

How the Nations of Eastern Europe Tried to Civilize Each Other: A Conversation with Polish Historian Ela Kwiecińska

Tuesday 3 December 2024, by [BILOUS Taras](#), [KOVALCHUK Yaroslav](#), [KWIECIŃSKA Elżbieta](#), [SHOPIN Pavlo](#) (Date first published: 15 October 2024).

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Ela's doctoral dissertation, defended at the European University Institute, focuses on the concept of the civilizing mission in Eastern Europe during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The historian examines how German, Polish, and Ukrainian intellectuals saw and used this concept. This is our discussion with Ela.

The civilizing mission as intellectual transfer in Eastern Europe

IK: What is the civilizing mission and how did this idea come to Eastern Europe?

EK: The civilizing mission is primarily a concept according to which nations, groups, and classes are divided into less civilized and more civilized. Depending on the time and place, this concept can have different meanings.

The concept of the civilising mission came to Eastern Europe by two routes: directly from the West or first from the West to Russia, and then from Russia to Ukraine and Poland. Notably, this concept first appeared in colonial powers, which used it to justify their domination of the colonies. Examples include the British civilising mission in India or the French mission in Algeria, which have been widely written about. At the same time, there is still a debate whether it is appropriate to use colonial approaches to study Eastern Europe. However, since this concept existed to justify various policies of domination, this approach, including colonial studies, is appropriate.

IK: Who were the first proponents of the idea of the civilizing mission in Eastern Europe?

The concepts of the civilizing mission and civilization date back to the Enlightenment, when the idea of creating a “new man” emerged. However, the very concept of “mission” had existed earlier in theology, where it meant a religious mission, such as Catholic or Orthodox. In practice, the idea of the Catholic “mission” served as a justification for the Crusades and the killing of many people in the name of religion. Violence was committed in the name of the civilizing mission, in the name of improving the world, in the name of progress, in the name of bringing civilization.

In nineteenth-century German policy toward Poland, instead of religious justifications, secularized ideas of civilization through education were used in line with the German concept of *Bildung*. The

Germans justified their power over the Poles by claiming that the latter lacked state values and were, therefore, allegedly incapable of governing themselves. The Poles used similar rhetoric in nineteenth-century Galicia against Ukrainians, claiming that they could not have their own university because of their lack of civilization and underdeveloped language, which, in their view, could not be the language of academic communication. Similar arguments can be found in the British document *Minutes on Indian Education*, which states that Indian languages cannot be used in education due to their lack of civility, unlike English, which was considered more developed. It is important to emphasize that these states did not make efforts to support local education — it remained at a basic level. For example, there were problems with the opening of Ukrainian gymnasiums in Galicia in the nineteenth century. Polish schools in the territories under German control had similar problems.

The Polish civilizing mission toward Ukraine was a response to the German one. For example, in his pamphlet "[Polacy i Indianie](#)" Ludwik Powidaj states that Poland is the poorest and worst country in the world, and we have to learn from the Germans in order to become civilized. However, there is also a compensatory element: although we are the poorest and worst, we civilized Ukraine. This often comes up in the sources: first, the peripheral position of Poland, especially in relation to Germany, is highlighted, and then the civilizing mission towards Ukraine is presented.



The First Partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, 1772. Artist: Jean-Michel Moreau

In 1867, the Provincial Sejm of Galicia, in its appeal to the emperor, claimed that it was undertaking the Habsburg civilizing mission. At the time, it was only about Poland and the Poles, against which local Ukrainians, or as they were then called, Rusyns, protested. One of the arguments against such a course belongs to a Ukrainian peasant whom a Polish scribe recorded in the transcript of the Sejm meeting as a “włościanin,” that is, a person from the “commons” without specifying his nationality (and the language of this peasant was a Galician dialect of Ukrainian written in Polish Latin, which the Poles understood at the time). For the “włościanin,” the civilizing mission was an empty concept, as he understood it only in a religious pre-modern sense, in which Ukraine was not a periphery but a part of the Christian world. This was often mentioned in relation to the Polish lands of Germany, when the Germans spoke of the Poles as living on the periphery. The latter responded by reminding the Germans that they were also part of the Christian world.

