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The missing Second World. On Poland (and Eastern Europe) and postcolonial studies

I.

When approaching the topic of postcolonial studies from the perspective of a country such as Poland – an Eastern European country of the so-called “Second World” – one soon notices a certain gap. This gap is identified by David Chioni Moore (2001, 115–16); he shows it using an example of the article “Notes on the ‘Post-Colonial’” by Ella Shohat (1992). By listing all the countries, regions and ethnic groups mentioned by Shohat in her article, Moore concurrently shows what is *not* mentioned there: the whole of the former Eastern bloc. The omission is not only Shohat’s, but a more general characteristic of postcolonial studies: analysing extensively and in various aspects the First World’s exploitation of the Third, and the Third World’s ways of opposing and contesting the First’s domination, they leave a blank space in place of that which comes between the first and the third: the Second World. It thus becomes, in a way, an elephant in the room.

This essay is an attempt to address the existence of this elephant and determine, at least partly, its shape. More precisely, its aim is to place the part of the Second World that is Poland within the field of postcolonial studies, in its ambiguous capacity as both victim and perpetrator. By this, it is also a call to fill the gaps in postcolonial studies that would help us to understand European colonialism and imperialism in a more comprehensive way, and the various ways in which European nations have been complicit in them.

Moore is not the only one to notice the gap. It was discussed, for example, in a series of essays published in Polish literary journal *Teksty Drugie*. The discussion was prompted by an essay by Clare Cavanagh, an American expert on Polish poetry (Czesław Miłosz in particular), entitled “Postcolonial Poland. A white spot on the map of the current theory”. It asked the question why theories of postcolonial studies – Cavanagh quoted Fredric Jameson and Edward Said in particular – ignored “the so-called Second World, meaning Russia and its former satellites in Europe and Asia” (Cavanagh 2003, 61). Afterwards, the question returned in several other articles published in the same journal, e.g. by Izabela Surynt (2007), Dorota Kołodziejczyk (2010), Ewa Thompson (2011) and Aleksander Fiut (2003). The latter commented that Cavanagh had “accurately exposed the ideological hypocrisy of postcolonial critique, which completely avoids the imperial conquests of Russia, and subsequently of the Soviet Union” (Fiut 2003, 150–51). If the hypocrisy is “ideological”, what is, then, the ideology behind it? According to the majority of the authors mentioned, it is the Marxist or in general left inclinations of most scholars of colonialism, which make them interpret imperialism only in terms of capitalist imperialism, and reluctant to see the

Soviet Union as “a French- or British-style villain” (Moore 2001, 117; this explanation is also given, among others, by Cavanagh [2003, 62]; Kołodziejczyk [2010, 29]; and Thompson [2011, 295–96]).

Other reasons are also proposed as contributing to the existence of the gap. For example Dorota Kołodziejczyk lists postcolonial studies’ monolingualism (the fact that they are allegedly only conducted in English), the Iron Curtain’s impermeability in their formative decades, and a phenomenon she calls “Western academia’s inbreeding” (2010, 28–29). I would like to add another explanation – which does not necessarily exclude the ones mentioned above – which can be called a shadow of a (mental) iron curtain. This metaphor is inspired by Larry Wolff’s comment on Winston Churchill’s Fulton Speech, and I find it useful to explain the absence of the region of Eastern Europe from many aspects of both scientific and popular discourses. The image of the iron curtain, as put forward by Churchill, conveyed not only an idea of separation, but also of a place hidden in a shadow, in which it was “possible not to look too closely, permitted even to look away – for who could see through an iron curtain and discern the shapes enveloped in the shadow?” (Wolff 1994, 1). Although Wolff in his analysis was mostly interested in ways of portraying Eastern Europe, the metaphor of the shadow of the iron curtain puts accent elsewhere: on ignoring Eastern Europe – not necessarily out of ill will, but because mental maps of most Western Europeans (and Northern Americans) do not include Eastern Europe at all.

