

East and Center as States of Mind: Psychological Colonization in the Work of Ziemowit Szczerek

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In his most recent book, Przemysław Czapliński offers the following definition of “the East”, which he uses to describe Poland’s “post-Soviet” and “post-communist” neighbor:

“The word ‘East’ appears in the table of contents, although this descriptor will apply only to Russia – not Ukraine, Belarus, Romania, or Moldova, for Russia epitomizes and most violently redefines the meaning assigned to the East. Moreover, on literary maps devoted to Poland and Russia, Ukraine and Belarus tend to appear as mere transit zones.”¹

¹ P. Czapliński, *Poruszona mapa: wyobrażenia geograficzno-kulturowa polskiej literatury przełomu XX i XXI wieku*, Kraków 2016, p. 11.

This claim may read as a nonchalant generalization, and I would imagine that Belarussian and Ukrainian scholars and journalists might be taken aback by the statement. Polish journalism and fiction about Belarus and the Baltic nations are certainly a rarity, but the recent interest in Ukraine calls for some attention.² Naturally, this heightened interest is bound up with the situation in Ukraine since the Euromaidan revolution, although Ziemowit Szczerek's work is an exception to this trend, as it focuses on an earlier incarnation of Ukraine. In Szczerek's novel *Mordor is Coming to Eat Us* (*Przyjdzie Mordor i nas zje*),³ Szczerek treats Poland's Eastern neighbor as something much more than a "transit zone" or waystation *en route* to Russia.

Many have described Ukraine as Szczerek's *idée fixe*, although his treatment of Ukrainian/Eastern themes and issues is in reality more complex. Szczerek is not interested in Ukraine as an entity in itself. He is interested in Ukraine as a network of relationships (academics and sociologists of literature jump at this approach) between Ukrainian and Polish society, between neighbors, with stereotypes and symbols of all kinds operating within social space. The novel *Mordor...* was controversial for its form (its colloquial and intensely vulgar language) and

² I am referring mainly to reportage that has been published by Czarne: Z. Parafianowicz, M. Potocki, *Wilki żyją poza prawem. Jak Janukowycz przegrał Ukrainę*, Wołowiec 2015; and by these same authors, *Kryształowy fortepian. Zdrady i zwycięstwa Petra Poroszenki*, Wołowiec 2016; K. Kwiatkowska-Moskalewicz, *Zabić smoka. Ukraińskie rewolucje*, Wołowiec 2016; and finally, P. Pogorzelski, *Ukraina. Niezwykli ludzie w niezwykłych czasach*, Gliwice 2015.

³ Z. Szczerek, *Przyjdzie Mordor i nas zje, czyli Tajna Historia Słowian*, Krakow 2013. All subsequent passages from this book will be marked with MC (for Mordor's Coming) and the corresponding page number. Translations are provided by the translator of this article unless otherwise noted.

content: Szczerek portrays Poles traveling to Ukraine as psychological colonists on a mission of heritage and leisure tourism. Their intentions are to exert their superiority over post-Soviet space, thereby curing their own national complexes, while simultaneously nursing their resentments toward the “Kresy” [Eastern Borderlands] region. The novel reveals that the prewar or even pre-partition distinction between “cham” (peasant) and “landowner” is still alive and well in contemporary Polish social consciousness.⁴

You come here because in other countries they laugh at you. And they think of you the same way as you think about us: as a backward shit-hole you can sneer at. And feel superior towards. [...] Because everyone thinks you're impoverished, Eastern trash. [...] Everyone thinks you're just a slightly different version of Russia. The third world. It's only here [in Ukraine] that you can be patronizing. Here, you make up for the fact that everywhere else they wipe their asses with you. (MC 37).⁵

Aside from Ukraine, Szczerek is also interested in notions of Central Europe and defining what it means to be Slavic. These questions are a frequent subject of conversation for

⁴ This is also a product of the neglect of “class consciousness” and ignorance of social history in Poland. For centuries, Polish peasants in the Kresy region were just as oppressed by their Polish masters as Russians and Ukrainians were, even in the interwar period (which unfortunately continues to be mythologized in common discourse). Andrzej Leder has discussed this in his research. See: A. Leder, *Prześlona rewolucja: ćwiczenie z logiki historycznej*, Warsaw 2014, pp. 34–35, 41, 55.

