

East Central Europe between the Colonial and the Postcolonial in the Twentieth Century. Edited by Siegfried Huigen and Dorota Kołodziejczyk. Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. 265 pp.

In recent years, we have witnessed an explosion of scholarly interest in deciphering the in-between position of East Central Europe (ECE), analyzing its numerous and contended connections with the “First” and “Third” World, making sense of its place in global power relations and its recognized or blocked out “complicity” in global practices of domination. The topic resonates especially in Poland, where the works of Piotr Puchalski (*Poland in a Colonial World Order. Adjustments and Aspirations, 1918–1939*), Marta Grzechnik (*The Missing Second World: On Poland and Postcolonial Studies*), and Mariusz Kalczewiak and Magdalena Kozłowska (*The World beyond the West. Perspectives from Eastern Europe*) lately contributed to the study of Eastern European participation in “Othering” the non-Europeans and their colonial fantasies. We also have the seminal works of Manuela Boatcă (*European Elsenheres. Global Sociologies of Space and Europe*), Zoltán Ginelli (*Opening the Semi-periphery: Hungary and Decolonisation*), and most recently Ivan Kalmár (*White but not Quite. Central Europe’s Illiberal Revolt*), which, however, met with some criticism from Eastern European scholars. These studies at least partially placed Eastern Europe (or ECE) in the field of postcolonial studies, and they substantially reworked our knowledge of European colonialism, imperialism, and racialized thinking. It is true that ECE was long overlooked by the postcolonial critique, but since about 2000, many social scientists began to look at it through the prism of its quasi-colonial dependence on the Soviet Union as well as its quasi-postcolonial relations to Western Europe. I was therefore intrigued to learn in what ways *Eastern Europe between Colonial and Postcolonial* contributes to the existing scholarship and viability of postcolonial approaches to the history of (post)communist East Central Europe.

Given the popularity of postcolonial studies in Poland, it perhaps comes as no surprise that the majority of contributors to the volume come from Polish academia, not to mention the fact that the publication is available through open access thanks to the Polish Ministry of Education. The editors also could not have wished for a better timing for publication. Postcolonialism as a perspective is now gaining new momentum in ECE, as it becomes a basis for political narratives of “decolonization from EU,” most notably in Hungary, but Slovakia seems to have embarked on similar path after the last parliamentary elections. In the introductory chapter, Dorota Kołodziejczyk and Siegfried Huigen properly

contextualize the volume within the current political trends in ECE, namely the co-optation of the notion of the postcolonial condition by the modern right and the use of this notion as a tool for mobilization of the rhetoric of ethnic and national emancipation. The authors' primary objective is thus to demonstrate the various forms of intra-European dependence and how they are reflected in the present political and social milieus. They call for the "postcolonizing of postcommunist Europe" and offer a "more nuanced model of scholarly inquiry" into the cultural, literary, and historical imageries which have created East Central Europe's ambiguous identity between colonial and postcolonial. Despite the ambitious claims, the collected case studies only very loosely managed to connect the present situation with the historical preconditions that contributed to the dependent status of ECE. I first briefly sum up the main points of the chapters and then discuss what I miss in the volume. However, my comments should not be read as a criticism but rather as a vantage point for further scholarly inquiry.

The book's layout copies the traditional structure of edited volumes, with a theoretical introduction and nine case studies. The introduction is followed by two more theoretically oriented chapters. Claudia Kraft considers the potentials of the category of "East Central Europe" for historical analyses of the region and persuasively characterizes it as a great terrain for experimentation with postcolonial methods. Tomasz Zarycki explores the Polish mechanisms of Orientalization (or Eastness) and demonstrates how it helped legitimize and reproduce social, economic, and political inequalities inside and outside Poland. He claims that a typical feature of East Central European Orientalization is its "fractality," e. g., a tendency to "transfer one's Eastness" to more eastern neighbors.

In the second part, the authors seek to explore the ambivalent experience of ECE with colonialism. Róisín Healy, comparing the Polish and Irish relationships with colonialism, argues that there is no simple equation between exposure to colonial practices at home, participation in colonial projects abroad, and attitudes towards colonialism after independence. The origins of the differing attitudes towards colonialism can be traced back to the 1930s. She argues that Polish colonial fantasies which were kindled at that time were fueled in part by the sense of threat from Nazi Germany and USSR. The acquisition of colonies was supposed to compensate for this geopolitical fragility. Raul Cârstocea decided to take a biographical approach. He interprets Mircea Eliade's interwar fascination with India as an attempt to escape the ambiguity of Romania's position in ECE by adopting its status as "Europe's wholly Other." Agnieszka Sadecka further

