Escaping KAKANIA

Eastern European Travels in Colonial Southeast Asia

Edited by JAN MRÁZEK

CEU PRESS

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COLONIALISM, FREEDOM FIGHTERS AND POLISH AMBIGUITY

How Joseph Conrad Korzeniowski and Bronisław Piłsudski (Almost) Met in Singapore

Rafal Pankowski

This chapter focuses on certain historical connections between Poland and Southeast Asia in the context of (post)colonial and cultural studies. It attempts to connect several seemingly disjointed aspects of memory, identity, and geography. In particular, it focuses on the ambiguity of roles played by Poles in Southeast Asia in the late nineteenth century (personified by the examples of Joseph Conrad and Bronisław Piłsudski), which was influenced by the complex positioning of Polish identity vis-a-vis European empires—and the world.

Polish Orientalism

It should be noted that Polish perspectives on Southeast Asia have been strongly filtered by the Orientalist lens. The imagery of Asia's South and East in Poland has been influenced, in multiple ways, by the discursive mechanism of "Orientalization." The multi-faceted phenomenon of "Orientalism," as conceived by Edward Said, is based on a stereotypical and essentialist perception and representation of the cultures of the "East" in the "West."[1]

Southeast Asia—as a region of the Asian East—has often been "orientalized" in Poland, a country in East-Central Europe with a strong sense of identification with the culture and values of Western Europe. It would be wrong, however, to apply Said's perspective to various forms of the Polish relationship with Southeast Asia in an uncritical manner. Interestingly, Said wrote his PhD dis-

1 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

sertation about the Polish-born writer Joseph Conrad, but apparently had relatively little to say about Conrad's Polishness.[2]

For historical, cultural, economic, and political reasons, the case of Poland's relationship to the colonial world has been both similar to and different from that of the Western European centers of political and economic power. In fact, Poland has been the object of (external and internal) Orientalization in its own right: for centuries Poland itself has been a part of Europe's East rather than its West. Therefore, Said's approach to Orientalism in the Polish case needs to be problematized and supplemented with some nuances as "East" and "West" tend to be relative and fluid categories.

Maria Janion invoked Said's theory of Orientalism to discuss Poland's complex relationship with (post)colonialism, including its lengthy history as both a victim and a victimizer, sometimes alternately and at other times even simultaneously. A key—perhaps permanent—dilemma of Polish identity has concerned its self-definition as part of "the West," along with a certain uneasy perception of (semi-)peripheral status, combined with a complex sense of both superiority and inferiority with respect to other cultures.[3] In the words of Marta Grzechnik,

> Poland ... is also implicated in the European system of colonialism and imperialism in a number of ways. It can be considered a victim of its neighbours' (Germany and Russia/the USSR) imperialism, and mechanisms of orientalization and "othering" coming from Western Europe. However, it can also be considered a colonizer in its own Eastern borderlands, and complicit in European overseas expansion as a nation sharing in the European "colonial mind", reproducing its hierarchies and stereotypes, for example in literature and science.[4]

The lack of experience in overseas colonization has been frequently mentioned as a factor that distinguishes Polish history and identity from that of Western Europe. In consequence, Poles, reflecting upon their history of foreign occupations, have often tended to identify as the colonized (victim) rather than as the colonizer (oppressor). Such an approach might contribute to a level of empathy

2 Edward Said, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

3 Maria Janion, *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna* [Uncanny slavdom] (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2006).

4 Marta Grzechnik, "The Missing Second World: On Poland and Postcolonial Studies," *International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 21, no. 7 (2019).

with historically oppressed peoples (as exemplified by the writings of Ryszard Kapuściński, for example),[5] in line with the nineteenth century slogan of Polish radicals: "For your freedom and ours." The internationalist element of the Polish patriotic tradition was invoked, for example, by members of the late nineteenth century Polish revolutionary movement in their fight against imperialist forces such as the Russian Empire. The Piłsudski brothers, Bronisław and Józef, joined the movement as students in the 1880s. Bronisław later became a champion of marginalized indigenous communities of the Russian Far East, while Józef became the leader of the reborn Polish republic built on the ruins of imperial Russia, Germany, and Austro-Hungary.

On the other hand, it has been argued that Poland's historical detachment from the colonization process has often superficially "absolved" the Poles from their share of "European guilt" and thereby made them less (rather than more) inclined to sympathize with the plight of the post-colonial "Third World," as illustrated in the case of the 2015 refugee crisis and its aftermath, when Poland refused to accept non-European (non-Christian) refugees. In 2022, however, millions of refugees from the worn-torn Ukraine crossed the border into Poland and were welcomed with solidarity and sympathy.