Thus, when Ella Shohat takes stock of the globe and its different peoples, whether as perpetrators or victims of colonialism, her gaze glides over the whole of the former Eastern bloc as if it was not there. One other example is the shadow that often falls over half of the life of one of the authors most studied as complicit chroniclers of the European colonial project: Joseph Conrad – Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski. Conrad, as well as his later compatriots, Clare Cavanagh comments (referring to Neal Ascherson’s review of Ryszard Kapusciński’s *The Shadow of the Sun*), “knew all too well what it meant to be at the wrong end of colonialism – and during sojourns in Africa, Asia, or Polynesia, they continually recognized aspects of their own experience” (2004, 91). While one can certainly discuss whether this recognition made him sympathetic to non-Europeans who found themselves “at the wrong end of colonialism” (e.g. Achebe 1989), the omission of this fact, or seeing it only as a source of Conrad’s ironic distance to the British imperial endeavours (e.g. Said 1994, 27), seems like a missed opportunity.¹

The term “Second World” itself has in some contexts within postcolonial studies become, so to speak, washed out of its original meaning and given a new one, i.e.: “those settler-invader communities which are situated between the ‘First World’ and the ‘Third World’ and yet whose differences from the ‘First World’ are often unproblematically skipped over” (Childs and Williams 2014, 83). This understanding, proposed at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s by Alan Lawson and Stephen Slemon (1990) unproblematically skipped over the fact that the term had already had an established meaning, and in effect over the whole area of the globe that it referred to. This possibly is a manifestation of a certain belief: in an “end of history” that was supposed to come with the end of the Cold War. After the lifting of the iron curtain, the place hitherto hidden in the shadow was to become enveloped in the First World’s light, and the “Second World” cease to be a useful category for the post-Soviet bloc. Thus, the Second World appears as something transitory, not only in terms of space, but also time. However, even though concepts such as the iron curtain and the Second World itself might be context-bound to the era of the Cold War, that what they represent

¹ Among the few exceptions of authors who took this opportunity is Maya Jasanoff with her recent book on Conrad (2017).

is not. As argued by, among others, Larry Wolff (1994) and Jan Sowa (2011), the European continent's division into the eastern and western halves is both older and more firmly established than the Cold War's iron curtain. Wolff places the origins of the division in the time of the Enlightenment, while Sowa goes further back in time, to the early modern period, or even the antiquity – the first European division line being, according to him, the border of the Roman Empire on the Elbe and the Leitha (2011, 16–17). The twentieth-century iron curtain descended roughly along the same line: between Western and Eastern Europe, between the First World and the Second. So too did the specificity of the Second World's experience in relation to the First and the Third Worlds – Eastern Europe's experience in relation to Western Europe and the rest of the world – not start, or end, with the Cold War.

Furthermore, the division is not neutral, but rests on hierarchies and relations of power, not completely unlike those around which much of postcolonial analysis evolves, in which Western Europe – the First World – is, in Maria Todorova's words, “the standard against which the rest has to position itself” (2005, 63–64). Eastern Europe, when held to this standard, is very often found lacking. Yet it constantly feels the need to prove itself, while at the same time is often deprived of a possibility of setting its own standards, or as a handful of historical examples show, even setting its own borders. In the direct aftermath of the First World War the emergence of new states on the ruins of old empires in Eastern Europe was viewed with a mixture of fear and condescension in the West, and contemptuously called “Balkanisation” (Todorova 1997, 33–35; Grzechnik 2012, 61); and David Lloyd George compared giving Poland the industrial district of Silesia to giving a watch to a monkey (Howard 1989, 46). After the Second World War, Eastern Europe's borders were redrawn by European powers, in many cases above the heads of the concerned nations. Poland's eastern border was put on the so-called Curzon line, so named after the former Viceroy of India, also there known for his boundary-drawing efforts: the 1905 partition of Bengal. As for Poland's western border, before having the chance to talk about the iron curtain descending across the continent, Winston Churchill contributed also to its redrawing during the series of conferences of great powers towards the end of the Second World War. In this, he was not hindered by his rather poor orientation in Eastern European geography, as evidenced by his confusing the two potential new border rivers, Lusatian Neisse and Eastern Neisse (Eberhardt 2013, 292).