TB: You argue that the Polish civilizing mission emerged in response to the Prussian one, but in your dissertation you date the emergence of the civilizing mission in Poland to 1815, and initially it was aimed at building and civilizing the Russian Empire.

Before the Polish civilizing mission, there was the French mission that existed during the Napoleonic Duchy of Warsaw. At the same time, Napoleonic laws appeared in Poland along with a modernization course. There was an idea that Poland should carry this French civilizing mission further east.

Interestingly, around the same time, there was a well-known case in Haiti, when Polish troops that were part of the Napoleonic army were sent to suppress a local uprising. However, for Poles, an uprising is usually associated with something good, provided it is not directed against them. That's why most of them joined the locals. And their blue-eyed descendants still live there.

TB: Why did the Poles refuse to extend the French civilizing mission to Russia?

In the early nineteenth century, Russia's policy was not national. It relied on cooperative local Polish and Ukrainian elites, whom it later considered civilized. Therefore, Poles and Ukrainians made careers in St. Petersburg. However, at the end of the life of Emperor Alexander I, this liberal project failed in the Kingdom of Poland, which was followed by two Polish uprisings. Before that, Russians had considered Poles to be equal partners. After the January Uprising, these relations finally changed, and Russian politics became more oriented toward nationality.

The Russians, like the Germans after the Poznan Uprising in 1848, decided that the partnership had failed. Russia's civilizing mission was to bring order to what they saw as chaos. If you are a revolutionary, then you are a barbarian, because you rebel against the legitimate authorities. That's why the Russian authorities saw the Poles as chaotic and the noble democracy as barbaric. The ideal model for the Russian authorities was absolutism.



The Battle of Milosław, 1848. Painting by Juliusz Kossak

TB: Was that the time when there was a shift from the idea of building a Russian empire to the idea that Russians were not Slavs but Asians?

In 1846, during the Polish uprising in Galicia, peasants began killing the rebels, even though they wanted to improve the lives of the peasants. After that, Polish elites began to consider local peasants barbarians who could not be saved by a civilizing mission. Something similar happened with the attitude toward Russians after the uprising in the Russian Empire: they were seen as barbarians from whom the Poles needed to close themselves off in their own world. Everything Russian was seen as Asian. For example, Warsaw residents often referred to the Polish Academy of Sciences, founded by Alexander I, as a "Turkish cafe." This academy, which was rebuilt into a Byzantine-style church between 1892 and 1895, was rebuilt again in 1926 in the neoclassical style. The orientalization of Russians was a response to imperial power when no other reaction was possible. Also, the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw is often called Peking because it was built by Russians and resembles a Chinese palace.



Staszic Palace after 1893 with a facade in the Byzantine-Russian style. Image: Wikimedia

After the January Uprising against Russia (1863–1864), many Russian churches were built in Warsaw. Officially, this was done to meet the needs of local believers, but it was also a demonstration of power. The local population perceived these churches as the implantation of the Orient within their city.

TB: Was there a difference in the way the Russian Empire formulated its civilizing mission in the western peripheries and in its Asian possessions?

This is a good question for future research. The Russian authorities perceived the Poles as a historical nation, and for the Russians they were above nations that were often illiterate.

Bringing civilization to Kresy: Class and national aspects of civilizing missions

IK: When the ideas of the civilizing mission came to Eastern Europe, socio-economic changes were taking place in parallel, with the development of capitalist relations. What was the connection between these processes and the spread of the idea of the civilizing mission?

As long as serfdom existed, the szlachta (the nobles) justified their power over the peasants by saying that it had always been so. When serfdom was abolished, the concept of the civilizing mission began to be used. In Polish, there is a concept called “lud” that does not correspond to the Ukrainian “narod” (people). “Lud” is an anti-national concept. Lud could include a Pole, a Ukrainian, or a Jew. Polish elites had a class-based vision of the world, which was legitimized by the criterion of civilization: they distinguished between those who, in their opinion, were civilized and those who were not. There is the class of “lud” — that is, the uncivilized of the lower class, regardless of nationality, for whom the measures of the civilizing mission were intended.