The era of major geographical discoveries and the period of early colonization which followed them, from the late fifteenth to the late eighteenth centuries, coincided with Poland's entering its union with Lithuania, i.e. an eastward expansion. Poland's lack of participation in overseas colonization can be qualified by the problematic nature of its relationship with its own Eastern territories. Historians have pointed to the exploitative nature of social relations in the Polish East (in the territories of contemporary Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine),[6] which bore resemblances to colonial practices and patterns. Similar analogies were sometimes made about social relations in mainland Poland itself, with the exploited Polish peasants being compared to slaves in colonies by writers such as Edmund Burke.[7]

Poland as a state did not colonize non-European lands, although individual Polish-born adventurers could be found among the colonizers. In this context one might also mention the ephemeral colonial episodes in The Gambia

5 Ryszard Kapuściński, *The Shadow of the Sun* (London: Penguin Books, 2001).

6 Daniel Beauvois, ed., *Les confins de l'ancienne Pologne: Ukraine, Lituanie, Biélorussie XVIe-XXe siècles* [The borders of ancient Poland: Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus in the sixteenth to twentieth centuries] (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille 1988).

7 Edmund Burke, *The Modern Orator. The Speeches of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke* (London: Aylott and Jones, 1847), 564.

and Tobago. In fact, Polish history cannot be completely cut off from the story of European colonization. After all, Poland was a (semi-peripheral) part of the European socio-economic "world-system" (to use Immanuel Wallerstein's terminology)[8] and its trade relations constituted a key link with the colonial powers. In the Jagiellonian period Polish agricultural production became inextricably linked with the international market, providing grain supplies paid for by Western European silver, gold, and spices obtained through colonial conquests. For centuries, large amounts of Polish crops were shipped to Amsterdam, the seat of the East India Company.[9]

Clearly, the "internationalist" element of Polish identity was never fully hegemonic or permanent. The rise of nationalism in Poland in the 1930s was reflected by the government-supported organization named the "Maritime and Colonial League" (described in detail in Marta Grzechnik's chapter).

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, a number of Polish exiles visited and/or played a role in the region of Southeast Asia. A majority of them were ex-combatants of the failed freedom uprisings in Poland who were engaged in the colonial plantation business on the territory of present-day Indonesia. The paradox of former freedom fighters becoming active participants in the regime of colonial exploitation is vivid.

There were also seamen and travelers, the Polish-British writer Joseph Conrad being one example. Conrad's insightful novels inform many contemporary debates on colonialism and genocide. In an analogy between the different types of "exotica" perceived by a "Polish eye," Conrad's biographers attributed his fascination with distant lands and oceans to a longing for the vast spaces of the Ukraine, the East European "exotic" land of his childhood. In the words of Barbara Kocówna, when one reads Conrad's "novels and short stories which take place in the Malay Archipelago (...) a justified suggestion can be made that the people of that country could have reminded Conrad of the demographic structure of the Ukraine."[10] Kocówna developed her original argument even further:

8 Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1989).

9 Maria Bogucka, "Żegluga bałtycka w XVII–XVIII wieku w świetle materiałów z archiwum w Amsterdamie" [Baltic shipping in the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries in the light of materials from the archives in Amsterdam], *Zapiski Historyczne* 83, no. 4 (2017): 123–37.

10 Barbara Kocówna, *Polskość Conrada* [Conrad's Polishness] (Warsaw: Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, 1967), 5.

> Why did Conrad come to love this country [Malaya – R.P.] so much? Did he find a similarity to his native Ukraine, the Promised Land of many Poles who had broken radically with their environment and bravely traveled into the steppe in their quest for shelter and sometimes a better life? The whole historical past of the Ukraine, represented in Polish literature, especially by Sienkiewicz, was not alien to Conrad. The layers of the past were visible, as well as the clash of influences of the newcomers on the local population, and the other way round. Of course one must be very careful and not make too far-fetched analogies. What is ... important is the climate of human relations in the Ukraine and in the Malay Archipelago.[11]

While Kocówna's analogy may seem far-fetched, there is one striking detail in Conrad's novel suggesting her thesis is not entirely off the mark. The fictional village of Sambir, the Malay setting of his first two novels, *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*, had been named by the author after Sambir, a town in Ukraine, where the Korzeniowski family spent their last years of relative happiness.[12]