⁵ From an excerpt of *Mordor's Coming...* translated by Scotia Gilroy and published in *Asymptote Journal*, <https://www.asymptotejournal.com/nonfiction/ziemowit-szczerek-mordors-coming-to-eat-us-a-secret-history-of-the-slavs/> (March 18 2018).

the protagonists of his journalism and prose. Yet his approach differs severely from that of Milan Kundera. Szczerek's narrator is not interested in the "warm blobs" of Slovakia and Hungary – no, he is fascinated with the "omnipotence" of Ukraine and Central Europe's Eastern frontier (MC 46). The relationship between Central Europe and the Kresy region is deeply rooted in the Polish literary and intellectual tradition, as Czapliński has already pointed out.⁶ Szczerek's idea of Central Europe (to the extent that it can be clearly defined) shares some common attributes with the idea conveyed in Andrzej Stasiuk's writings: Central Europe is a rustic, peripheral space that is radically distinct from the West.

Mordor... fills a gap in the Polish discourse on the essence of Central Europe and Slavic culture. Whereas the conceptions outlined above have taken on a positive light in scholarship and prose⁷ (as in the work of Maria Janion)⁸, and critique has been limited to the argument that Central Europe and Slavdom do not exist (or that these, too, are fabricated categories), some of Szczerek's heroes push this critique to an extreme. They suggest that, while the phenomena described above do exist, they are undesirable, and Central Europe and the East are therefore tantamount to Mordor or, at best, a European "purgatory". Slavic lands are "fossil deposits" – an open-air ethnographic museum that "got fucked by the

⁶ "It is plain to see that Kundera's description more or less perfectly carries over into the Polish phantasmatic geography of the Kresy region [...]. In Polish literature of the 1990s, one can discern a process of cartographic translation that displaces the characteristics of the Kresy onto Central Europe. Yet the scale of this transposition was not 1:1; for the goal of this imaginative operation was to expand the scope of Polish culture's roots without sacrificing the imaginary of the Kresy." P. Czapliński, *Poruszona mapa...*, p. 244.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 245-248.

⁸ M. Janion, *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna. Fantazmaty literatury*, Krakow 2007.

competition” (MC 81). The “Slavic reciprocity” that emerges over the course of Szczerek’s text is a harmful, utopian chimera. The very title of the novel points to a significant trope: the history of the Slavs is secret because of its inconvenient details; it is rife with mutual injustices, colonization and carnage, and covered-up crimes.

In *Mordor* as well as in *Tattoo with a Trident* (*Tatuaż z tryzubem*), Szczerek delves into his reflections on self-colonization and the historical narratives circulating among Poles and Ukrainians (and more generally, among the nations of Central Europe).⁹ The complexes exhibited by the societies of “younger Europe”¹⁰ often resulted from a fear of immaturity over against the West: an immaturity tied to a lack of historically legitimizing contact with the Roman Empire and an affiliation with a group of nations that developed some centuries after the national bodies composing Western Europe. All of this has contributed to the remarkable popularity of “imperial” ideals and the sanctioning of national resentments and pretensions directed at neighboring nations and fellow citizens. Szczerek’s approach foregrounds the distortions that were crucial

⁹ As Alexander Kiossev has written: “The belief encapsulated by this metaphor, namely, that these cultures have [...] ‘conquered themselves’ by imposing external values upon themselves, is a logical paradox. For it suggests that there was once a hypothetical historical era when the existence of these cultures was firm and not subject to this self-alienation or injury. And it suggests that these cultures – as a collective subject that had long maintained its own identity and free will – colonized themselves, gave up on their own value system, and helped themselves to the trauma of adopting outside ideologies, which condemned them to an impossible nostalgia for entities that never existed in the first place.” A. Kiossev, *Uwagi o samo-kolonizujących się kulturach*, trans. E. Solak, “Dekada Literacka”, <http://www.dekadaliteracka.com.pl/?id=3463> (31.12.2016).