The civilizing mission was actively promoted in nineteenth-century Galicia when the reform of basic education for peasants was discussed. Likewise, in the Provincial Sejm of Galicia, the civilizing mission for the people was constantly present and applied to anyone from the lower class.

IK: So the civilizing mission was aimed not only at other national groups, but also at the lower classes internally?

It included both. In Galicia, the majority of the lud (people) were Ukrainians; and the Poles,

justifying their rule, often said that Poland brought civilization to Ukraine. In this context, the civilizing mission sounded like a national idea. The idea of bringing civilization to “Kresy” — the eastern lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth — became a Polish grand narrative that exists to this day. Today, its purpose is to solve the problem of Poland’s position in Europe: “We are not the West. We are not Russia. That is why we have this position. But we want to be the West, so we need to find our own barbarians.” Even today, there are groups in Poland that are considered uncivilized, and Poles continue to have their “Kresy.” And this is Eastern Poland, which is looked at as an internal Orient, such as Podlasie.



Galician peasants carry severed heads of the Polish nobles to Austrian officers. Anonymous French engraving on steel, 1848

IK: How much did the policies inspired by the concept of the civilizing mission differ from the original idea?

In the nineteenth century, when educational policy was created, the purpose of education was discussed. It was needed to make the peasants’ lives better, or to make them part of the ruling group, which was then the intelligentsia. Thus, peasants were taught Latin, which was part of the education of noble children, for some reason. On the one hand, if peasants were left alone, they would not become part of the civilized world, but on the other, it might be more appropriate for them to learn something else.

For Ukrainians, this issue was different, because when they received education, they moved to another national group, usually Polish or Russian. This problem is described very well by Yaroslav Hrytsak in his book about Ivan Franko, for whom changing his identity was a decision. He got his education, and what to do next? Should he become a Pole? Or perhaps a German? No, together with his few friends, he decided to create something new and combine it with a progressive policy towards the peasants. In contrast, the concept of the civilizing mission was usually not about improving people’s lives; it was about justifying power.

IK: How much did this policy require a national or an imperial state?

The state was important. Although Ukrainians and Poles did not have one, they were part of the intelligentsia, the proponents of the idea of the civilizing mission. They considered themselves the most civilized and therefore thought they had the right to tell others what to do, who to be, how to be a civilized person. They could exist without the state, replacing it in some cases. Ivan Franko did not need to be head of a university department to become a famous writer. The intelligentsia did not need to run university departments to have symbolic power, but, of course, it was more difficult that way.

If the empire took on a civilizing mission, this concept turned into a policy of modernization, which was often based on hegemony. As the example of Russia shows, the more authoritarian the state

was, the more the concept of the civilizing mission could influence society. Austria-Hungary, on the other hand, relied more on local elites and capitalized on their internal conflicts. The effectiveness of these strategies varied. For example, the Habsburgs' civilizing policies in Galicia were very authoritarian, but they were very useful for Ukrainians. Their educational policy led to the creation of a seminary for Greek Catholic priests. This was a game of local conflict of interests that at the same time gave rise to Ukrainian educational institutions. On the other hand, it meant little to the Ruthenian peasant.

For the intelligentsia, the civilizing mission often involved nationalization, especially for the Poles. In the nineteenth century, it was no longer enough to be a nobleman. You had to shed blood, take part in an uprising. Then you were recognized as a Pole and could say that you were part of the nation. But the question also arose: How civilized are you? Do you know Polish literature and culture? This was important in teaching peasants to be Poles. Educational policies aimed to nationalize the population. That is why it was important what language would be used in the educational program. The educational civilizing mission became an instrument of nationalization. For the peasants, it was a decision based on what they considered more useful. If there was a good gymnasium and it was Polish, you could go there to study. Peasants were more pragmatic, but there was a struggle for their souls among intellectuals.

IK: What ideological strands opposed and criticized the concept of the civilizing mission?