Figure 5.1. Joseph Conrad, 1916

One of the threads connecting Conrad's fascination with Southeast Asia and his Polish background is the very idea of "the East" so strongly embedded in Polish culture. Both menacing and attracting, "the East" in the Polish tradition often meant the lands of contemporary Ukraine, the vast spaces of the East European steppes which the most famous of the Polish Romantic poets, Adam Mickiewicz, famously compared to an ocean.[13] For centuries, the Polish so-called "civilizing mission" was directed at the spaces of Ukraine rather than overseas territories. For Polish landowners, settlers, and even poets, the Ukraine evoked feelings of oriental exoticism and attraction, unlimited opportunities, and a fear of semi-barbarian, unpredictable natives. Born in the Polish-Ukrainian borderland, Conrad's first encounter with the sea occurred in Odessa, on the Black Sea coast. Un-

11 Kocówna, *Polskość Conrada*, 155.

12 Kocówna, *Polskość Conrada*, 144; Maya Jasanoff, *Joseph Conrad i narodziny globalnego świata* [Joseph Conrad and the birth of a global world] (Poznan: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2018), 169.

13 Adam Mickiewicz, *Sonety krymskie* [Crimean sonnets] (Moscow: 1826).

doubtedly, some of the "oriental" features of Ukraine's imagery in Polish culture resonate with Conrad's perception and depiction of Southeast Asia.

The above observations pose a set of questions which are relevant in the Southeast Asian, East European, and universal contexts: What are the challenges of such (quasi-) colonial ambiguities? Can we understand "the other" by referring to "the familiar"? Can East Europeans contribute an original perspective to contemporary postcolonial debates?

A Prisoner Below the Deck: Bronisław Piłsudski

In 1887, two Polish men traveled through the waters of Southeast Asia with both their ships stopping at Singapore. They had no chance to meet at the time, although they had a lot in common: they represented a generation of young Polish noblemen from the eastern part of historic Poland (at that time a part of the Russian Empire). Both of them had come of age in the wake of the failed Polish revolt, the January Uprising of 1863–65. Both of their families suffered repression for participation in the Polish revolutionary movement and paid a large price for their patriotic ideals. Both men were socialized in the spirit of the Polish Romantic tradition of the nineteenth century, which prophesized a resurrection of an independent Poland as an act of historical justice.[14] Importantly, both of them were to make a huge contribution to global intellectual history, directly and indirectly, through a number of mutual friends, artists, and thinkers.

Their paths would cross again more than two decades later, during the historic Japan-British exhibition in London in 1910,[15] but it was not possible for them to meet personally in 1887, because—unbeknown to each other—they found themselves in very different personal circumstances. Józef Korzeniowski (known later as Joseph Conrad) was not yet a writer, but rather a trade ship officer operating in the region, who was successfully climbing up the sailor career ladder. In 1886 he reached the rank of captain and became a British citizen. His home ports were first Singapore, and then Bangkok and Sydney. He

14 The similarity in social backgrounds of Korzeniowski and Piłsudski was noted by Stefan Zabierowski in "O Conradzie i Piłsudskim" [Conrad and Pilsudski], *Teksty Drugie* 3 (2009): 33-46. Zabierowski wrote about Józef Piłsudski, Bronisław's more famous brother.

15 Jerzy Chociłowski, *Bronisława Piłsudskiego pojedynek z losem* [Bronisław Piłsudski's duel with fate] (Warsaw: Iskry, 2018), 89. Piłsudski served as a translator and mentor for a group of Ainu who were a part of a "living exhibition" and while fulfilling the task he spent much of his time in the company of Stefan Żeromski, a famous Polish writer who was also an acquittance of Conrad's and the author of several prefaces to the Polish editions of the latter's books. It is unknown, however, if Piłsudski and Conrad met in London on that occasion.

Figure 5.2. Bronisław Piłsudski with Ainu children.

became especially familiar with the coast of eastern Borneo which he repeatedly visited on trade missions. He had first seen the sea in Odessa as a youngster and was now living his childhood dream of being an accomplished sailor.[16]

The other man's status at the stop-over in Singapore was radically different and much less comfortable. Bronisław Piłsudski was a political prisoner of the Russian Tsarist regime who was on his way to many years of imprisonment and exile in the Russian-controlled Far East. Piłsudski's biographer Jerzy Chociłowski compares the function of Russia's Sakhalin Island in the nineteenth century as a Tsarist colonial dumping ground for criminals to that of Australia in the British Empire and New Caledonia for the French.[17] As the Trans-Siberian Railway had not yet been constructed, the Russian state in those years sent some of its prisoners to the furthest East of Asia by a sea route via Odessa, Suez, Ceylon, Singapore, and Osaka, before finally arriving in Vladivostok. At the outset of the journey they were shackled like slaves. The shackles were not removed until after they passed the Suez Canal. Such conditions were in itself a form of humiliating punishment.

