Chapter 6

Territorial Contexts of the Polish Reflection of Russia[*]

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1. Introduction: The Nature of Polish-Russian Relations

Polish-Russian relations have often been perceived as an interdependence of two arch-enemies (Drawicz 1995: 37) and a very brief outline of historical 'wrestling-and-encountering' (to quote František Palacký on Czech-German relations) of Poles and Russians seems to affirm this belief. However, a more detailed and deeper analysis of the history of Polish-Russian relations leads to a different conclusion. During the decades of partition, Russia had under its control most of the territory of the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (roughly sixty percent after the third partition and about eighty percent after the Congress of Vienna, which redistributed the Polish lands dismembered in 1795). Polish-Russian relations developed with a number of attitudes, ranging from ostentatious expressions of loyalty to overcautious opportunism, and from serious offers of cooperation to armed resistance.

These attitudes both developed and existed as specific structures. Conspirators and collaborators alike played their simultaneous roles in national insurgencies for freedom as well as in the times of national

resignation, when the slogan 'organic work' became the order of the day. The 'wise' collaborators went on the scene to atone to the nation for the consequences of its repeated defeats while the 'bold' conspirators addressed the nation to awaken it from the shameful slumber of resignation. The same could be said about the plans concerning the settlement of relations on the international level. One group of Polish politicians (like Dmowski) tried to make use of the alliance with Russia and another (like Piłsudski) sought to avoid the alliance. Each situation emphasised different aspects of the Polish view of Russia. Therefore, to claim that extreme hostility and deterioration represented a constant feature of these relations would be an oversimplification.

It is true that the history of Polish-Russian relations consisted of many traumatic experiences. Thus, the Polish view of Russia can hardly contain many instances of optimism or merriness. Beyond that, one cannot help but feel that the negative perception of the Russians prevailed and cast a long and dark shadow, in which nearly all the relations resembled an ancient tragedy.

To come close to the core of the problem let us compare Polish-German relations with Polish-Russian ones. Nazi Germany attacked Poland, occupied and annexed large chunks of Polish territory, and deported and killed thousands of Poles. Communist Russia attacked Poland, occupied and annexed large chunks of Polish territory, and deported and killed thousands of Poles. However, when the war was over, the Germans were able to improve their image among Poles in spite of the past, whereas the Russians still played the role of oppressors. Of course, one can argue there were also different experiences with the Germans after 1945. Germany underwent democratisation, whereas Soviet Russia adhered to its communist style with Poland as one of its satellites. Today, political life in Russia is a far cry from standard parliamentary politics and democratic society (although the exclusive evaluation of Russian development through the prism of the 'democratic' paradigm is misleading). Polish-German relations have undergone a fifty-year process of reconciliation since World War II, but Polish-Russian relations are still consumed with bitterness due to unhealed wounds (Katyn, etc.) and conflicting ideas and plans of the development in Eastern Europe (compare e.g. the Polish and Russian attitudes to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine).

However, the controversy between the Polish-Russian relations and the manner in which they were perceived was not exclusively a matter of the postwar period. Looking at the interwar system of education and the textbooks used in the elementary schools, we can find the first signs indicating this different understanding. According to these texts, the Germans, even if pictured as able to threaten the Poles because of their militarist and expansionist inclinations, deserved certain respect due to their diligence, education, discipline, pedantry, and sense of order. The Russians, pictured always as threatening the Poles through their despotic and expansionist designs, deserved no respect because of their lack of cultivated values. Rather, they were inclined towards obscurantism, perfidy, savagery, and servile obedience. Beyond that, they were often viewed through selected figures (from Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great to officials and politicians administering the Russian partition of Poland, as well as Soviet politicians), personifying particular features of the Russian character (Sanojca 2003: 82–3, 102–3). The Germans, on the contrary, were perceived mostly as a collective entity—nation. In the German case, power (although it had a negative impact on the Poles) was associated with a set of values representing the European world. Moreover, this set of values functioned through anonymity typical of modern civilisation. In the case of the Russians, however, power represented primitive force. Furthermore, the Russian situation was heavily personalised as was the case in the pre-modern world.

The contrasting pictures of Germany and Russia were not rooted so much in a different course of historical events or a different bilateral agenda, but instead, a different understanding of and approach towards Germans and Russians as certain cultural phenomena, evaluated in terms of how they corresponded with the self-perception of the Poles as a certain cultural phenomenon. The principal disparity between the Polish perception of Germans and Russians consisted in the fact that the Poles approached the Germans on the same level they themselves would like to be approached, whereas the Russians were located on a lower tier. Germans were considered to represent entities able to meet Poles on the level of the shared values (regardless of the real power relations), whereas Russians and Poles represented two different worlds communicating mostly through power relations (since the values were mutually incompatible).