It is tempting to say that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when both the EU and NATO have been enlarged to include a substantial part of Eastern Europe, the division has disappeared – or at least moved further east: the light has spilled over to the place hidden in the shadow. At the same time, however, some analyses of the process of EU enlargement to post-Soviet Europe, for example by József Böröcz, Melinda Kovács (2001) and their colleagues, and by Jan Zielonka (2007), argue that the process had more features of expanding an empire than of integration – a concept which implies mutuality, exchange, equality. Böröcz and Kovács, in particular, analysed the language of EU's communication with and about the post-Soviet candidate states, concluding that it reproduced Wolff's “inventing Eastern Europe” as exotic other, while discursively creating itself as superior (Kovács 2001, 228).

The sources of the lasting division are not (only) the West's stereotypes and ignorance, as several of the above-mentioned examples could suggest. Also, this is not only a Western intellectual construction, as is Larry Wolff's argument. Its permanence points to reasons than run deeper, and are of both economic and cultural nature. Eastern Europe's position towards Western Europe remains ambiguous: it is both inside and outside, not “European” enough, nor “White” enough, in the permanent state of needing to catch up (Zarycki 2014, 4–5). Sowa describes this

phenomenon as “eternal imprisonment in the logic of catching up and escaping”: catching up with the West (“we want to be like Germans, Austrians, Italians, French”) and escaping the East (“we are not like Russians, Ukrainians, Turks, Asians”) (2011, 18). This defining oneself in relation to others to this extent he considers characteristic of the region of East Central Europe, the area which he calls “no-man’s and nondescript land” (2011, 15). Philosopher Andrzej W. Nowak discusses the Second World’s paradoxical situation stemming from its transitory status between the First World and the Third: it has to “give identity to itself, struggle for it, create itself and at the same time free itself from it” (2016, 87). Quoting Marina Blagojević, Tomasz Zarycki describes the region as a semi-periphery:

a space located close to the core yet not the core itself, always “lagging behind” yet not distant enough to develop an alternative scale of evaluation, hence forever measuring itself with the yardstick of the core. Positioned between the center and the periphery, it has characteristics of both. It cannot be subsumed under the postcolonial subject, because, from the viewpoint of the periphery, it is “too white”, too industrial, too developed, and, most importantly, not eligible for claiming victimhood due to the absence of colonial experience. (Blagojević 2009, 38; quoted in: Zarycki 2014, 5)

The notion of semi-periphery comes from Immanuel Wallerstein’s vision of the world-economy as divided into three spheres: the core, the semi-periphery and the periphery (Wallerstein 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2011d). The semi-periphery, at the same time the exploited and the exploiting, is necessary for the world-economy’s functioning, preventing the exploited areas from joining forces against the core and overrunning it, as the periphery and the semi-periphery are pitted against each other in protecting their short-term interests (Babones 2016, 14). That these concepts were taken over to describe networks not only of economic, but also cultural dependence, is an indicator of the overwhelming nature of these relations.

Contrary to Blagojević’s statement about the semi-periphery not being able to claim victimhood due to absence of colonial experience, scholars such as Cavanagh, Moore, Thompson, and others argue that the post-Soviet bloc should be included in the reflection on the postcolonial because of its history of dependence on the Soviet Union (and, less frequently, Germany), which limited its possibilities of forming independent policies and deformed its historical development. That is not to say that the experiences of the Third World and the former Soviet bloc are the same – but that tools and methods developed for the description of one could be useful for examining the other. Such analyses have, in the meantime already been undertaken (e.g. Conrad 2010, 144–202; Kopp 2012; Healy 2014; McNamara 2014). Studies such as Wolff’s, Todorova’s, and Böröcz’s and Kovács’s, on the other hand, concentrate on the region’s (or its parts’) quasi-postcolonial status in relation to Western Europe. They draw on Edward Said’s concept of orientalism: defining a region and standards of evaluating its civilizational development from and with relation to the Western European core, and taking away its agency (Wolff 1994, 6–7; Todorova 1997, 7–12; Kovács 2001; Böröcz and Kovács 2001).