Piłsudski, while a student in St. Petersburg, had been implicated in a plot to kill the Tsar, Alexander III. Initially sentenced to death, his sentence was commuted to fifteen years of hard labor on Sakhalin. His younger brother, Józef Piłsudski, was sentenced in the same trial to five years in Siberia. Another

16 Mieczysław Czuma, *Siódmy kontynent* [The seventh continent] (Rzeszów: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1988), 149.

17 Chociłowski, *Bronisława Piłsudskiego pojedynek z losem*, 51.

protagonist of the plot, Alexander Ulyanov—the older brother of Vladimir Ulyanov (Lenin)—was sentenced to death and hanged.[18] After years in the Far East, Bronisław Piłsudski became a renowned researcher and advocate for the Ainu minority culture in Russia and Japan. After a spell in Tokyo, he eventually returned to Europe in 1906, settled first in Krakow, then Geneva and Paris where he worked for the Polish National Committee and died (probably by suicide) just a few months before Poland finally regained her independence in 1918. He was never reunited with his Ainu spouse and children.

Bronisław Piłsudski is not a well-known figure today and he is usually mentioned in the context of the historic role of his younger brother, Józef, who went on to become a leader of the Polish Socialist Party and then de facto father of the nation, an Ataturk-type figure of Poland in the interwar period. Only in recent years, a century since his tragic death, has Bronisław Piłsudski attracted more attention in his home country, for example, through exhibitions organized at the Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology in Kraków (2018) and at the Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw (2021).[19] He did not succeed in joining academia during his lifetime. Nevertheless, Bronisław's serious legacy as an anthropologist and ethnographer must not be underestimated.

As a pioneer of modern research, Bronisław built a substantial collection of sound recordings documenting Ainu culture. A self-taught pioneer of the method of participant-observation, he did not just study the Ainu, he fully immersed himself in the community and its culture, which included marrying an Ainu woman. Piłsudski's approach to the Ainu (and the other indigenous peoples he encountered in East Asia) was characterized by a deep empathy and a radical commitment to their well-being and emancipation. A fellow exile and writer Wacław Sieroszewski "recalled that his friend, Bronisław Piłsudski, was very fluent in the Ainu language and was very popular among the Ainu, whom he protected and cared for. Piłsudski was even jokingly referred to as 'the king of the Ainu'."[20]

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18 Philip Pomper, *Lenin's Brother. The Origins of the October Revolution* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010). Pomper argues the trauma of the trial and the hanging of Alexander Ulyanov had a profound impact on Lenin's subsequent revolutionary path—and thus on world history.

19 There has also been a number of new publications based on B. Piłsudski's work such as Alfred F. Majewicz, *Japonia późnych lat okresu Meiji oczyma Bronisława Piłsudskiego* [Japan in the late Meiji period through the eyes of Bronisław Piłsudski] (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2020). Piłsudski's legacy is known among Russian anthropologists, see e.g. *The World of the Ainu through the Eyes of Bronisław Piłsudski* (St. Petersburg: Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography Kunstkamera of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2019).

20 Andrey Sokolov and Veronika Belyaeva Sachuk, "Bronisław Piłsudski—an Outstanding Polish Researcher of the Cultures of the Indigenous Peoples of the Russian Far East," in *The World of the*

While in Japan, Piłsudski authored numerous articles with an optimistic view of the modernizing process leading towards democracy: "The times are changing. The old authorities are falling down. Japan is entering a new era, when the exercise of state power will pass into the hands of a generation brought up and educated in the ideals of a more democratic Europe."[21] Clearly, the years spent in exile did not destroy his historical optimism and a universalistic outlook on Asia. A Japanese biographer of Bronisław Piłsudski, Kazuhiko Sawada, detailed numerous encounters, friendships, and cooperative endeavors established by Piłsudski with progressive intellectuals and activists from Japan and other Asian countries. His internationalist credo can be found in a dedication written on a photograph presented to Akira Kashima: "Let's serve the great cause, which is unity and friendship with the nations and tribes who were previously considered to be hostile."[22]

Upon his return to Europe, he shared his experiences with a young anthropologist from Krakow, Bronisław Malinowski, with whom he shared an interest in the highlanders' culture of the Zakopane region in the Polish-Slovak borderland (Piłsudski was a co-founder of the regional folklore museum, applying his ethnographic skills to the study of the local culture of Zakopane).[23] Malinowski developed the participant-observation methodology in his later study of Polynesian cultures which earned him global fame as a founding father of modern social anthropology.

