, postcolonial theory it is not applicable and it should be viewed only as a humanistic novelty. Secondly, the non-colonial Poland is more likely to be found among the countries and peoples that were colonized, and continuously so from the end of the 18th century all the way to 1989. Not being an historian, I am not going to focus on

a tedious analysis of our history. What I am more interested in is how history has been given meaning; how Poland and Polishness have been evaluated, understood and depicted.

From the Borderlands to Crypto-Colonialism

I will first analyze the claim that Poland was not a colonial country. In order to problematize this belief, we should take a critical look at the history of the Nobles' Commonwealth, particularly, the significance of the so-called Borderlands. Before this term became a vehicle for the myth about a harmonious coexistence of nations and religions, it referred to "the border region between Poland and the Tatars, Walachia, and later the Cossacks [...] from the Dnieper River to the Dniester." ["Kresy" 664] Contemporary research informs us that the social relations there could be described as colonial. The local peasants, whose lands were exploited, were treated as free labor. The manorial system, which had the features of a slave system [Kuligowski], took on the most radical forms in the Borderlands. There are indications [Beauvois] that social relations there were built on contempt and dehumanization, which resembled the situation on American cotton plantations where slaves were exploited. Other researchers [Sowa] point to Old-Polish texts where "Polska Niżna" (that is, Ukraine) was unambiguously referred to as "Coloniae Polskie."

Hence, the difference between Poland and England or Belgium was that the latter two empires conducted expansion by sea, whereas Poland conquered its colonies by land. The Borderlands, which *de iure* belonged to the territory of the Commonwealth, were viewed as reserves of people, land, and natural resources that were open to exploitation by the dominant class – the Polish nobility and magnates. It goes without saying that the idyllic myth of the Borderlands was later confronted with a violent reaction of the subalterns. I will elaborate on it later.

Consequently, Poland indeed owned colonies; they were simply less on display than the overseas ones. What is more, it had grand colonial ambitions [Kowalski], but the more loudly these ambitions were proclaimed, the less likely it was that it would become even a pocket-size colonial empire. It suffices to mention here Stefan Szolc-Rogoziński and the 1882 expedition to Cameroon, as a result of which, a 30 square kilometer colony was formed, only to be liquidated in 1885 under the provisions of the Treaty of Berlin. The Second Polish Republic witnessed a number of colonial endeavors: in 1927, by the river of Ucayali in Peru; in 1929 in Angola, in the '30s in the Brazilian state of Paraná, or in 1934 in Liberia. There were also expansion interests in the French Guinea, Mozambique, Togo, the Dutch East Indies, and Colombia. In March 1939, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent out secret letters to the embassies in Washington and London, inquiring which areas of Antarctica belonged to the USA and Great Britain, because Poland would be happy to make the available sections a Polish colony.

I would treat the latter as a metaphor for Polish colonial aspirations if it were not for the fact that before WWII, the Maritime and Colonial League, which was formed in 1930 and whose main goal was to obtain territories for Poland's new settlements and colonies, had nearly one million members, and founding colonies

was officially presented in the categories of historical necessity and progress. The Colonial Publishing House printed volumes devoted to such countries as Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia and Paraguay, analyzing their usefulness for Polish settlement, and implicitly, Polish colonization [Lepecki]. Considering the government policies, public support, and actual decisions, it is hard to defend the thesis that Poland was a country with no colonies. At the level of aspirations and self-definitions, inter-war Poland wished to have colonies and made efforts to acquire them.

Let us compare now how the policies translated into cultural practices. From this standpoint, Henryk Sienkiewicz should be considered as the key founder of Polish thought on the Orient. Obviously, we will find traces of interest in the East in Polish theater, opera, painting, collections, customs, and cuisine. It put its stamp on festivals, masquerades, fairground rides, the formation of the Janissary guards, and bands. After all, for Sarmatian Poland, the Orient was a next-door neighbor, not a destination for long, exotic travels, as it was the case for London, Rome or Brussels. No one, however, can compare to the greatest Polish "Orientalist", Henryk Sienkiewicz. If Said had been familiar with *Ogniem i Mieczem* (*With Fire and Sword*), perhaps he would have included it in the canon of the most radically Orientalizing works. Why? Sienkiewicz quite skillfully combined mythical and historical spacetime [Mencwel]¹: while the plot of his novel essentially takes place between the Zaporozhian Sich and Warsaw, the extremum of this space is hell, that is, Poland's borderlands. The borderlands were the home of ghosts and phantoms, *didkos*,² and bogeymen, as well as "serpents, lizards and giant snakes ten-ells long as thick as a man's arm." Hence, if it is not hell, then it is surely hell's kitchen. This belief is enhanced by the cited names of places: Wraże Uroczyszcze, Śleporód, Orzawiec, Czortowy Jar, Czertomelik.³