¹⁰ This idea was introduced into Polish historiography by Jerzy Kłoczowski. J. Kłoczowski, *Młodsza Europa. Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia w kręgu cywilizacji chrześcijańskiej średniowiecza*, Warsaw 1998.

to Kundera's Central European project; according to the Czech writer and his followers, Central Europe is a space marked by eternal tolerance and high culture that is primarily linked to the Austro-Hungarian legacy. It is a pacifist realm unmarred by chauvinism in all its forms.¹¹ However, the reality may not square with this vision: as early as the 1940s, the Hungarian political scientist and historian István Bibó stated that the nations of East and Central Europe were a breeding ground for nationalist sentiments and were perhaps "the most inflammatory place on earth."¹² After all, we are not always aware of the anachronistic nature of applying the term "multiculturalism" to the region in question. The multicultural melting pot of Central Europe revealed itself to be a ticking time bomb; it proved to have little in common with contemporary definitions and conceptions, for it operated first under early modern and then later under modern conditions (sustainable modernism).¹³ It did not function as a convergence or social symbiosis, but as tolerance between autonomous groups often locked in a prescribed hierarchy and subject to various contingencies, stark inequalities, and mutual distrust. We might even make the argument that, during World War II, the cultural melting pot of Central Europe boiled over; the mass deportations and persecutions of peoples (inspired by the communists, but also initiated as

¹¹ P. Czapliński, *Poruszona mapa...*, pp. 246, 256–257.

¹² I. Bibó, *Nędza małych państw wschodnioeuropejskich*, [in:] idem, *Eseje polityczne*, trans. J. Snopek, Kraków 2012, p. 94.

¹³ A. Leder, *Prześlona rewolucja...*, p. 53.

early as 1940 by the Beneš' decrees in Czechoslovakia)¹⁴ merely catalyzed a process already in motion.

In one sense, the Central European fantasy of being a “power block” and its dream of “sovereignty” (often manifested as a lack of sensible, pragmatic ideas for managing foreign policy) face the task of consolidating the nation around a specific symbolic conception of a tradition of nationhood extending “through the ages.” At the same time, these ambitions also result in an unconscious resistance to the colonial notions of the West and East vis-à-vis Central Europe (such as the German-Prussian vision of a Mitteleuropa that must be “tamed”). Such resentment and imperial impulses have a storied tradition in Central Europe. The most well-known revisionist ideas are the plans for Greater Romania (România Mare), Greater Hungary, and the Intermarium (i.e. “Poland from sea to sea”). In their programs of historical politics, many countries of Central and Eastern Europe invoke the legacy of Rome (as in Romania, through the “Latinization” of the language and the emphasis on their historical connection with Roman Dacia) or antiquity more generally (as is the case with “Hellenic” aesthetics in Macedonia, the descent from the Huns in Hungary, and the emphasis on the Sarmatian legacy or Lechitic Empire in Poland, and so on, and so forth). The longing shared by the nations of Central Europe for an imagined (pseudohistorical, “eternal”) imperialism becomes a compensatory response to injuries they have suffered, the partitions, and territorial plundering.

¹⁴ See: J. Kuklík, *Mýty a realita tzv. “Benešových dekretu”*: *Dekrety prezidenta republiky 1940–1945*, Prague 2002.

Central Europeans seem to “deny” their fantasies about conquering and even doing violence to their neighbors, despite the fact that they themselves have been on the receiving end of these actions for centuries.

