

Book Review:

East Central Europe Between the Colonial and the Postcolonial in the Twentieth Century

Karol Dabrowski*

East Central Europe Between the Colonial and the Postcolonial in the Twentieth Century, ed. by Siegfried Huigen, Dorota Kołodziejczyk, 2023, Palgrave Macmillan.

The editors begin their book with an apt quote from Nobel laureate Olga Tokarczuk about immigrants: “East Central Europe is a region that imagined itself as a space between, constructing historiographies of bulwarks and borderlands”. This accurately characterises the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and shows their ambivalent attitude towards Europe. In their opinion, these countries believe they are not sufficiently “Europeanised”, previously subordinated to Prussian/German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, or Ottoman empires, uncertain of their “status of Europeanness” with self-reinforcing peripherality.

The editors utilise postcolonial studies to describe the nations of Central and Eastern Europe and show how these nations were colonised by European empires. Their inhabitants had to migrate from their own territories, settling overseas colonies, but in a manner that differed from typical colonisers, such as the English and French.

The editors do not shy away from connections to the contemporary context, writing about the stereotypes present after the entry of Central and Eastern European countries into the European Union. Neither do they forget the criticism of the political transformation after 1989, and extensively discuss scholarly literature, noting that transformation processes occurred in East-Central Europe and South Africa at a similar time. They present an interesting conclusion that the reaction to colonial times is a political programme of sovereignty through anti-colonialism that conceals illiberal democracy as the politics of decolonisation. Postcolonial discourse in politics may also pose a threat.

Their scientific approach to the postcolonial perspective is accurate in stating:

... part of a more heterogeneous comparative formula geared to reflecting on the short- and long-term impact of dependence on societies and on how they construct their self-image and their world-image in a confrontation with these legacies. (p.20)

And highlighting an important issue:

The postcolonial perspective on the region raises fundamental questions about how the countries and societies in the region construct their self-image, what legacies they are proud of or burdened with, and how they grapple with their sense of inferiority in the process of system transformation and accessing the European community. (p. 22)

In summary, this is a book about selected aspects of the history of Central and Eastern Europe from the perspective of postcolonial studies.

It includes, nine chapters, divided into three parts. Part one “Locating East Central Europe Through Comparative Methodologies” includes two chapters – “East Central Europe as a Historical and Conceptual Space: On the Production of Knowledge from an (Historical) Area Studies Perspective” by Claudia Kraft (Austria) and “Polish Stereotypes of the East: Old and New Mechanisms of

* E-mail: karol.dabrowski@mail.umcs.pl

Orientalisation in the Regional and Transnational Dimensions” by Tomasz Zarycki (Poland). Part two “Appraising the Empire from European Peripheries” contains four chapters – “Colonial Ambivalence and Its Aftermath: Colonialism and Anti-Colonialism in Independent Poland and Ireland” by Róisín Healy (Ireland); “The Unbearable Virtues of Backwardness: Mircea Eliade’s Conceptualisation of Colonialism and His Attraction to Romania’s Interwar Fascist Movement” by Raul Cârstocea (Ireland); “Reportage from the (Post-)Contact Zone: Polish Travellers to Decolonised India (1950–1980)” by Agnieszka Sadecka (Poland); and “An East Central European «Sahib» in a Former Colony: Andrzej Bobkowski in Guatemala (1948–1961)” by Jagoda Wierzejska (Poland). The third part “Emigres, Exiles, Settlers – Framing Displaced Identities” consists of three chapters – “Regained Landscapes: The Transfer of Power and Tradition in Polish Discourse of the Regained Territories” by Kinga Siewior (Poland); “Between Pedagogy and Self-Articulation: Roma Necessary Fictions in East Central Europe” by Emilia Kledzik (Poland); and “Soviet Colonialism Reloaded: Encounters Between Russians and East Central Europeans in Contemporary Literature” by Miriam Finkelstein (Austria).

Claudia Kraft considers the term Central and Eastern Europe and its perception in the literature. Tomasz Zarycki touches on the important topic of Borderlands (*Kresy*). The mythical concept of “Borderlands” is something of great importance in Polish culture, history and identity. This term has more than just a geographical meaning, because the image and memory of the lost territories after the Partitions of Poland and the Second World War are a component of Polishness. Therefore, postcolonial studies, in which Poles are presented as colonising eastern regions (Belarus, Lithuania, Ukraine, Ruthenia), is so deconstructive.

On the other site of Polishness are the Regained Territories (*Ziemia Odzyskana*) – territories which the Polish state received after the Second World War. The chapter on these was written by Kinga Siewior. Only in the 21st century has the problem of the “Regained Territories” been more thoroughly analysed in Polish literature. During the communist era, it was concealed by censorship under propaganda statements, and capitalism after 1989 had a stronger impact on the local communities in the northwestern areas of Poland than in the central regions. As a nation, we are only now working through the history of the “Regained Territories”, and it is our history.

As for the remaining chapters, Róisín Healy sees similarities between Ireland and Poland but warns against simplistic comparisons of the two nations. Emilia Kledzik interestingly describes the situation of the Roma, also from the perspective of the right to free mobility. The texts by Cârstocea, Sadecka, and Wierzejska are fragmentary, while Finkelstein’s text is situated in literary studies.

The book does not claim to be exhaustive. At times, it is more of a post-conference volume than a synthetic monograph. It could have, for example, provided a broader description of the Polish Maritime and Colonial League, which in its propaganda disregarded the aspirations for independence of African nations and treated Africa as a unified object. Another important theme is the colonisation of Polish lands by Germans during World War II. Wartime historians and of the occupation period do not fully utilise the potential of postcolonial studies. One of the first scholars to directly address the “colonisation” of Poland by Germany was Diemut Majer in her classic work “«Fremdvölkische» im Dritten Reich. Ein Beitrag zur nationalsozialistischen Rechtssetzung und Rechtspraxis in Verwaltung und Justiz unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der eingegliederten Ostgebiete und des Generalgouvernements“. Her work was rejected by the German mainstream but was rightfully received with enthusiasm by Polish historiography.

In my opinion, the chapters of a general nature hold the greatest value. In this way, the international reader receives a textbook introduction from the perspective of Polish-language scholarship, an explanation of the specificity of the Borderlands and Regained Territories. The reader will learn that Poles who emigrated due to partitions were not colonisers, but thanks to their knowledge and skills, they brought progress to Africa, America and Asia as scientists, engineers, and cultural and artistic figures. It is therefore worth comparing the fate of Polish elites with the fates of those of other nations from Central and Eastern Europe.

From a Polish perspective, the book fulfils its purpose. The remaining texts, especially the detailed

ones, serve as an appendix. The strength of the book lies in the selection of authors from different countries: Austria, Ireland, and Poland, as well as the editors' experience. The book's audience will undoubtedly include anthropologists and individuals seeking information on the historical determinants of Polish culture. Paradoxically, the references to postcolonial studies by the editors and authors not only fail to limit the audience but actually broaden it through the diversity of topics. Moreover, the book is available online under an open licence.

Karol Dabrowski is a researcher and academic teacher at the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland, Faculty of Law and Administration.