In Sienkiewicz's prose, the natives of the Borderlands embody the opposition between culture and nature, civilization and savagery, the West and the East. The Wild Fields were ruled by half-humans and half-beasts, humanoids which were areligious and

did not bury their dead. The writer's nomenclature is unambiguous – "czabanowie" are entirely savage and stupid, similarly to "czumacy-woskoboje", "włóczęgi-siromachy", "zachozi-przybłędowie", and "niżowcy."⁴ There is also "czerni" – "the Murk", an umbrella term for an impersonal legion of "savages." Sienkiewicz frequently describes the morals of the Murk: in Sich, "the drunk mob howling terribly fought with each other for access to victims, trampled them and tore the bodies into shreds"; in Korsuń, "the mob scrambled over pieces of corpses, smeared their blood over their faces and chests with delight, wrapping their necks with intestines that were still so warm, they were steaming. The peasants grabbed small Jewish children by their legs and tore them up amidst maniacal laughter"; in Prokhorovka "the nobles had their eyes drilled out and their heads smashed between rocks"... It is noteworthy that these are the images that Sienkiewicz used to "warm up the hearts"; it was his novels, including *Ogniem i mieczem*, that were considered as the canon of education for young Polish citizens of the 20th century. A postcolonial reading brings into focus their imperialistic "structure of feeling" (as Said quotes after Raymond Williams [12-13]).

One more observation comes to mind. There is a great deal of similarity between Sienkiewicz's apocalyptic visions of the 17th century, and the narratives about the cruelty of the Murk in the UPA in the 1940s.⁵ A continuation of the peculiar "structure of feeling" may be found in such popular movies as *Ogniomistrz Kaleń* (The Artillery Sergeant Kaleń) or *Zerwany most* (The Lost Bridge). *Sotnias* are particularly terrifying are – military units of the UPA – which burn down villages, destroy temples and murder people. The first movie features a memorable scene where the collective execution of Polish soldiers is performed by axe. It is relevant that the movie was adapted from Jan Gerhard's novel *Luny w Bieszczadach* (Fire Glows in the Bieszczady Mountains). The book was first published in 1959, and since then has been reissued multiple times, becoming compulsory reading in secondary schools for many years [Gerhard].⁶

¹ All the citations come from this source.

² A *didko* was a demon in Slavic mythology.

³ The names connote the devil's realm, e.g. Czortowy Jar – the Devil's Gorge – trans. note.

⁴ The names describe peoples whose livelihoods depended on shepherding, hauling and vagrancy – trans. note.

⁵ UPA – Ukrainian Insurgent Army – trans. note.

⁶ All the citations come from this edition.

Let us compare it with *Ogniem i Mieczem*. Gerhard's novel takes place between Warsaw and the Bieszczady Mountains; in other words, between the capital city and the new borderlands, formed after the borders were shifted following WWII. It is meaningful that in both Sienkiewicz and Gerhard's writing, we encounter foreign-sounding places such as: Hulskie, Tworzyłne, Smerek, Wetlina, Dwernik, Berehy Górne, or Komańcza. The town of Baligród is referred to as Diabligród.⁷ Hence, in both novels, we find depictions of the East and its people while the opposition between culture and savagery is based on the same principles.

In Gerhard's novel, the former Murk is replaced with "bands" and "bandits," which are "numerous" and leave behind "horribly maimed bodies" and "charred corpses." One of the Polish officer's calls it "leprosy on the body of Poland." Gerhard describes in detail the indulgences of these "bands": In Huczvice, "Roadside willows were used as gallows [...]. They carried out the hangings while people held down the wives and children of the executed. Women covered their eyes so they wouldn't see it"; by Dołżyca, "One soldier lay on the ground, his throat slit. A few steps farther, another one had a crushed skull while [others'] bodies were riddled with machine gun bullets"; on the mountainside of Berdo, "A corpse was completely naked. His head was almost severed from his trunk, his hands tied up with a wire behind his back, his genitals cut off"...

In both cases, the Orientalization is based on a repetition of negative stereotypes. The Polish East – whether as distant as the 17th century, or as recent as the mid-20th century – was portrayed as a space of ruthless war. This is a war of cultures and civilizations where the Polish princes and generals fight against anarchy, cruelty, and savagery. In this conflict, the Orient is in the wrong and is fueled only by its determination. In this context, the colonization of the Zaporozhian Sich and the Bieszczady Mountains, framed simultaneously as a mission of civilizational progress and peace, seems righteous. It must be admitted that these novels contain features that are typical for the narratives of an empire trying to justify its own ambitions (discursive and military) by depreciating others.