It was with these arguments in mind that postcolonial studies first started to appear in Poland, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. An interesting feature of this Polish first take on postcolonialism was, according to Adam F. Kola, its right-wing, conservative approach (2018, 419). In this approach, Poland remained concerned first and foremost with itself, its own suffering and victimhood; and with its concentration on Russia – untypically for a colonial power seen as

having inferior culture and no symbolic power – it provided a new language for expressing the old Polish hostility towards the eastern neighbour, at times veering into orientalizing (see Chmielewska 2013, 565–66). Postcolonial approach's usefulness for the Polish case was, however, not universally accepted. For example, Daniel Beauvois doubted whether it offered any new insights in comparison to the established frameworks of reference (occupation, partitions, hegemony etc.), and went as far as to call it, in a debate with Ewa Thompson, a fashion (Kieniewicz 2008, 27–30).

In the second half of the twenty-first century Polish research's approach to postcolonial studies and Poland's own place in them has become more inspired by Western European approach and closer to global trends. It has also become more nuanced. Some scholars proposed an alternative term: post-dependency. Most notably it has been used by the Post-Dependence Studies Centre founded at the University of Warsaw. Their work has resulted in several conferences and publications (e.g. Nycz 2011; Gosk and Kwiatkowska 2013; Gosk and Kołodziejczyk 2014).

II.

On its Internet site, the Post-Dependence Studies Centre defines its objective as filling in “the gap created by the lack of an adequate theoretical language” describing the variety of East European experiences. Recognising this variety means admitting that its relationship to colonialism is more complicated than just that of a victim. If the latter role is discussed in Poland at all, it is usually associated with *Kresy*: Eastern borderlands of the early modern Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. They occupy an important place on Polish mental maps as a crucial element of Polish national culture and national identity. As a lost territory, they are an object of nostalgia of the past, the site of memory of Poland's past greatness, and the subject of the powerful myth of a national idyll, or a multicultural melting pot revolving around Poles as the benevolent *Kulturträger*.

Contrary to this myth, *Kresy's* position in the Polish history – and present – can be considered in colonial categories, as discussed by, among others, Bogusław Bakula (2006), Tomasz Zarycki (2014), Christoph Mick (2014) and Jan Sowa (2011). The latter analyses, for example, the Polish relation to *Kresy* in terms of political, economic and demographic relations, as well as the colonial discourse that accompanied their takeover:

There appears the typical discourse accompanying all colonial endeavours. It is supposed to answer the question about the best possible organisation and using of the new possessions. The Polish authors' works follow thus the tradition of colonial literature, along with *Travail sur l'Algerie* by Alexis de Tocqueville and Edmund Burke's parliament speeches about the situation in the British India (e.g. *The Nabob of Arcot's Debts* and *Article of Charge of High Crimes and Misdemeanours against Warren Hastings*). The rhetoric of colonial conquest and rule appears in the Polish musings about *Kresy* completely openly, as if it was obvious for the contemporaries that Poland's calling was to use Ukraine according to its own needs. (Sowa 2011, 329–30)

Polish hesitation to consider one's own colonial responsibility towards *Kresy* and to examine this relation in postcolonial terms further widens the gap in postcolonial studies. Sowa proposes four reasons for this hesitation – or, should we say, denial. Firstly, he mentions postcolonial theory's Western-centrism. Secondly, the strength of the traditional ways of thinking about Polish history, offering competitive ways of explaining its course (partitions instead of colonization; *Kresy* instead

of colonies). Thirdly, problems with the Polish national image: on the one hand, being in denial about one's own peripheral position, and on the other – unclean conscience towards the eastern neighbours. Finally, the hesitation to accept Marxism as an inherent part of postcolonial theory – something that Sowa calls “exorcising Marx” (2011, 440–48).