Historical experience prompted the Germans to behave rationally and as a cultivated nation and when they failed to do so (for example, during the Nazi regime), the general Polish perception was that this was a deviation from the expected 'traditional standard'. A similar historical experience prompted the Russians to behave like powerful, but savage barbarians and when they did so (at the approval of the Bolshevik regime), the Polish perception was that it was a continuation of the expected 'traditional standard' (Zackiewicz, 2004; Kornat, 2003). Briefly, in the case of the Germans, the Poles did not anticipate the deeds committed by the Nazis in Poland during the years of occupation, whereas, in the case of the Russians, they expected nothing but the actions committed by the Bolsheviks during and after the war.

The reflections towards the Germans indicated that the bad experience could be replaced by a better one, whereas the attitude towards Russia implied that improved relations would be almost impossible. The former provided the Germans latitude, but the latter afforded the Russians no such opportunity, despite the fact that both sides had treated the Poles in a disastrous manner. The possible equating of the faults of both sides appeared regularly in the situation when the Poles felt the condensed threat of the Russo-German treaty over their heads (a good illustration was provided by the Polish reactions to Russian-German agreement on the joint gas pipeline project through the Baltic Sea, which was labeled the 'Ribbentrop-Molotov' pipeline). The question, then, is what are the roots of this interpretation of Russia and why does this interpretation persist?

2. Distinction between Rus' and Russia

When considering Polish attitudes concerning Russia, we need to define the meaning of the terms 'Polish reflection' and 'Russia'. We can use here the comparable question of how to define Polish-Russian relations. The most complex elaboration of this topic by the German historian Klaus Zernack approaches the question through an interpretation drawing on the combination of historical development of relations (*Beziehungsgeschichte*) and historical structures of relations (*Beziehungsstruktur*) and depicting Poland and Russia as the two fundamental alternatives of development of East European territory, or as the two 'ideal types' of this development (Zernack, 2000). If we accept

Zernack's modified approach, we can define the 'Polish reflection' as a combination of the development of opinions about Russia and the structural features of this opinion. However, in order to be able to apply this definition, it is necessary to resolve the problem of Russia as an entity symbolically constructed in the intersection of development and structure. The key to understanding this symbolical construction is to view Russia as a certain sort of quasi-Oriental phenomenon in terms of Edward Said's definition of Orientalism as a manifestation of a distinction made between 'the Orient' and 'the Occident' (Said 1979: 2).

In order to conceive the origins of the Polish view of Russia, it is useful to return to the second half of the fifteenth century. Europe began to explore 'post-Mongolian' Russia and, at the same time, the Polish-Lithuanian Union and Muscovite Russia entered a period of struggle over Eastern Europe. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth defended territorial gains achieved in the area of the old 'Rus'' (present day Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia) at a time when the old Russian state had declined under the Mongol invasion, whereas the newly restored Muscovy initiated the policy of reclaiming these territories as part of the policy of 'gathering the Russian lands'. The struggle over territory established one of the major fields where the core of the Polish view of Russia was forged. The establishment of this perception of Russia was later related to the consequential change in the geometry of Europe's eastern periphery when Russia was descending from the position of the 'northern state' to the new one representing the 'East' behind which the area referred to as the 'Orient' was located alone. The difference was mostly religious—'the East' was Orthodox while 'the Orient' was non-Christian, but rather mostly Islamic. In this changing geometry, the Polish interpretation of the Russian phenomenon became located on the edge of the two terms—'Rus'' and 'Russia' (Wapiński 1999: 9–19; Chrzanowski 1988: 177–90; Lemberg 1985: 48–91).

As an area that remained after the old Kievan state, incorporated by the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and, from the second half of the sixteenth century, a bone of contention between Russia and the Polish-Lithuanian Union, 'Rus'' represented in general the territorial unit located between 'Europe' and the 'East', more specifically between the Polish-Lithuanian Union (the most eastern part of Europe) and Russia (the most western part of the 'East'). Both sides employed various arguments to defend their territorial demands in this area. The Polish view perceived 'Rus'' as a

territory separate from Russia with the latter being a power trying to absorb the former. Conversely, Russia laid claim to those territories employing the concept that it was gathering what had initially been Russian territories, supported by the mostly Orthodox identity of their population. The Polish standpoint opposed this claim by using the arguments taken from political theory and by changing the religious parameters through the religious union of 1596. In the Polish view, the word 'Rus'' designated a territorial unit consisting of the pre- or non-Muscovite standard of politics and civilisation.

This standard was based on the idea of an archaic democracy which, established in the remote past, became the source of political culture in Central and Eastern Europe in the pre-Muscovite period. The parameters of this standard were similar to those of the system of the Polish-Lithuanian noble republic where the idea of early democracy (*gminowładztwo*) was defined as a key concept of Polish history.

Democratic inclination was an original and autochthonous feature of the East-Central European delimiting the political space where the Polish-Lithuanian Union and 'Rus'' could coexist as comparable units and the former was continuing in cultivating of the democratic ideal in the times following the Mongol invasion—mainly on the territories taken from the destructed old Kievan Rus'. When Muscovy appeared on the scene it was a new and strange political entity incompatible with the ideal mentioned above. Combining the elements of the local Orthodox tradition, Mongolian system of rule, and the Byzantine heritage it was vigorously progressing in its autocratic transformation culminating in the emerging Russian Empire which expansion opened the dispute for 'Rus'', i.e. the struggle for the dominance in Eastern Europe (Lelewel 1959: 382, 1964: 589–628, 1969: 39–226).