The "structure of emotion", as well as the "structure of attitude and reference" coloring the Polish approach to the ethnically dissimilar east did not go away after the war. Its new variant resurfaced in the period of the system transformation after 1989. The system revolution in states of the so-called Eastern Bloc produced a cognitive dissonance, under which the formation of the Visegrád Group ought to be interpreted as an attempt at shifting the oriental stigma farther east and south, mainly towards the former war-torn Yugoslavia and the countries of the former Soviet Union. On the one hand, it was an element of a political strategy; on the other, a replication of the dominant discourse referred to as "crypto-colonialism." [Herzfeld 101] This term describes the "strange alchemy" of preventing certain countries, which have never been classic colonies, from direct access to the advantages of global modernity. At the same time, this shift of the stigma should also be considered [*Czyścić* 198] as an offshoot of a mindset whose most blatant expression (articulated in the spirit of the open postcolonialism) was the concept of "the clash of civilizations." [Huntington] A syllogism of the transformation of the '90s could be reconstructed as follows: since we are in Europe and in the zone of the neoliberal agenda, then we should be allowed to think according to this agenda. This is how Poland, defined as the "leader of changes," quickly and eagerly embraced the role of the agent of transformation, sending out experts east and south whose job was to instruct the local communities and their leaders about the necessity to change the future direction.

The replication of Orientalizing mechanisms and the crypto-colonialism were not only international in their nature. Certain "structures of feeling" were also revived in the discourse about our own Polish society. The concept of "transition" [*Klasa; Rethinking*] comes from the dictionary of liberal capitalism. In its model form, it refers to an implemented change based on replacing the socialist system with capitalism. This notion stigmatized all the social groups that did not fit the logic of this change. The communities of the former state-owned farms, which were identified with the ghost of Homo sovieticus, became the primary scapegoat. These "orphans of socialism" were attributed with entitlement, infantilism, low work efficiency, incompetence, and hostility towards

⁷ Diabligród – the Devil's Borough – trans. note.

change and the elites [“Dilemmas”; “Looking”]. It was believed that these people hindered changes and resembled the former “Murk” or “leprosy on the body” of the transforming Poland. This discourse also produced the term eastern wall (or “Poland A”) as the anti-thesis of the western wall (or “Poland B”) which meticulously implemented the transition script. Another consequence of the internal Orientalizing during the times of the transformation was the stigmatization of the so-called “mohair berets,” associated with the supporters of conservative and Catholic values, standing at odds with pro-Europe and pro-liberal attitudes. Looking back, one could say that while the former workers of the liquidated state-owned farms were “orphans of socialism,” “mohairs” became a visual representation of neoconservatism in Poland.

The issue of the postcolonial attitude towards the people from the east has been revived due to the economic migration of Ukrainians to Poland. This process intensified in 2014 and was a result of the war in the east of Ukraine as well as the country’s deteriorating economic situation. By December 2017, over a million work permits had been issued for Ukrainian citizens [Coraz więcej], and this number, which doesn’t even include those working illegally, keeps growing. This is the biggest wave of migration in the history of modern Poland and what is interesting about it is that the migrants are spreading across the country’s entire territory, ending up in towns and villages where for decades a foreigner had been no more than a phantom. In a broadcast on the popular radio station TOK FM, Grzegorz Sroczyński commented that “Most Poles perceive Ukrainians as very cheap labor who can be disrespected even more than Poles. We revert to the model of a Polish master and a Ukrainian farmhand. The historical pattern becomes transparent in contemporary job market relations. And this is something that should be rooted out” [“Ukraińcy”]. This phenomenon brings us back to Sienkiewicz’s “Murk” and Gerhard’s “bandits,” who provide the basis for activating the crypto-colonial attitude.

From the Primeval to Proto-Polish Forest

Finally, I would like to propose another peculiar form of postcolonialism. I refer to the lively debate around

the Białowieża Forest and the resistance of ecologists and activists involved in the forest protection camp, and, more broadly speaking, to defining the forest as an element of national heritage and economic resource. In order to analyze forest colonization, it is helpful to employ the lens of political ecology, which studies how natural resources are accessed and controlled. It is also interested in the related attitudes of the authorities and the formation of alternative ways of thinking about the links between the environment and politics [Peluso, Watts 24-25]. To quote Bruno Latour, since we live in the Anthropocene, that is, the geological epoch dominated by human activity, then the former division between sociocultural anthropology and biological anthropology is no longer relevant [Latour]. The need to employ a lens inherent to political ecology is reinforced by another researcher’s comment, who feels that today our thinking about nature is undergoing a deep change: we have started viewing it as a socially constructed yet bio-physical reality [Escobar].

