

“Reflections on Colonialism and Anti-Colonialism in Ireland and Poland”

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Central Europe and Colonialism:

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In a memoir published in 1925, an Irishman recalled an encounter with a Polish priest while travelling across Poland nearly three decades before, in 1896. The priest, upon discovering that his companion was a foreigner and a Catholic, complained at length about the ill-treatment of the Poles by the Russians—the restrictions placed on the Polish language, on the Catholic faith, and plight of so many Polish exiles in Siberia. The priest concluded the conversation, however, by admitting that “one cannot but be proud to belong to such a great and mighty Empire.”(O’Dwyer 1925: 86) His listener, Michael O’Dwyer, was much amused by the combination of indignation at the Russians’ subjugation of the Poles and pride in the Russian empire. As an Irishman, he was also subject to foreign rule at home and part of a “great and might Empire”, but was consistent in his support for British rule across the globe. He dismissed both Irish and Indian grievances as “sentimental or fictitious” respectively (O’Dwyer 1925:86). O’Dwyer was exceptional, however, in his attachment to the British state—as the former lieutenant-governor of the Punjab, he had defended one of the most notorious British atrocities, the Amritsar Massacre. Most Irish people had more in common with the Polish priest, in having a complex relationship towards the empire that governed them.

This paper seeks to situate the central European experience of colonialism within a broader European framework. It draws upon a scepticism regarding the customary division of Europe into distinct historical regions, whether simply east and west or a tripartite division into western, central, and eastern Europe. The case of Ireland demonstrates many features that are often associated with central and eastern rather than western Europe. First, there was a high degree of linguistic and religious diversity. Ireland had a sizeable portion of speakers of Gaelic, a Celtic language distinct from English, well into the nineteenth century.¹ Three-quarters of the population was Catholic and the rest was comprised of several different Protestant denominations. The Jewish population was tiny—about 2,000 at the end of the nineteenth century. Second, the land-owning class remained economically dominant into the

twentieth century. While no Irish peasant endured serfdom, there were few peasant proprietors until a series of land acts from 1885 provided for the gradual break-up and sale of large estates. Third, Ireland's nationalist tradition was not produced by the state, but against the state. A local intelligentsia developed national consciousness among the population with the purpose of gaining autonomy or even independence from Britain.² Fourth, Ireland was subject to its own particular political arrangements and not governed as a normal part of a unitary state. Unlike Scotland and Wales, Ireland had its own civil service, led by a Lord Lieutenant, a minister of the British crown in Dublin. Jürgen Osterhammel has suggested that this makes Ireland a good point of comparison with eastern Europe, given the huge variety of political arrangements from centralised control to autonomy in operation across the Tsarist Empire (Osterhammel 2008: 24). Andrzej Chwalba has also pointed to the logic of comparing the Irish relationship to Great Britain to that of Poland to Russia (Chwalba 1991: 4). A similar argument could be made for the lands of the Habsburg Monarchy, especially from 1867, when power was devolved not just to Hungary, but also Croatia and Galicia, if to a much lesser degree.

If Ireland shares enough similarities with central and eastern Europe to merit comparison with them, the question of colonialism is a particularly obvious focus of attention. Historians of Ireland have grappled for over half a century with the validity of the concept for the relationship of Ireland to Britain in the centuries from the so-called second conquest of the seventeenth century through independence and partition in 1922 to the present status of Northern Ireland. Much of the original impetus to studies of colonialism within Europe, such as the special issue of *Ethnic and Racial Studies* in 1979, in fact came from the work of Michael Hechter on Ireland (Hechter 1975; Stone 1979). Scholars of central and eastern Europe are now taking an interest in Ireland as an intra-European example site of colonialism to bolster the case for a colonial reading of power relations in central Europe. This is evident in the many references to Ireland in the special issue of *Teksty Drugie* published in 2014, entitled Postcolonial or Postdependence Studies. Ewa Thompson, for instance, uses Hechter to dismiss claims that colonialism only operated in far-flung sites (Thompson 2014).