The third point is, in my opinion, especially interesting. It is connected to the dominant, and very powerful Polish self-image. It presents Poland traditionally as a victim of its powerful and aggressive neighbours, and not as oppressor of other peoples. It also reflects the Polish sense of self-importance, making it unwilling to see itself in the same categories as Third World countries: the semi-periphery's constant attempts to escape the periphery. It is close enough to the core to aspire to be treated equally with it, joining it appearing to be within its grasp, and at the same time it is not ready to face either its own peripherality or its responsibility towards its own peripheries. It is even less ready to face its responsibility towards the Third World. A good starting point to discuss this issue is to remind about the Polish aspirations to acquire overseas colonies that appeared in the interwar period.

For Poland, the interwar period was not only a period between the wars, but also between the extended periods of foreign domination. In 1918 Poland regained independence after so-called partitions, the 123 years for which the country disappeared from the world maps, its territory divided between its neighbours, Russia, Prussia (later Germany) and Austria. The interwar period was, therefore, the time when its identity as an independent nation and its place among other nations had to be ascertained. The idea of colonial expansion followed from a conviction that, after regaining independence, Poland should join the great states of Europe in the race for overseas colonies. It was propagated first and foremost by an organisation called *Liga Morska i Kolonialna* (Maritime and Colonial League), founded in 1930 from the earlier Maritime and River League. The effort was directed towards Africa and South America, especially towards former German colonies currently under the League of Nations' mandate. Apart from that, the League was interested in Portuguese (Angola) and French (Madagascar) colonies, as well as Liberia. It signed a trade agreement with the latter on 28 April 1934, and attempted to set up coffee plantations there. Another direction was South America, and especially Brazil, the destination of Polish emigrants since mid-nineteenth century. There, the plan was to organize the process of settlement, which would create a tightly-knit Polish community with a strong national identity and lasting connections with the mother country. Despite several attempts and intensive propaganda within Poland, the project turned out to be a failure. This was in part due to the hostility of the colonial powers. Most importantly, however, the projects lacked thorough planning and financial backing, and they were not based on a realistic assessment of the conditions existing in the colonial territories, interests of the colonial powers as well as local national feelings (e.g. in Brazil) (Łossowski 1990, 110–20; Białas 1983, 207, 215–16, Kowalski 2010, 119, 125).

The pursuit of overseas territories was presented as a remedy to Poland's serious economic and social problems, especially overpopulation in the countryside, and lack of access to raw materials and export markets which hampered industrial development. “Should the world, which is full of natural resources,” an article in the Maritime and Colonial League's popular journal dramatically asked,

remain stuck in the situation in which some countries, “satiated” with resources, destroy their supplies to prevent price decrease, while other nations, “hungry” and overpopulated, lacking space and natural resources, cannot provide their growing young generations with work and

humane living conditions, they cannot direct their surplus population to cities, to industry and trade, because of lack of resources, capitals and export markets, because these nations have been deprived of possibilities to send their surplus population to free, almost uninhabited lands in other parts of the world. (Dębski 1937, 1)

Poland, a “hungry” nation, demanded its cut in the division of the globe and its resources in the name of what the colonial activists understood as international justice, which was all nations’ right to unhampered development. It was implicitly understood that this right and this justice was only given to “civilized”, white nations of Europe and North America. And it could only be secured with colonies.

The question of the Polish quest for colonies in the interwar period has been studied to some extent. For example, Tadeusz Białas (1983) presented the history of the Maritime and Colonial League; Marek Arpad Kowalski (2010) analysed the colonial discourse of interwar Poland (and also, in more popular form, a short history of Polish overseas presence since the age of exploration [Kowalski 2005]); and Anna Nadolska-Styczyńska (2005) discussed the presentation of non-European peoples in the League’s publications. Other authors have examined aspects of the League’s activities (e.g. Jarnecki 2006; Jarnecki 2010; Szczerki 2013). However, instead of filling the gap in postcolonial studies, these analyses widened it: they did not attempt to place the issue of Polish colonial plans in the context of postcolonial studies, operating in complete disconnection from this field. Reading them one could conclude that the Polish colonial plans were in no way connected to the European nineteenth and twentieth century colonialism understood not simply as military and economic expansion, but also as a system of production of knowledge and hierarchies.