In the books cited above, Szczerek draws attention to the tendency among Poles and Ukrainians to spawn fictional narratives testifying to the “primacy” of their ethnicities or national identities. These fictions – if we follow the logical antipathy pointed out by Kiossev – affirm that the Slavic nations and their inhabitants belong to a history much older than accepted historiography suggests, and that they have been subjected to various outside influences (Christianity, Western civilization) that have distorted their “true” identity. But historians and politicians presumably conspire to silence these “facts”. Self-colonization is not the only process unfolding here, for we might also speak of “prior imperialism:” the main function of these fictions is to stir up feelings of national pride (once, long, long ago, we were powerful) and conjure the sense that certain nations are “timeless” (such is the case with the Sarmatian speculations that Adam and Eve were Polish).¹⁵ In today’s Poland, these theories are not without their supporters (take, for instance, the reception of Janusz Bieszk’s pseudoacademic writing).¹⁶ In his novel *Siódemka*, Szczerek comically references such theories through the character of Prince Bajaj, who regales the

¹⁵ For more on Sarmatian ideology, see: J. Sowa, *Fantomowe ciało króla. Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą*, Krakow 2011, pp. 259–283.

¹⁶ See: J. Bieszk, *Słowiańscy królowie Lechii: Polska starożytna*, Warsaw 2015. Bieszk traces the Slavs directly back to the Aryans, claiming that Slavs, as an ethnic group, have a history over 10 thousand years old. Problematically, Bieszk’s argument reeks of Nazi rhetoric.

narrator with a tale of the ancient “Great Lechia” and asserts the necessity of constructing national myths. In the novels *Mordor...* and *Tattoo...*, Ukrainians are not impervious to this problem, for while they can base their history on interactions with the “Roman” world (Byzantium), this foundation is insufficient for many. In *Mordor*, we encounter the character Taras – a Ukrainian of Polish descent who is a clear-cut case of the self-colonizing mentality. Taras claims that “Ukrainians had it best under the Austrians, that’s a fact. That is, under the Germans. There’s no need to go crying and tearing up banners. [...] It is how it is, and now we just have to learn whatever lessons we can.” (MC 69). After the moment has passed, Taras makes the following confession:

I feel a little bad for you. You Poles [...]. You have no choice but to mourn in the depths of your Polish souls that the Germans never properly Germanized you. If they had, then today you could have been happy “Germans.” Then maybe it would never have even occurred to you to resent them. What for? But that’s not how it is, and you go on wrestling with your Polishness. (MC 75).

And from the West? There’s no escaping from the West. After all, they’re what created us [...]. The civilization that goes by ‘Central Europe’ is really just the periphery of German civilization. You were onto something, Łukasz. Everything originates in Germany. And that’s Central Europe’s claim to fame [...]. Because here, on site, what was invented? Well, not too much. (MC 80)

The next interesting take conveyed to the narrator comes from a cabbie called Yuri. He recites a tale that is a variation on the theme of nineteenth-century Pan-Slavism: Ukraine assumes Russia's dominant role and is then meant to unite the neighboring nations and finally win back those "eternally Slavic" cities: Berlin, Hamburg, Dresden. As he pontificates, Yuri also announces that the territory of today's Ukraine is in fact the primordial fatherland of Indo-European civilization. (MC 210-211).

Szczerek's novel *Tattoo with a Trident* mentions a pseudo-historian by the name of Semeniuk, who is effectively Bieszk's Ukrainian counterpart. A proponent of Semeniuk's theory tells the narrator that "we got Hamburg. Yes, sir. We conquered Rome. That's right. The guy in charge of ancient Rome was Ukrainian."¹⁷

Well, it's like Semeniuk says. For some reason, historians simply pass over Ukraine's glory days. Those days when Ukraine ruled everything from Hungary to Romania to the Czech Republic, Austria, Slovakia, Poland [...]. In a way, Semeniuk's onto something. I mean, why not. There's no such thing as objective history. There are only historical narratives. Poles trace their origins back to Polans, although if they felt like it, they could just as well have chosen the Vandal tribe that inhabited the banks of the Vistula river before the Slavs arrived. I mean, after all, the Slavs didn't kick them out,

¹⁷ Z. Szczerek, *Tataż z tryzubem*, Wołowiec 2015, p. 86. Moving forward, I will designate all citations from this novel with TT and the corresponding page number.

they just mixed with them, imposed their language on them, and took from them. (TT 87-88)