While the debate about colonialism in the central European context has concentrated on the postwar era of Soviet occupation, leading the American Slavist, Clare Cavanagh, to proclaim that decolonization came to eastern Europe only in 1989, I will concentrate here on the long nineteenth century, when the parallels between Ireland and the subject nations of central Europe are stronger (Cavanagh 2004). These parallels are particularly evident for

Poland and have been noted by many scholars specialising in Poland as well as Ireland. Most obviously, Ireland lost its domestic parliament in 1801 after the unsuccessful United Irishmen Rising, just a few years after Poland was fully dissolved into the surrounding three empires after the failure of Kosciuszko's Uprising (Davies 1979: 18). Irish nationalists also responded to their country's denigration in similar ways to the Poles, with a mixture of emigration, cultural regeneration, political negotiation and violence (Foster 1988; Zamoyski 1989). Detailed historical comparisons between Ireland and Poland have now been attempted for a range of themes, for instance the Catholic Church's support for political violence, the peripheral role of Ireland and Poland within the broader European economy, internal migration and emigration, the importance of language and religion in civil conflict in Silesia and Ulster immediately after World War I, paramilitary violence in Ireland and Russian Poland in the same period, and the experience of political prisoners (Healy 2011; Petruszewicz 2004; Belchem and Tenfelde 2003; Wilson 2010; Eichenberg 2010; Kenney 2012).

In the following I wish to address three aspects of the relationships of both Ireland and Poland to colonialism: first, the extent to which each can be considered objects of colonialism; second, the extent to which each are implicated in the operation of colonialism globally; third, the ways in which each challenged colonialism globally. I will argue that the relationships of Ireland and Poland to colonialism in the long nineteenth century were very similar, but that only Ireland identified itself immediately after independence as an anticolonial state.

Ireland and Poland as Objects of Colonialism

A strong case has been made for the colonial character of Ireland in the nineteenth century. The fact that the process of conquest two centuries before brought a sizeable number of English and Scots to take up land and positions in Ireland means that one can speak settlement, a criterion commonly found in definitions of colonialism. Literary scholars have highlighted the extent to which British official and popular discourse on Ireland from the time of conquest onwards denigrated the Irish as culturally inferior. The British satirical journal, *Punch*, was particularly guilty on this point, producing cartoons depicting Irish people as simians, but even more serious publications and national politicians caricatured the Irish as irresponsible and unfit for self-government (Foster 1993). Dennis O'Hearne has shown the differentiated economic treatment of Ireland. British trade legislation disadvantaged Irish manufactures, to the point that the thriving Irish cotton industry collapsed (O'Hearne 2005).

The catastrophic losses of the Great Famine of the 1840s provide further confirmation of colonial attitudes. While professional historians would not support the idea that the famine was a deliberate effort to clear the Irish countryside of small peasant farmers and thus genocide, it is clear that Britain failed to respond to the disaster as it might have, had it happened in England, Scotland or Wales. Despite the obvious decline in incomes in Ireland, the government tried to foist the financial burden for famine relief onto Irish taxpayers rather than drawing on central funds (Kinealy 2005; see also Ó Murchadha 2013). The fact that Ireland was denied Home Rule until 1914, when it was suspended due to the war, demonstrates the disregard that successive British governments had for the freely expressed wishes of the Irish electorate from the time of Daniel O’Connell in the 1830s and 1840s. The most well-known argument for Ireland’s colonial status is probably, however, that made by literary scholars on the basis of literature produced largely after 1922, when Ireland attained independence. David Lloyd suggests that Irish writing is marked by centuries of cultural conflict over language and identity. Homi Bhabha has endorsed this view: “The writing of Ireland exemplifies the crisis of representation. It is a literature of territorial division, Anglocentric appropriation, diasporic peoples and exilic authors, that stages the vivid, visceral struggle to belong, to return, to re-make a tradition.” (Lloyd 1993)³