elaborates on the Indian trajectory in her analysis of Polish travelogues on postcolonial India written during the socialist period. She comments on the paradoxical nature of this encounter, in which socialist and orientalist discourses overlap. Similarly to Healy, she also refers to the sense of insecurity as a fuel for degrading (colonial) attitudes towards non-Europeans. But in this story, it is the adoption of the socialist model of development by the peoples of India that is supposed to sanctify the Eastern European authority vis-à-vis the Western powers. The element of compensation is also central to Jagoda Wierzejska's study of the life of Andrzej Bobkowski in Guatemala. She interprets Bobkowski's mimicking of the role of white colonizer as a strategy to escape a traumatic memory of a subordinate status of Eastern Europe in the West.

The third section shifts the focus to colonial practices directed towards the peoples inside ECE. Kinga Siewior deciphers the Polish discourse of "Regained Territories," or the territories formerly belonging to Germany, which Poland gained after World War II in exchange for the so-called Eastern borderland taken by the USSR. As most of the new settlers came from the lost borderlands, Siewior demonstrates which strategies were adopted by the communist authorities to transfer the narrative of the "mythical cradle of Polishness" to the new landscape. Emilia Kledzik uses the postcolonial critique to analyze the depiction of Roma populations in the East Central European "necessary fictions" after World War II. By "necessary fiction," she refers to a genre specifically developed by the socialist authorities with the objective of educating non-Roma people about the Roma which, however, helped strengthen various anti-Roma stereotypes. Miriam Finkelstein offers the final discussion. Unlike the other contributors, Finkelstein analyses reciprocal representations of citizens of post-Soviet Russia and different East Central European states in the current migrant literature. She demonstrates the continual presence of colonial attitudes towards Eastern Europeans in the literary works of Russian migrant authors and, simultaneously, the efforts of East Central European authors to refute these Russian attempts to dominate the space.

As this brief outline makes clear, the research questions, analytical strategies, and individual authors' styles are so diverse that the chapters are better read as standalone texts only tenuously linked with the research aims discussed in the introductory chapter. I would welcome more texts dedicated to the present-day situation or, at least, more discussion of the connections between the historical, intellectual, and literary imageries and current political narratives. Similarly, the vantage point of analysis is dominantly Polish. Are the mentions of a few Czech

writers and a Romanian philosopher enough to make claims applicable to East Central Europe as a whole? The editors thus seem to fall into a common trap of edited volumes, e. g., how to glue together independent works by several authors from different disciplines who may or may not know one another's work. Given the claims for "more nuanced models" and "new patterns" in studies of East Central Europe, I also expected to see more theoretical experimentation of the postcolonial approach with world system theory, such as, for example, Zoltán Ginelli's discussion of the notion of transperiphery or the contribution by Andrzej W. Nowak. For these and other scholars, it is particularly the desire for advancement combined with a fear of regress to a lower, peripheral position that informs the notion of East Central Europe's in-betweenness. A more innovative combination of these approaches might provide a more nuanced reading of the element of fear or sense of threat which is mentioned by almost all the authors. The reason for this disregard may lie in the fact that most of the contributors come from the field of literary studies, and they are much more familiar with the postcolonial critiques of Homi Bhabha than they are with the work of Wallerstein.

Despite these weak points, any attempt by East European (or East Central European) scholars to enter the field of postcolonial studies, which is still dominated by Western (or Western-educated) scientists, is very welcome. Apart from a few exceptions, many studies on East Central Europe's postcolonialism have been published in the languages of the region and thus remain largely inaccessible (and overlooked) by the global academic community. As a historian from former Eastern Europe, I gladly noticed that most of the works cited in the lists of references were written by East Europeans (or East Central Europeans), which is not common. I see such publications as a way to contest what some scholars call "Anglo-American neo-colonialism in academia." Paraphrasing the famous essay by Gayatri Spivak, letting the subaltern speak is, after all, an unofficial motto of postcolonial studies. Moreover, perhaps inconsistent in their style and focus, the authors unanimously managed to counter the victim narratives that are widespread, not only in the Polish and Hungarian but also the Czech, Slovak, and other Eastern European national historiographies, by portraying plentiful variations of the double status of East Central Europe as colonizer and colonized. I read the volume as a window to further inquiry into the subject of ECE's in-betweenness, and I hope that a publication which would enrich the topic with the addition of Czech, Slovak, and Hungarian perspectives will follow in the near future. The publication will capture the interest of anyone

curious to know more about the history of East Central Europe and postcolonial studies, and it will be useful for historians, social and literary scientists, and students from neighboring fields.

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