Anticolonial criticism did not appear in Eastern Europe along with postcolonial criticism [of the second half of the twentieth century]. It emerged here earlier from scratch. It was a critique of hierarchical, unjust exploitative relations. Different approaches were used for this purpose, and it was not necessarily a direct criticism of the civilizing mission. For instance, Taras Shevchenko did not criticize the civilizing mission: he criticized serfdom itself in the language of folklore. But Ivan Franko uses anticolonial rhetoric, taking it from Drahomanov. They are part of the German-speaking world and they are familiar with these concepts, which are useful for describing local relations. These intellectuals exposed that **the civilizing mission justified exploitation rather than brought civilization.**



Ivan Franko. Image: Wikimedia

This is exactly what Franko wrote about in "[Our View on the Polish Question](#)" (1883). He compared the Polish policy toward Ukrainians with the German policy toward Poles, calling it "Drang nach Osten" ("push to the East"). Franko deliberately uses German concepts to emphasize this analogy. The socialists tried to overcome hegemony, which was based on the notion of the civilizing mission. However, they failed to do so. Polish and Ukrainian socialists cooperated, but their cooperation was not always successful. Socialism was one of the attempts to overcome thinking in terms of the civilizing mission as a justification for exploitation.

However, when we look at, say, how the Soviet state project finally took shape, we see that it is fully consistent with the logic of the civilizing mission. In the case of Poland, it was most effective in destroying all national minorities. The Soviet government made Polish society very homogeneous: there were to be no Ukrainians or Jews. It is said that the Communist Party realized the dream of Roman Dmowski, the Polish ethnonationalist of the early twentieth century.

The civilizing mission and the challenges of national self-determination

TB: What was the relationship between romanticism and the idea of the civilizing mission?

The intellectuals of the Romantic period had different opinions about who could undertake the civilizing mission. Adam Mickiewicz, also inspired by French socialists and Christian ideas, believed that it should have been Poland. However, Mickiewicz himself was against the Pope because the Pope criticized the Polish uprising as revolutionary and anti-imperial.

The anti-imperial position unites Kostomarov and Mickiewicz; they claimed that they would teach Russians democracy and Christian ethics. They wanted to find a universal community, which for

them was the community of the first Christians. But the Pope is not the main figure in such a community, because they — Kostomarov and Mickiewicz — nationalize Christianity. Many national ideas are secularized religious ideas. There is no Pope, but there is a Polish nation that carries a civilizing mission to other oppressed peoples.

Of course, for Kostomarov, this could not be Poland, because, in his opinion, it betrayed its mission after it became a state of landlords and priests. Shevchenko has a similar criticism of Polish landlords and priests. That is why Ukraine has a civilizing mission, because it has remained truly egalitarian and with an ethos of Christian solidarity. As a result, we have two utopias, Mickiewicz's and Kostomarov's. This explains the conflicts in Ukrainian and Polish historical memory. For the Poles, the Rzeczpospolita was a desired utopia, and for the Ukrainians it was the Kozachchyna. Accordingly, Mickiewicz turns to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as a utopia for the future, while Kostomarov turns to the Kozachchyna.

When Shevchenko wrote his poem "To the Poles," he wrote that the Kozachchyna could be a common myth for Poles and Ukrainians. I recently gave a lecture on Shevchenko to Polish students, and we read this poem. It was very strange for them that Ukrainians did not dream of the Rzeczpospolita.

TB: Shevchenko also supported the struggle of the peoples of the Caucasus against the Russian Empire. What was the attitude of the Polish intelligentsia to this? In your dissertation, you quote Kazimierz Borodzinski, who supported the extension of the civilizing mission to the Russian Empire and praised the conquest of the Caucasus and the destruction of the Zaporozhian Sich.