While the status of Ireland as a colony has now been widely if not universally recognised, the same is far from true about partitioned Poland.⁴ Poland is rarely included in general studies of the colonial adventures of the partitioning powers. With the exception of the recent volume by Sebastian Conrad, for instance, histories of German colonialism do not consider the case of Poland, instead concentrating on territories in Africa and Asia, beginning in 1884 and usually ending in 1919 with the formal loss of the colonies or in 1945 to include the expansion of Germany under the Nazis (Conrad 2012; Gründer 1985; Speitkamp 2005; Baranowski 2011). The case for seeing Poland’s history as colonial is complicated by the different experiences of the various partitions and the wide variety of features associated with colonialism—political subordination, economic disadvantage, cultural denigration and settlement. If in the case of Ireland, the colonial model operates quite well across all four vectors, this is not so clear in the case of any of the Polish partitions. The argument for colonialism is probably at its weakest in the Russian partition, at least Congress Poland, later Vistula Land. This region was more prosperous than the Russian interior, had for a time some political representation unmatched in Russia proper, and saw minimal Russian settlement (Kieniewicz 2008). Sebastian Conrad has pointed out, however, that as far as the more industrially developed Germany was concerned, the Vistula Land operated as a colony, from

which it could draw essential migrant labour (Conrad 2012). The case for Galicia is somewhat stronger. While its political position within the Habsburg Monarchy, at least from around 1870, was strong relative to other regions, certainly when compared with Bosnia-Herzegovina, it was desperately poor. Galicia was also subjected to the notion of civilising mission from Vienna, as demonstrated by Larry Wolff (Wolff 2012). To my mind, the case for Prussian Poland is the strongest. As Kristin Kopp and Izabela Surynt have shown, they were subjected to “discursive colonization”, most notably in the work of Gustav Freytag, but also later in tropes that associated Poles with black Africans (Kopp 2012, especially 69-85; Surynt 2004; see also Orłowski 1996). In economic terms, the provinces of West Prussia and Poznań lagged behind other provinces and, where development took place, it was manipulated to favour the ethnic German community. This was evident in the ambitious land distribution programme inaugurated by the Resettlement Commission in 1886, but also in a state-led reforestation campaign in the Tuchel Heath in West Prussia (Nelson 2009; Edie and Kouschil 2002; Wilson 2008; Healy 2014).

The colonial model is not without its critics. Some historians have pointed to alternative frameworks for the Irish experience, centred on confessionalisation in the early modern period or world systems theory. Economic historians have questioned, for instance, the role of sovereignty in promoting economic development. Bogdan Murgescu’s comparison of the impact of self-government on various peripheral nations (Romania, Denmark, Serbia and Ireland) over five centuries cautions against assumptions of immediate improvement upon independence (Murgescu 2010). The work of Jacek Kochanowicz suggests that the partitioning powers did not hamper Poland’s economic growth but that Poland simply followed general European patterns of growth, before and after the partitions (Kochanowicz 2006). The objection in terms of Ireland is all too obvious: Irish sovereignty may have assisted the emergence of the Celtic Tiger but it did nothing to stop its demise. Moreover, the focus on ethnic difference at the heart of theories of colonialism may not be that helpful for certain contexts even into the nineteenth century. Klemens Kaps notes, for instance, the continued importance of class in the Polish setting: Polish nobles in Galicia considered their own peasants as outsiders, using terms similar to those used by overseas colonisers to describe indigenous peoples (Kaps 2012). Finally, critics of the colonial model have also pointed out the vast difference in the experience of European and overseas subjects of empire. It should be acknowledged that both the Irish and the Poles in the Prussian and Austrian partitions, at least, enjoyed parliamentary representation for much of the nineteenth century, whereas this was not true for the populations of India or SW Africa. Jens Boysen

notes that the educational opportunities and legal framework of the Prussian state allowed Poles to develop a national consciousness and improve their living standards, a possibility denied subject peoples in overseas colonies.(Boysen 2016: 163)