Replying to utilitarian and historicising ideology of 'gathering of old Russian lands' the Polish used utilitarian political argument—'Rus'' had to be separate from Russia because its parameters were incompatible and superior to those defining the 'aberrant' Muscovy. Therefore the border between 'Rus'' and 'Russia' was fixed in terms of its definition, albeit its actual shape depended more on how the two rivals were sufficiently able to back their demands with adequate military force. The idea of the space-border, fixed in terms of its definition but actually floating, which was brought to perfection mainly on the example of 'Rus'', became known as *antemurale christianitatis*—a movable strip of land between

'Europe' and the 'East' serving offensive as well as defensive purposes. 'European' identity of this strip of land was undisputable although it could be ruled and controlled by purely 'Eastern' power (Tazbir 1987).

3. Conclusion: Russia as an Imperial Non-Civilisation

If the term 'Rus'' was previously defined as something located on the crossroads between 'Europe' (Polish-Lithuanian Union) and the 'East' ('Russia'), then 'Russia' was interpreted as something located on the crossroads between the 'East' and 'Orient'. The dominant Orthodoxy and Slavic background did not allow for Russia to be described as a purely 'Oriental' or 'Asian' entity. However, it could not be simply identified with the 'Orient', which is typical for non-Slavic and non-Christian populations. The fact that Russia could not be placed within a purely 'European' or 'Oriental' context made defining it problematic.

Moreover, during the process of tri-partition (1772, 1793, 1795) 'Rus'' (as a part of the territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Union) was incorporated to the Romanov Empire. Russia then progressed to the West, replaced 'Rus'' and the Polish-Lithuanian Union as well, and became the dominant link between Europe and Orient instead.

The Russian state was not a purely 'Oriental/Asian' phenomenon, and its 'European' character was questionable, although the Russian Western provinces were located on formerly 'European' territory of the erased Polish-Lithuanian Union. How, then, could it be defined? The logical conclusion was that Russia had to become an un-definable unit located between the 'East' and the 'Orient'.

The essential solution to this dilemma consisted in the concept of Russia as a non-civilisation. This concept was expressed by Feliks Koneczny (known as the 'Polish Oswald Spengler') in his book on

Europe	East	Orient
Rus'		Russia

Fig. 1: The Position of Rus' and Russia Between Europe and Orient

Russian history completed after World War I. Koneczny formulated the idea that Russia as a non-civilisation represented an amorphous entity whose visible features and frames originated neither as a product of internal impulses nor of the forces struggling on the borderline between 'Europe' and 'the East' as it was in the case of 'Rus''. Rather, they were outcomes of mimetic processes simulating the development in the outer world. Russia was an empty form waiting for the proper content (Koneczny 1997).

The Polish views of Russia derived partly from this sense of emptiness, and partly from empirical observations linked to the specific historical situation, in which Polish-Russian encounters occurred. There have been two essential positions within the Polish view of Russia. The first, which could be described in terms of exploration and exploitation, followed the original pattern of expansion of the Polish-Lithuanian Union into the territories of the old 'Rus''. It is acknowledged that, during this expansion, the eastern territories were denoted as 'our [from the Polish point of view] America', and the perception of 'Rus'' and Russia as areas replete with resources and suitable for a certain type of colonisation was common throughout centuries, sometimes supported by the opinion that the Russian non-civilisation gave the Poles the chance to affix their seal on Russian development.

The second position, which can be described as a concept of external threat, reflected the struggle over East European territory in terms of the conflict between noble democracy and Muscovite autocracy and culminated in the view of Russia as an expansive empire rife with expansionism, despotism, and the oppression of subordinated nations (Tazbir 1979). Imperialism represented the very characteristic product of mimetic behaviour of Russian non-civilisation. It proved to be the only manner in which the amorphous form could be given some content using a system of government combining tradition taken from the inter-space 'East-Orient' (political culture of the Mongolian period) as well as from 'Europe' (absolutism as a way of applying the principles of the well-ordered police state).

The interpretation of Russia as a non-civilisation also descended into Polish political thinking in the form of two interwoven ways how to deal with Russia. The first, developing from the ideas of the so-called Great Emigration (to induce the three partitioning powers into the mutual conflict) to Pilsudski's plans to secure Poland from Russia by means of an

East-Central European federation, aimed to push Russia out of Europe. The second focused on the problem of the ethnic and national diversity of Russia and attempted to employ the potential of nationalism of non-Russian nations to weaken the power of the empire (Nowak 1995: 82–3). The two strategies converged at a crossroads—the more imperialistic behaviour emerged in Russia, the greater the Russian threat to the Polish independence. From this perspective, the only resolution of the threat was for Russia to relinquish its imperial identity. However, there was still one main obstacle to this objective, namely that imperialism was historically the only known way to manage the great territorial space of Russian non-civilisation.

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