This leads us to another, more important Polish entanglement with the European imperialism and colonialism. As Edward Said argues in *Culture and Imperialism*, norms and values imprinted in colonialism are such an integral feature of the European societies that one can speak of the European identity as the identity of the colonizers (Said 1994). As Europeans and global Westerners, participants in the European culture, Poles have shared in European discourses of hierarchies of peoples and systemic racism, a shared cultural outlook which Mai Palmberg (2009, 47) calls “the colonial mind”. Its elements are part of European literature, popular culture, but also research: its describing and ordering the world, ascribing it with hierarchies and centre-periphery relations (Pratt 1995, 15–37; Said 1979, 31 ff).

Poles were no exception in this process, even before regaining independence in 1918. The most notable example was Stefan Szolc-Rogozieński (1861–1896). He was mostly remembered for his pioneering work on the exploration of Cameroon, which he did from a base on a small island in the Amba Bay. As a member of the Royal Geographical Society in London he had both access to contemporary developments in European science, and possibility to disseminate his own findings. As a founder of the National Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw, he contributed also to dissemination of European ethnography in his native Poland (see Rhode 2013, 29–34). In the interwar period, Szolc-Rogozieński’s name was often recalled in the context of the colonial project, and especially his nationality was underlined as evidence of the nation’s previous efforts. This is, for example, how Stanisław Zieliński, a publicist and member of the Maritime and Colonial League, described these efforts in his encyclopaedia of colonial pioneers:

Rogoziński did not care only for the honour of enriching the scientific output, but for this output to be named as Polish, and last for posterity as an achievement of a Polish scientific expedition. The guiding principle in this endeavour was independent Poland, discovering and acquiring a piece of African land for an own, independent [of other powers] colony. Rogoziński's expedition was the only one led by the Polish national thought. That is its paramount importance. At the time when the nation was deprived of the sea, deprived of an own state and government, Rogoziński attempted to – despite this severe lack – acquire a colony for Poland. (Zieliński 1933, 417)

Such rhetoric was supposed to compensate for absence of Poland as a state in the scramble for colonies in the nineteenth century. This had not been due to the nation's lack of interest in the matter, but due to the unfortunate fact that there was no Poland, as a state, in existence. It was thus a legitimising tool for justifying present colonial aspirations. Throughout the 1920s and especially 1930s, the daily press and journals published reports from European colonies, articles by travellers describing their experiences in Africa and America. Travel literature, as argued by Mary Louise Pratt among others, is rarely an “innocent” description of authors' experiences and expression of their interest in the world. It is also a hierarchy making tool, which establishes and maintains the colonial order, conceptualizes the extra-European world as something for the European world to describe, measure and thus give meaning – but not to have or produce meaning itself. Travel reports thus “encode and legitimate the aspirations of economic expansion and empire” (Pratt 1995, 5). Popular Polish writers-travellers such as Arkady Fiedler, Mieczysław Lepecki, Jerzy Giżycki, were especially interested in Africa and America, countries which appeared in the colonial discourse as potential territories for expansion or destinations of Polish emigrants. Their publications were not only meant to educate and inform, but, more importantly, to help place the readers and their culture in relation to those who were described in these publications.

This picture of the Polish “colonial mind” has to be further nuanced, however. Let us do this with the examples of two books published in Cracow in 1912 – still during the period of partitions. The first of them was an ethnographic account: *Materials for the study of the Ainu language and folklore* by Bronisław Piłsudski (1912), the elder brother of Józef, the later leader of independent Poland. Bronisław Piłsudski conducted his research on the Ainu people on island of Sakhalin (and later also Hokkaido), where he had been sent as punishment for his involvement in a plot to assassinate Tsar Alexander III in 1887. Hard labour in Siberia was a punishment often used in the Russian Empire for political prisoners. In the Polish case, it applied mostly to those involved in the independence movement (especially after the January uprising of 1863–1864). Thus, Russian imperialism, and the prisoners' attempts to oppose it, created a situation in which a comparatively large group of young, educated and often idealistic people found themselves in the hitherto unexplored by European science Siberian lands, in search of occupation that would make their forced stay there bearable, and perhaps meaningful. Piłsudski was not the only one to use this as an opportunity to conduct research. Many of his colleagues occupied themselves with the study of ethnography, geography, geology, archaeology and others. In some ways, their taking to research in the harsh Siberian conditions could be interpreted as act of defiance against the Empire, and against the punishment that was designed to break them. They often perceived their own activities in terms of “civilising” Siberia (e.g. Dybowski 1993, 209), and were later recognized and even rewarded by Russian research associations.