Szczerek portrays Slavic Central Europeans as individuals incapable of reconciling themselves to history (or even historiography or geography) or the cultural legacy of the land they inhabit. Their “power fantasies” break down into two categories. The first seeks to restore a “golden age” (an essentially fabricated period in the history of a given nation/ethnicity), complete with total sovereignty and the cultivation of an independent identity (which would necessarily entail breaking off relations with neighboring nations or conquering nearby territory). The second category runs counter to the first; it expresses a longing to become a fully-fledged member of another societal system (usually a Western one). Taras represents this second category, for he is ashamed of his Slavicness and identifies all things Slavic with barbaric and anti-Western values. Taras condemns his countrymen in Eastern Ukraine because, according to him, they have been Slavicized/Russified to excess. These two positions can be summarized as follows: we are such an old people that a) we belonged among the ancient civilizations, or b) we fought with the ancient civilizations (as in the Sarmatian myth of the Poles’ battle with Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great). It is curious that this mindset has imposed polarized views on contemporary Central European social groups: we have historically been and remain part of the West (the leftist, liberal view); or, on the contrary, we do not want to fully accept Western val-

ues and must therefore resist them (on the right). Szczerek claims there is no such thing as objective history, but a few paragraphs later, he writes that “the facts remain the facts.”¹⁸ Whether this is a chance inconsistency or whether he is demonstrating the capriciousness of the Central European mentality remains to be seen. As Szczerek himself has written, he distances himself from the history of colonialism and postcolonial theory (at least in the context of East and Central Europe). One might even say he treats colonialism as a kind of historical necessity (to use the language of vulgar Marxism).

The weaker ethnicities are absorbed into the stronger ones, one into the other, the Moravians slowly blend into the Czechs, the Provençals into the French. [...] But somehow, I was never too convinced of this colonialism. It's hard to buy into the idea of a nefarious campaign conducted in the shadows of a comatose, indifferent world. Ukraine absorbs the Transcarpathian Ruthenians, Russia absorbs Ukraine. So it goes. It's a process. If you ask me, the 'colonized' people don't even seem to have minded. (TT 161-162)

We should not take these words too seriously. Self-irony and parody are central to Szczerek's prose and reportage, as is the paradigm of the Good Soldier Švejk. Central European history has no shortage of evidence

¹⁸ “Poles, Ukrainians, Slovaks, Bulgarians, Macedonians, Hungarians, Germans, Romanians, the devil himself – all of them can choose the narrative that suits them. All of them can embellish the facts with whatever colors they please. But it is non-negotiable – the facts remain the facts. (TT 90).

demonstrating that the colonized did, in fact, “mind” this situation, even when a peaceful harmony seemed to prevail. The union between Poland and Lithuania beginning in 1569 by no means played out without resistance from the latter, and the colonization of Ruthenia’s territory has been a centuries-long process whose ramifications continue to be palpable in Polish-Ukrainian relations today. What Leder calls the Sarmatian “culture of disdain”¹⁹ remains alive and well in present-day Polish socio-political discourse.

The Slavdom envisioned in Szczerek’s prose is, for the most part, an aggregate of embarrassing clichés: the indispensable element of the Eastern sensibility is the “Babushka”; when Poles meet up with the “Ruskis” they have no choice but to binge drink; Poles set off to Ukraine in search of a “Ruthenian” or “Eastern” essence (this is Orientalism proper, for the Eastern fringe of Central Europe is treated as something exotic – strange, but fascinating). In this way, Szczerek implements his own postcolonial deconstruction of the very concept of “Slavdom” and of Polish-Ukrainian relations since 1989/1991 – even shallow attempts to treat Ukrainians as (little) brothers seem protective and condescending. Allegations of being “Eastern” or “barbaric” are tossed back and forth like a game of hot potato: Germans find the Czechs exotic, the Czechs find Poles exotic, Poles find Ukrainians exotic, and so on, ad infinitum.

¹⁹ A. Leder, *Prześlona rewolucja...*, p. 99.