What does it mean that the Białowieża Forest is socially constructed? It means that its ascribed values – from being the last wild, primeval forest in Europe to providing a habitat for precious tree species – comes from outside; they are not articulated by the forest itself but by actors engaged in a struggle over access and control. This struggle is marked by a sense of property and nationhood [Konczal]. One should be reminded of the fact that in 2015, Jan Szyszko (a former parliamentary deputy and later the Minister of the Environment), claiming to speak in “defense of the Polish forests” from being sold to foreigners, argued: “We are drawing up forest legislation to ensure that the forest land is protected, to ensure that it is protected by Polish law so it can serve the Polish people, and guarantee the existence of the State and the Polish nation. A nation without its land is extinct” [Radio Maryja]. A deep belief in the communion of the forest, the Polish land and Polish history allowed forestry circles to collect over two million signatures in favor of a referendum on the future of the State Forests.⁸ In the same vein, the then presidential candidate, Andrzej Duda, said the following in a campaign commercial:

⁸ A Polish governmental organization that manages state-owned Polish forests – trans. note.

“The Polish forests (should remain) in Polish hands” [Kac Pro] and as we know, the future president garnered sufficient support to win the elections.

In the most contemporary view, the forest is both an artifact and ecofact; while in the history of colonialism, it was one of the first victims of appropriation and exploitation. Biocolonisation [Huggan, Tiffin] was justified by the creation of the Enlightenment’s “natural history,” which began with Linnaeus’ systemics and reach a natural endpoint with the syllogisms by the aforementioned Minister Szyszko. In this particular case, even if we cannot speak of an “ecological genocide”, we are surely dealing with appropriation and exploitation. Once the spirit of Polishness colonized the forest, the next step was the “rescue”; the logging that swept through the Białowieża Forest. It triggered a dispute between those who viewed this forest as a common good belonging to humanity, and those who saw it only as a Polish resource dependent on the decisions of the Polish officials. Again, as in the title of the famous essay by Spivak, “the subaltern could not speak”, hence, various actors of the conflict spoke on their behalf.

The postcolonial threads of the debates around the Białowieża Forest – and more broadly, the significance and the role of the forest in the Polish culture, economy and history – resurface in those areas where the former paternalistic stances have been destabilized. However, this dispute somewhat chipped away at the alleged naturalness of the Biblical command “subdue the earth” along with the belief that “the forest land [...] is to serve the Polish people.” Furthermore, it revealed the mechanisms of the authorities and hierarchy, including those at the supraspecies level. It seems that this might be the most surprising form of postcolonialism in contemporary Poland.

Final comments

This overview of the various dimensions of postcolonialism and their presence in the Polish context, whether inconspicuous or visible, had one primary goal. My intention was to argue that the postcolonial relations of the authorities and hierarchy, along with the correlating “structures of feeling” permeate both Polish history and the present. They can be found

in the Nobles’ Commonwealth, which promoted manorialism, and the Sarmatian megalomania. They are featured in the 19th century literature that formed the national canon, in post-war military and discursive struggles against distinct ethnicities, up until the current state of the Polish culture. Moreover, they are ingrained in virtually all levels of social life: from family and gender, through religion, economy, politics, to ethnicity and nationality, and even ecology. Thus, the master and servant relationship may be considered as almost universal to understanding our culture.

The history and culture of Poland have been colonized, and this fact is still widely discussed. However, the notion that Polish history and culture have also colonized others is much less frequently considered. I have no doubt that the question about the colonial and postcolonial practices of Poland should be asked to the Ukrainians, Lemkos, Tatars, Armenians, Crimean Karaites, Roma, Wallachians, Mari people, Nogais, the participants of a dozen Cossack uprisings, the faithful of the Russian Orthodox Church, and other “dissenters.” What may appear to us as a civilizational mission, granting opportunities or developing the national interest, for them may mean pain, loss and humiliation. We should also ask a number of similar questions to ourselves and our hearts of darkness, which have not spoken yet.

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 ABSTRACT

Waldemar Kuligowski
The Polish hearts of darkness.
Postcolonial dimensions of history and culture

This article's attempt to apply postcolonial theses as a tool for rethinking Polish culture and history requires confrontation with the following engrained opinions: (1) Poland was not an imperialistic country, and having had no colonies is absolved from accounting for its shameful past, and (2) the non-colonial Poland is grouped with other colonized countries and nations (from the late 18th century until the year 1989). The analysis refers to the "structure of feeling" generated by the imperialistic Poland in the former borderlands as well as in relation to the peasant and Ukrainian populations after the Second World War. The ruling government's treatment of natural forests as an economic resource that can be managed freely by the authorities is another strain of Polish cryptocolonialism.

Keywords: cryptocolonialism, Poland, authorities, imperialistic culture