The second book was a popular adventure novel *W pustyni i w puszczy* (English title *In Desert and Wilderness*) by Henryk Sienkiewicz (1912). Sienkiewicz won international acclaim after being awarded a Nobel Prize in literature in 1905. However, in Poland, he is most known for writing historical novels *ku pokrzepieniu serc* – to comfort the nation’s hearts – usually by reminding of its periods of greatness. *W pustyni i w puszczy* diverts from this pattern, being a contemporary novel, however it too could serve a similar, comforting purpose. The story, known to every Polish schoolchild, and adapted to film twice (in 1973 and 2001), presents adventures of a brave Polish youth as he struggles, successfully, to get himself and an English girl in his care to safety across dangers of Africa’s political upheavals (Mahdi’s rebellion) and hostile nature. The young hero’s patriotism combined with his European – mostly British – ways of thinking about Africans and Europeans’ place in Africa, positions him as a member of a nation with a distinct identity – despite its lack of statehood – which is, at the same time, a European, white identity. As Anna Cichoń (2004, 93–94) discusses, he epitomizes the ideals of a brave, adventurous European male that are typical of a colonialist literature (which is literature “written by and for colonizing Europeans about non-European lands dominated by them”, according to Elleke Boehmer [2005, 3]), designed to show his readiness to conquer and rule Africa, and superiority to its indigenous population.

What these two examples show, is Poland’s “double status as a colonizer and colonized” (Skórczewski 2008, 35). It is the paradox of, at the same time, being the victim of European imperialism and attempting to escape one’s own victimhood by aspiring to being recognized as belonging to the same club as European empires. This paradox is not unique to the Second World in the Cold War sense, the world formerly under Soviet dominance. This becomes visible when if we examine other European countries sharing the experience of foreign domination in the nineteenth century, the time of the great European race for colonies – countries such as, for example, Ireland, Iceland and Finland. Róisín Healy (2017) analysed Ireland’s relation to Polish fight for independence. She noticed a distinction, made by Irish nationalists, between Europeans, such as Poles and Irish – entitled to self-government and needing no civilising mission from their oppressors – and non-Europeans, “who were entitled to merely good government” (Healy 2017, 4). For Iceland, Kristin Loftsdóttir (2008) analysed depictions of Africa in a journal *Skírnir* in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, interpreting them as part of a more general European narrative about non-Whites, designed to place Icelanders themselves in relation to other peoples in and beyond Europe. Despite Iceland’s own lack of independence, care was taken to distance oneself from other dependent peoples of the Danish Kingdom, such as Greenlanders, as well as Africans (Loftsdóttir 2008, 183). Similar mechanisms were at work in the Polish case, intended to present oneself, and imagine oneself, as part of the European culture, distinct from non-European cultures, and therefore subject to a different set of rules and rights.

Ulla Vuorela, a Finnish scholar, developed the notion of “complicity” to describe this phenomenon, basing on the concept used by Gayatri Spivak (1999; 2008). Complicity, as defined by Vuorela, is

participation in the hegemonic discourses, involvement in the promotion of universal thinking and practices of domination. Complicity is an important notion for those of us who are not quite situated in the centre; always wanting to get closer; our responses to the invitation give us a complicit position that we rarely even recognize. It also resembles a “tacit” acceptance of hegemonic discourses, since if we want to be accepted by the centres it is only possible, or so we think, on their terms. (Vuorela 2009, 20)

A nation does not need to be a colonial power to be complicit in the colonial system – it does not even need to be independent. There are no easy and neat divisions into categories of white colonialists and non-white victims of colonialism or into colonial empires, their victims, and innocent bystanders; the eagerness to prove to be worthy of the core's acceptance is what makes one complicit. The Polish interwar colonial plans, for example, which started to appear soon after regaining independence, and for which the ground had been prepared by sharing in the European "colonial mind", in its science and literature, were not so much a condition of Poland's very survival (as it was often presented in the Maritime and Colonial League's propaganda), as a prestigious project, an attempt to escape the European periphery and join the elite club of European powers on an equal footing.