The authors associated with the publishing house Ha!art and the journal “New Eastern Europe” (Nowa Europa Wschodnia) – among them, Szczerek, Kaja Puto,²⁰ and Adam Balcer – seem to invert Kundera’s approach: Central Europe always belonged to the East, and the West must now hijack it once and for all. This is a symptomatic shift in the vision of Central Europe as construed in literature and criticism: nostalgia for the Habsburg Monarchy or Galicia has been eliminated. This move has made room for radical critics of the idea of Central Europe who argue that this region was always a non-functioning chimera, and that we do not want to get along with our own neighbors or even with ourselves (Czapliński makes a similar argument in *Poruszona mapa*).²¹

Csaba G. Kiss uses concepts like “community of memory” and “impractical definition” to describe Central Europe.²² This is yet another example of the distorted and paradoxical nature of research on this region. It is important to remember that this “community” cannot be linked with “memory” in the singular: its memories are plural, consisting of the many narratives of Central European historians and firsthand historical witnesses that appear to describe the same experience (the Holocaust, the Nazi occupation,

²⁰ I am thinking, in particular, of Puto’s controversial column. K. Puto, *Ratunek dla Unii? Wywalić Europę Środkową na zbity pysk*, *Dziennik Opinii*, 10.09.2015, <http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/artykuly/opinie/20150910/puto-wywalic-europe-srodkowa-na-zbity-pysk> (27.10.2016).

²¹ See, in particular, the chapter: Południe, czyli krajobraz osobności, [in:] P. Czapliński, *Poruszona mapa...*, pp. 237–320. The very idea of the “center” is not a geographical subject, so Czapliński could not allot it its own chapter in his book.

²² C.G. Kiss, *Europa Środkowa jako wspólnota pamięci (kilka przyczynków do definicji niewykonalnej)*, “Porównania” 9/2011, pp. 109–114.

the Soviet occupation, repressions of the communist regime, dissident movements, the regime changes of 1989-1991). The countries of Central Europe are distinct from Western Europe, but they have their own internal differences as well, and these on many different layers: value systems, political traditions, the processes of cultural production, and the experience of modernity.²³

Paradoxically, however, Szczerek's texts seem to imply a certain commonality among the Slavic and Central European nations. This is not the experience of totalitarianism, as many have already suggested. Rather, these countries are linked by a history of reciprocal colonization and violence, shared traumas, a penchant for generating myths and pseudo-historical narratives sanctioning the tradition of resentment and revenge so prevalent in the region. To finally process these traumas and reevaluate historical politics would be Central Europe's "true lesson."²⁴ Unfortunately, the dissolution of the colonial paradigm in our historical narratives does not appear to be something we can count on any time soon. A rhetoric that prioritizes national sovereignty, chauvinism, and the severing of international relations has now become a global trend. As Jan Sowa recently noted:

²³ Mateusz Chmurski's article offers an interesting and incisive perspective on different receptions of modernism among the nations of Central Europe (M. Chmurski, *Modernizm(y) Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej. Rekonesans*, "Przegląd Filozoficzno-Literacki" 45/2013, pp. 395–419).

²⁴ This is an allusion to Csaba G. Kiss' book *A Lesson in Central Europe (Lekcja Europy Środkowej. Eseje i szkice)* (Kraków 2009). In this book, Kiss advocates Kundera's approach: he idealizes Central Europe as an idea, for he limits his attention to its intellectual and artistic heritage.

[...] [W]e are dealing with the desublimation of materialist issues of class in the register of a symbolically defined dispute that is articulated as recalcitrance toward foreigners and pride in one's own homeland (in Poland 'we are rising from our knees,' in Great Britain there is the espousal of 'British values,' and in the United States there is Donald Trump's rallying cry to 'make America great again'). This pride – to speak in schizoanalytical terms – becomes a means of reterritorialization. It is nothing but a defense mechanism against fear and a lack of confidence provoked by the sheer relentlessness of global capitalism.²⁵

Translated by Eliza Cushman Rose

²⁵ J. Sowa, *Ostatnia dekada: populizm i populofobia*, Dwutygodnik, <http://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/6786-ostatnia-dekada-populizm-i-populofobia.html> (31.10.2016).