Ireland and Poland as Agents of Colonialism

The strongest challenge to the notion of Ireland as simply a British colony is the growing evidence of Irish engagement with the British Empire in Africa and Asia. Indeed this is probably the most active area of research on Ireland's relationship with colonialism. The current centenary of the First World War has drawn attention to the 200,000 Irishmen who volunteered to fight on behalf of Britain, compared with the mere 4,000 or so who rebelled against it in the Easter Rising of 1916. While Irishmen in the officer ranks were predominantly Protestants, this was not true for the rank and file. This *voluntary* military service formed part of a much longer tradition dating back to the admission of Catholics into the British army in the Napoleonic Wars and made an important contribution to the expansion and defence of the Empire. In addition, many Irish men and women entered the imperial civil service. My own university prepared many Irishmen, both Catholic and Protestant, for the Indian Civil Service exam, including Antony MacDonnell, a member of an Anglo-Irish family from north of Galway, who served as Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal in the 1890s (Crosbie 2011; O'Leary 2011; Brillman 2009). While some Irish administrators, including MacDonnell, were relatively benign—his effective management of famines in the region is thought to have saved many lives—others were not, as the example of Michael O'Dwyer shows (see also Howell and Lambert 2006). Added to these are the numerous Irish missionaries who did so much to promote Christianity within the Empire (Rafferty 2011).

It is becoming increasingly clear that Poles were also complicit in the European colonial project. There is much to suggest that most Poles shared the general European belief in the superiority of European culture. One need only to look at the exoticising comments of Polish legionaries in Haiti in the first decade of the nineteenth century and or the depictions of non-Europeans in Polish novels and museums in the last decades (Pachonski and Wilson 1986). Or indeed, one might look at Polish attitudes towards the *kresy* and its Ukrainian population, whether the advantage taken of Ruthenians by Polish leaders in Galicia or the contempt for Ukrainian aspirations to statehood evident in the expansive borders Roman Dmowski sought for a future Polish state (Beauvois 2005). Maria Rhode has uncovered the commitment of Polish ethnographers, Stefan Rogoziński and Benedikt Dybowski, to the

colonial project through an analysis of their activities in Cameroon and Siberia respectively. Remarkably, Rogoziński sought to establish a Polish colony in Cameroon to make up for the lack of a Polish state. Dybowski, part of the Polish exile community in Siberia, played an important role in supporting repression against non-Christian communities, by condemning them as uncivilised and capable only of trading (Rhode 2013).

Poles were also involved in the operation of colonial relationships within the empires to which they belonged. In addition to political exiles like Dybowski, Russia hosted a coterie of Polish nobles such as Adam Jerzy Czartoryski, who, as Daniel Beauvois has shown, were willing to collaborate with the state during the partitions. These were directly or indirectly associated with the massive colonial project of the empire. (Etkind 2011; on Russian indifference to ethnic background, see Lieven 2000). 10% of the Russian officer corps was made up of Poles, whereas Irish Catholics barely penetrated the officer corps of the British army, so strong was prejudice against them (Rhode 2013: 8). This changed considerably, however, in the wake of the November and January Uprisings, after which Poles were regarded with deep suspicion. If we agree with Clemens Ruthner that Bosnia-Herzegovina was the Habsburgs' European colony, then the 10,000 Poles who settled it on behalf of the Empire at the turn of the twentieth century must be seen in some respects as colonisers (Ruthner 2014 and Bandić and Drlijača 1985). The Prussians, unlike the Austrians, saw the Poles as their most unreliable minority and did not call upon them specifically to run or defend the colonies Germany acquired from the 1880s. Yet it would be interesting to know if even some of the low-level servants of empire, for instance, soldiers in the armies that suppressed revolts in the colonies included some ethnic Poles, perhaps those resident outside the eastern provinces in the Ruhr region.

Ireland and Poland as Critics of Global Colonialism

Irish nationalists condemned colonialism outside Ireland as well as inside it. They identified strongly with the Poles and the Hungarians as fellow-victims of colonial-type policies within Europe. They also looked further afield at Britain's overseas territories and expressed sympathy for other subjects of the British Empire. The founding father of postcolonial studies, Edward Said acknowledged his debt to Ireland, alongside South Africa and India, in generating a body of cultural work in opposition to imperialism.⁵ Examinations of popular nationalist publications demonstrate a repeated repudiation of the principles underlying colonialism, which embraced a wide range of subjects within the British Empire, such as the

Indians and the Afghans and even occasionally the Zulus. Mindful of British claims that the Irish were unfit for Home Rule, the moderate newspaper, the *Nation*, challenged contemporary racist assumptions in insisting that Indians were capable of self-government (Townend 2007; Ryder; 2006; Regan 2008). Roger Casement, condemned the exploitation of indigenous peoples in the Belgian Congo and the Amazon Basin, before coming to the conclusion that his own compatriots in Ireland were also victims of colonialism (Mitchell 2003). Irishwoman Annie Besant was a leading campaigner for Indian autonomy from the British (Mahajan 2016).