Poles were often exiled to the Caucasus for participating in uprisings. There is even a Polish diaspora there that speaks a little Polish. They are the descendants of those who were sent there after the January Uprising of 1863. In Central Asia, many Poles exiled after the uprisings worked as engineers, researchers, and ethnographers. But this raises the question of their complicity in colonial policy on the ground. Women often worked as ethnographers, because ethnography and anthropology were not seen as something serious. Among them was the Polish anthropologist Maria Czaplicka, who worked for the British Academy of Sciences, focusing her research on Central Asia. It's great that someone was recording the testimonies of local people at that time, but the question of their involvement in colonial policy remains open. Therefore, we must critically evaluate this research. Anthropologists of the time often considered the people to be a mass without any agency, which is strikingly different from modern approaches. We do not know how much agency was assigned to the people whose testimonies were recorded.



Maria Czaplicka. Image: Wikimedia

On the other hand, the Polish diaspora in Paris, which found itself there after the November Uprising (1830–1831), came up with the idea of supporting all peoples enslaved by Russia. Prince Adam Jerzy Czartoryski (1770–1861), a former adviser and friend of Tsar Alexander I, wanted to link the restoration of Poland to Shamil's uprising in the Caucasus, particularly in Dagestan and Ichkeria (1834–1859), as well as to the uprising in the Ottoman Empire. Czartoryski had his agents and ambassadors in the Balkans, in Istanbul, Georgia, Romania, Serbia, and Bulgaria, who were supposed to promote the development of local nations against the Russian imperial project. A similar idea arose in interwar Poland as part of the Promethean Movement, which supported the anti-Russian sentiment among Ukrainians in Soviet Ukraine. Subsequently, the idea of giving up territorial claims to Kresy after World War II was motivated by the common struggle against Russia. The anti-Communist opposition, from which the modern Polish political elite comes, adopted the slogan: "There is no free Poland without a free Ukraine." Poland's support for Ukraine in its struggle against Russia has been there since the 1980s and covers all of the political spectrum: the left, the right, and the liberals. Today, no one at the level of political and intellectual elites doubts this. However, there is still the issue of asymmetry in Polish-Ukrainian relations and the need to build them on a more partnership basis.

TB: As an example of the Ukrainian civilizing mission, you mention Hrushevsky, who wrote about the defense of Christianity by the Cossacks. However, after the February Revolution of 1917, Hrushevsky actively established cooperation with peoples who suffered from colonial oppression, in particular with the Asian peoples of the Russian Empire, and organized [the Congress of the Enslaved Peoples of Russia](#). Thus, Hrushevsky as a historian wrote a Eurocentric history, but his politics differed from his historical works.

Yes, he wrote a history that would meet the standards of the time, so it was Eurocentric. Could it have been different then? Probably not. And he was constructing [the space for the Ukrainian](#)

[civilizing mission](#) that stretched east and south to the Black Sea.

TB: And the Turkic population of the Black Sea region falls out of this picture.

Yes.

IK: How did Jews fit into various civilizing missions?

Jews themselves had their own chain of civilizing missions. If a person was born in a small shtetl and wanted to become a civilized man, he usually went to Berlin or the nearest large city, where there was a center of Jewish enlightenment or maskilim. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, there was also a major center of maskilim in Vilnius. They had their own mental map, which included the concept of “Ost Jude” (Eastern Jew), which usually denoted residents of the territory of modern Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine. They were usually religious, wore traditional clothing, and lived very conservatively. Jews from Berlin looked down on Jews from Eastern Europe.

There were even smaller internal civilizing missions. For example, Jews who assimilated into Polish culture in Lviv considered assimilation to be self-civilization. This is similar to the process described by Norbert Elias when he argues that one needs to dress differently and learn a civilized language. Assimilated Jews or Zionists did not consider Yiddish a civilized language. In Galicia, they often called it a jargon.

TB: In Galicia, maybe, but in the Russian Empire there were widely read newspapers published in Yiddish. The Bund adopted Yiddish as its official language.

It was a deliberate socialist policy that aimed to overturn the hierarchy. They consciously used Yiddish because it was the language of the people — it was a conscious choice. Some, for whom it was not their first language, learned it because they wanted to be on the side of the people, not the assimilators.



Demonstration of the Bund, 1917

IK: Has the popularity of the concept of the civilizing mission affected Belarusian intellectuals?