Andrzej W. Nowak approaches this same problem from a different angle: of the identity crisis that is in the very nature of the semi-periphery – the Second World. It is constantly struggling to (re)define itself in relation to the First and the Third Worlds. This (re)definition can take two possible forms: of the Third World's "paternalistic companion" or the First World's "servile boot-licker". The former attitude has been rare, most notably displayed during the period of Cold War, during which the identity crisis was subdued (Nowak 2016, 92). In his recent book Adam F. Kola (2018) presents an interesting study of Polish "socialist postcolonialism", that is communist Poland's discourse of solidarity with the Third World. It came from the Eastern bloc's declared anti-imperialism, but also drew on Polish experience of war and occupation as a common denominator helping to understand the fate of Koreans and Vietnamese fighting with French, and most of all American imperialists. Having been embraced by the communist authorities, this discourse was not picked up by the democratic opposition and subsequently in democratic Poland – until, as discussed earlier, the second decade of the twenty-first century (Kola 2018, 417–18).

Outside of the period of Cold War, as Nowak reminds, the attitude of the First World's "boot-licker" has prevailed. He interprets the interwar colonial plans as a manifestation of this "servile version of semi-peripherality": "It was an attempt at advancement from the position of the servant to the position of the master, but in the framework of the same system" (Nowak 2016, 92). In Nowak's interpretation, the Second World actually becomes the factor stabilising the whole system, as it has the most to lose – falling from the semi-peripheral to the peripheral position – whereas the core runs no such risk, and the periphery has nothing to lose. Therefore, "the semi-periphery is permanently stuck in between a vision of advancement and a fear of falling down" (Nowak 2016, 100). From this comes, Nowak argues, also the special type of racism that is typical of the semi-periphery: while the First World – the core – can "afford" to abandon the racist discourse (which it had itself created) and open itself up to multiculturalism, because its economic and symbolic position within the world-system is stable, the Second World – the semi-periphery – perpetuates the racist divisions, seeing in it a way of advancement in the world-system. Paradoxically, this leads to it being ethnicized, accused of racism and stigmatized: the effect is the opposite to the one intended (Nowak 2016, 101–2).

III.

In the recent refugee crisis in Europe, and Eastern Europe's response to it, we can observe manifestations of this process. To some, this response has shown that the First World's light has not, after all, spilled behind the iron curtain, into the Second World. But perhaps the belief that it

simply would, in the “end of history”, was just another case of avoiding looking into the shadow and recognizing what was really there, recognizing the ways in which the Second World, its historical experiences and its relation to the rest of the world differed from the First. Perhaps the dispersing of the shadow would have been more effective with a realisation that it was naïve to expect the semi-periphery to stop being semi-periphery if the process by which this was supposed to be attained – the EU enlargements – was accompanied by discourse which asserted the core’s power (Kovács 2001, 230).

For Poland, there are several consequences. One is that it remains locked in its position between aspirations of advancement and fear of regress, which produces mechanisms of distancing oneself from those in an even worse position: usually various forms of racism. Another – that this feeds the already strong Polish victim narrative. Together with the fact that Poland never acquired overseas colonies *sensu stricto*, this narrative provides with an easy way out of recognizing and examining the complicity in the colonial system, out of questioning “our assumed outsider status” (Vuorela 2009, 29). But, as we have seen, the roles of victim and perpetrator are not mutually exclusive – one might in fact engender the other.

Thus, Poland’s place in postcolonial studies lies at an intersection of a number of paths within the field, which makes it both an interesting and a challenging subject. Despite the ongoing discussion, it still waits for its thorough analysis, which would enrich and further nuance our understanding of European colonialism.

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