That is not to say that Irish nationalists were free of racism or that they were equally supportive of all subject nations—even among central Europeans, they privileged historic nations over ones that were perhaps greater victims of colonialism, such as the Bosnians and Ukrainians. There were also limits to their sympathies for non-European peoples. Irish nationalists were hugely enthusiastic about the Boers' struggle against the British in the Anglo-Boer Wars, but overlooked their heroes' treatment of the indigenous black population. (Howe 2002). What is clear, however, is that Irish nationalists saw *themselves* as anti-colonial. When the revolutionary leader and later prime minister and president, Eamon De Valera, visited the Chippewa Indian Reservation in Wisconsin as part of a fundraising tour of America in 1919, he proclaimed his anti-colonial credentials. "Though I am white I am not of the English race. We, like you, are a people who have suffered and I feel for you with a sympathy that comes only from one who can understand as we Irishmen can. You say you are not free. Neither are we free and I sympathise with you because we are making a similar fight." (History Hub) This image of Ireland encouraged an official repudiation of colonialism after independence. For instance, in a letter from one diplomat to the Secretary of the Department of External Affairs in 1935, "The Irish nation has no imperialist ambitions. Though a mother country we covet no colonies and have no dominions. Our sole claim is that the ancestral home of our people, unmistakably delimited by the Ocean, should belong to us."⁶ Indeed the Department saw Ireland's history as a colony as allowing it to play the role of a bridge between Europe and Africa. The exercise was not entirely disinterested. Irish diplomats used support for decolonisation as a means of asserting their own national identity in the crowded global space of institutions like the United Nations. Nor was it incompatible with continued involvement in the promotion of cultural colonialism. It has been argued that while Ireland eschewed a political empire, it achieved a spiritual one through the huge scale of its missionary efforts after independence (O'Sullivan 2012).

Poles can naturally look to Joseph Conrad as an outstanding critic of colonialism and the links between his early life as a Russian subject and his subsequent views have been well documented (Etkind 2011: 214-30; McClure 1981: 92). His impact should not obscure other instances of Polish anti-colonialism, however. If we agree that the Habsburgs were engaged in colonial rule in at least some of their territories, then one might take the voluntary military activities by individual Poles on behalf of Hungarians and Italians from the 1840s to 1860s as anti-colonialism in action (Feichtinger, Prutsch and Csáky 2003; Zamoyski 2001). Poles also contributed to the international anti-colonial organisations which emerged in the early twentieth century. Poles were members, for instance, of the Subject Races International Committee, formed at the International Conference at the Hague in 1907, in order to promote “the principle of nationality, to claim for each nation the management of its own internal affairs, to protect subject races from oppression and exploitation”. The British Pole, Wladyslaw Lach-Szryma spoke, on their behalf at the 1910 meeting in London. Alongside Poles and Irish, the committee included the Anti-Slavery Society, the Aborigines' Protection Society, the Egyptian Committee and the Anti-Imperialist League (Nationalities 1911; Sluga 2013, 16-18). Polish immigrants in the US were also very supportive of the efforts of Cubans to free themselves from Spanish rule. In 1897, the Polish National Alliance endorsed the struggle, comparing the Cubans to “the Polish heroes of yore” who had sacrificed so much in the national cause (Jacobsen 1993: 4-5). Yet Poland did not make a virtue of its anti-colonialism after independence and conducted policies in the *kresy* that bore some marks of colonialism (Fiut 2003; Bakula 2006 and 2009; Mick 2014).