The Belarusian intelligentsia was primarily the subject of the Polish civilizing mission as Kresy. In the nineteenth century, the Poles recognized Lithuania and Ukraine as more or less separate countries. They wanted to see them as part of a federation. But on the Ukrainian side, there was no trust in Polish policy, which discriminated against Ukrainians. As for Belarusians, Poles often did not

notice them. For them, they were part of the former Lithuania. But whether Belarusians opposed Polish policy is another topic for research. Much has already been written about Ukrainians. In the nineteenth century, the Belarusian elites were Polish nobles who sided with the people. I mean Kastuś Kalinoŭski, who came from the szlachta (Polish nobility) and became part of the Belarusian canon. From what I have read, Kastuś Kalinoŭski had no ideas of a civilizing mission, but rather advocated fighting on the side of the people.

There were also such Polish nobles on the side of Ukraine, but in Poland they are completely forgotten, and for Ukrainians they have become so Ukrainianized that no one remembers that Ukraine was their choice. Among them, Władysław Antonowicz (1834–1908), who was a member of the Polish szlachta, published his confession of a Polish nobleman in the Osnova magazine in 1862 before the January Uprising against Russia (1863), where he called the Polish szlachta “noble colonists” and compared their position to that of American planters. Because of this, his compatriots accused Antonowicz of national treason. He converted to Orthodoxy, began wearing embroidered shirts, and studying and teaching Ukrainian history at Kyiv University. For the peasants, this must have looked very artificial. In this way, Polish Ukrainophiles tried to be part of the people among whom they lived. Some Ukrainians trusted them, while others did not. Hrushevsky trusted them and appointed them to public office when the First World War broke out. Because of their education and knowledge of languages, they usually worked in embassies. For example, Mykhailo Tyshkevych was the ambassador of the Ukrainian People’s Republic in Paris. But another part of Ukrainians did not accept them, considering them Polish landlords whom they hated and looked at them through the prism of class hierarchy.

We need to remember that in the nineteenth century, the Ukrainian national movement was predominantly leftist, and a person who identified himself as a Ukrainian, even if he was Polish, usually had leftist views (exceptions were Panteleimon Kulish, who came from a Cossack gentry family, and Vyacheslav Lypynsky, who was Polish by birth and the founder of conservative monarchism in Ukrainian thought).

TB: In your dissertation, you refer to Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern’s idea of some Jewish intellectuals choosing Ukrainian identity as [an anti-imperial choice](#) when you talk about Antonowicz and other chłopomani changing their identity from Polish to Ukrainian. This idea can be extended to two national projects: 1) that Ukrainians were an independent nation, and 2) the Little Russian project, which spoke of Ukrainians as part of the larger Russian people. Nikolai Gogol chose integration into the general imperial field and wrote for Russian audiences, although he wrote about Ukraine, while Shevchenko chose a different path and wrote in Ukrainian. Both paths were open to Ukrainians. For those who chose the Ukrainian direction, it was, in a sense, an anti-imperial choice.

IK: There’s an article by John-Paul Himka entitled “Icarian Flights in Almost All Directions,” [\[1\]](#) where he talks about the choice to join someone or do something of your own. And it is important with whom to unite, because he talks about a hypothetical Western Ukrainian-Belarusian nation within the Habsburg monarchy that for some reason did not emerge. And there are various political factors that influence the choice. In Gogol’s case, it was a choice to make a career within the Russian Empire. If you make a choice to resist the empire, then you will end up like Shevchenko.

There was a third way: to become a Pole. But to do so, you had to learn Polish and go to a Polish school. There were such cases. For example, Anatol Lewicki, who was a Greek Catholic and wrote a textbook on the history of Poland and Ukraine for gymnasiums, where he popularized the Polish civilizing mission, the division of the world into East and West. One can look at him as a Galician Gogol. Such people were called “genthe Ruthenus, natione Polonus,” that is, ethnically Ruthenian,

politically Polish. This path was believed to have been paved by the Ruthenian Stanisław Orzechowski (1516–1566). This dual identification actually existed during the Rzeczpospolita. However, the phrase “genthe Ruthenus, natione Polonus” is an invention of the nineteenth century, which was used to consolidate the heritage of the Rzeczpospolita.