Conclusion

Poland bears some, if not all, of the features that have contributed to the widespread scholarly view that Ireland was an object of colonialism in the nineteenth century. If not exposed to the level of racism and violence as the populations of overseas colonies, Polish and Irish subjects of empire nonetheless suffered because of the attitudes and policies adopted by elites in London, Berlin, Vienna and Moscow towards them, most obviously when compared to the dominant ethnic group in these metropolises. Despite this colonial status, Ireland and Poland served as sources of direct and indirect agents of colonialism in other regions of empire. Direct Irish participation in British colonialism was extensive, in the form of voluntary military and administrative service. Overall, direct Polish participation in European colonialism, whether inside Europe, in Austria's colony of Bosnia-Herzegovina, or in the

outer reaches of the Russian Empire or perhaps even in Germany's African territories, appears to have been more modest. Assuming further research bears out the lesser involvement of Poles than Irish people in colonialism, it becomes particularly ironic that the revolutionary generation that took power in Ireland in 1922 identified so closely with anti-colonialism and made it part of the founding narrative of the state.

There are several possible reasons for this self-identification. It is possible that Irish anti-colonialism was in fact stronger than Polish anti-colonialism in the nineteenth century. The spread of the English language to the elites of Britain's colonies allowed for easier interaction or at least a greater flow of information about conditions elsewhere. The extensive contact with compatriots who served the empire may also have increased awareness of faraway places like India. Irish nationalists also faced an uphill battle in winning international support for their cause because of doubts about their status as a nation. The decline of the native language and the emphasis on religious issues had undermined their credibility in the eyes of leaders of the European nationalist movement, such as Mazzini. Poland, on the other hand, was the object of considerable sympathy outside the partitioning powers.

It is also important to acknowledge the specific circumstances after World War I. Ireland was a much smaller country than Poland with little strategic significance and needed to assert its relevance on an international stage more. Another factor may have been the greater level of ethnic and religious homogeneity in independent Ireland. The Irish government could plausibly argue that it was a bastion of anti-colonialism because, once southern Protestants had left in their droves, it had no object over which to exercise colonial rule. Poland could not make this claim as easily, given the presence and indeed the obvious dissatisfaction of many minorities, such as Jews and Ukrainians. Polish sovereignty turned out to be short-lived, however, and from 1939 Poland once again became a victim of colonialism of different kinds.

The anti-colonial identification of the Irish state ultimately had little impact on the peoples of Europe's overseas colonies. While Britain received thousands of immigrants from its former colonies in the decades after World War II, the anti-colonial rhetoric of the Irish state disguised the complicity of previous generations of Irish people in the British colonial project and allowed it to avoid responsibility for the impoverishment it caused. Only in the twenty-first century did Ireland receive large numbers of immigrants. Ironically, the greatest number came not from former overseas colonies but from Poland.

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¹ Estimates vary widely, but it is likely that around 40% of Ireland's inhabitants spoke Gaelic as their first language up until the famine of the late 1840s.

² On the historiographical division of Europe on the basis of state-based versus intelligentsia-led nationalism, see Paul Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine*, 352-54.

³ Homi Bhabha, review of *Anomalous States*.

⁴ See for instance the special issue of *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies* devoted to Ireland, *Ireland, Postcoloniality, and Contemporary Irish Literature* (Spring 2001) and indeed inclusion of Irish texts in anthologies and handbooks of colonialism, e.g. Douglas Hyde, "On the Necessity of De-Anglicizing Ireland" in Michael Brillman, ed. *Colonial Voices*.

⁵ From an interview with Edward W. Said conducted by Kevin Whelan and Andy Pollak in Dublin, 24 June 1999. For a full transcript of the interview see Eóin Flannery, ed. (2007) *Postcolonial Text – Special Irish Issue*, 3.3.

⁶ Letter from Frederick H. Boland to Joseph P. Walshe (Dublin), enclosing Eamon de Valera's speech to the sixteenth Assembly of the League of Nations, 16 September 1935. DIFP Vol. IV, No. 279 NAI DFA 26/94; <http://www.difp.ie/docs/1935/Speech-by-de-Valera-at-League/1648.htm>