Rusyns. Lithograph by Walery Eljasz Radzikowski from the book *Opowiadanie o ubiorach, zwyczajach i obyczajach ludu polskiego*. Kraków, Józef Bendorff, 1863

TB: The choice to join the Polish nation was common in Galicia and less so in Right-Bank Ukraine. But in other parts of Ukraine this was not possible.

IK: Well, this was also impossible in Zakarpattia.

That is why the project of thinking about Ukraine as part of the Rzeczpospolita is very limited. Poles think primarily of Lviv and Kyiv, but there are other parts of Ukraine that have nothing to do with that myth.

The civilizing mission in Central and Eastern Europe today

IK: Why does the idea of the civilizing mission remain popular despite being discredited in the twentieth century?

Some people tried to overcome this approach, but most agreed that this is what the world looks like. In Poland, the civilizational discourse has been popular for a long time. It was very prominent in the 1990s. We continue to believe in progress with a purpose. And this progress requires sacrifice. We need to work 12 hours a day, seven days a week, without breaks. This is justified by the fact that we have to be civilized. In response, the conservative and authoritarian populism of the Law and Justice Party emerged, and then liberal intellectuals realized that neglecting people is bad politics. The fact that Law and Justice representatives traveled to small towns looked strange to liberals. How is it possible to go to the hinterland and talk to the local people?

Despite all the criticism of the civilizing mission, we often hear that we must modernize. This is often the argument of German and Polish liberals. Modernization is something good. What is

modernization, what is its purpose, whether it should be imposed, and whether people (lud) should have some kind of agency — all these questions are not discussed. There are good answers in Larry Wolff's book *Inventing Eastern Europe*. It is interesting that it was translated in Ukraine (2009) much earlier than in Poland (2020), where the perception of peripheral status is painful. In Ukraine, the anti-colonial aspect of this book was accepted more naturally, while for Poles it was very problematic to admit that they are not Western Europe.

The right-wing radical forces in Poland, however, use anti-colonial resentment, believing that everything brought from Europe is imposed. They recall German policies from the nineteenth century, as well as the current asymmetrical Polish-German relations. A similar asymmetry exists in Polish-Ukrainian relations, although it is difficult to compare these asymmetries because Poland is an EU country and is not at war.

IK: If we look at these vicissitudes geographically and take Larry Wolff's book *Inventing Eastern Europe* as a guide, then in the 1990s we can see the promotion of the idea of Central Europe as a more civilized space compared to Eastern Europe. In a sense, this was a response of local intellectuals to the image of backward Eastern Europe constructed by their Western colleagues. This can be considered a kind of geographical outcome of various civilization missions in the region, searching for neighbors who could be considered less civilized.

Yes, this has to do with the civilizing mission, which is related to the mental mapping of who is more European. It is about establishing a hierarchy of who is more and who is less European.

IK: How widespread is a critical view of the civilizing mission in Polish academia today?

I have a doctoral dissertation on this topic that I defended in the West. In Poland, it would be very difficult to defend such a dissertation. Critical attitudes toward Ukrainian-Polish relations are present mainly in literary and cultural studies. The idea of the Rzeczpospolita as a model for future Polish-Ukrainian relations and understanding is popular among historians. This prism shapes attitudes toward Poland's relations with Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania. It is difficult to ignore the asymmetry present in these relations. Both in the nineteenth century and today, historical scholarship remains an instrument of nation-building in Poland and Ukraine. That is why critical voices in historical scholarship are difficult to accept. We still look through the prism of the myth of Kresy, because the territories in the East were once ours. Overcoming this myth is difficult, especially when in Poland and Ukraine historical scholarship is considered a science that relies on a positivist approach. The choice of research topics among historians in Poland clearly fits into the thinking that the eastern territories were once ours.

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Footnotes

[1] John-Paul Himka. 1999. "The Construction of Nationality in Galician Rus': Icarian Flights in Almost All Directions," in *Intellectuals and the Articulation of the Nation*, 109-64, ed. Ronald G. Suny and Michael D. Kennedy. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.