Interestingly, Bronisław Malinowski was later dubbed "the Conrad of anthropology."[24] His groundbreaking works, such as *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia* (1927), while influenced by the mental baggage of the time (as illustrated by the usage of the word "savages"), were instrumental in breaking with the Eurocentric paradigm in the social sciences and in enabling

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Ainu through the Eyes of Bronisław Piłsudski (St. Petersburg: Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography Kunstkamera of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2019), 29.

21 Majewicz, *Japonia poznych lat okresu Meiji oczyma Bronisława Piłsudskiego*, 278.

22 Kazuhiko Sawada, *Opowieść o Bronisławie Piłsudskim. Polak nazwany Królem Ajnów* [The story of Bronisław Piłsudski. A Pole named king of the Ainu] (Sulejówek: Muzeum Józefa Piłsudskiego w Sulejówku), 212.

23 Lesław Dall, "Zakopiańskie lata Bronisława Piłsudskiego (1906-1914)" [The Zakopane years of Bronisław Piłsudski (1906-1914)], in Antoni Kuczyński, *Kochany Wujaszku. Listy Bronisława Piłsudskiego do Stanisława Witkiewicza* [Dear uncle. Letters of Bronisław Piłsudski to Stanisław Witkiewicz] (Zakopane-Sulejówek: Muzeum Tatrzańskie w Zakopanem, Muzeum Józefa Piłsudskiego w Sulejówku, 2016), 125. Cf. Bronisław Malinowski, *Dziennik w ścisłym znaczeniu tego wyrazu* [A journal in the strict sense of the word] (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2007).

24 Marek Pacukiewicz, "Conrad and Malinowski," *Yearbook of Conrad Studies (Poland)* 3 (2007): 131-139. Pacukiewicz asks that if Malinowski was the Conrad of anthropology, was Conrad perhaps the Malinowski of literature?

inter-cultural empathy in Western academia and beyond. According to Xin Liu in *The Making of Anthropology in East and Southeast Asia*,[25] Malinowski's influence was subsequently important for the emergence of anthropology in Asia as well. Another of Piłsudski's intellectual acquaintances upon his return from East Asia was none other than Franz Boas, the founder of the Chicago school of anthropology, with whom the Polish ex-prisoner corresponded and even planned a joint expedition to the Far East (the plan was never implemented).[26]

Understandably, Piłsudski's 1887 sojourn in Singapore was brief and he had little or no interaction with the local environment, but he did manage to send a letter to his family back in Poland while in the port. On his way back to Europe as a free man in 1906 he took a different route: from Tokyo he sailed to Seattle and crossed the US.

Piłsudski was transported from Odessa to Singapore and further on to Osaka and Vladivostok on board the Russian ship *Nizhny Novgorod*. It was his first sea travel. He spent his time during the voyage educating fellow prisoners who, unlike himself, were criminals and not political prisoners: thanks to the imprisoned Polish revolutionary they learned to read.

The prisoners were crowded under the deck, with little ventilation and in conditions of unbearable heat. Drinking water was available only through a straw from a locked tank, with no possibility for the prisoners to wash their clothes or bodies. After a month's journey, Piłsudski wrote in his letter from Singapore that "the stench was unbearable."[27] Conditions improved somewhat when the ship entered the Indian Ocean as occasional baths were allowed, and in Colombo for the first time the prisoners even received white bread. Then, conditions worsened again and the journey took a physical and psychological toll on Bronisław. Upon reaching the final port, Piłsudski wrote to his father:

> I am finally in the place of exile. God knows how long I'm going to be here. Strange as it may seem, I couldn't wait to reach Sakhalin and *katorga* [penal labour in the Russian Empire—R .P.]. Anyone in my shoes on this steamboat would not be surprised. The voyage, under difficult conditions, was terribly burdensome, especially at the end. Dirt, terribly stale air, damp, hard-

25 Xin Liu, "Past and Present. Two Moments in the History of Chinese Anthropology," in *The Making of Anthropology in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Shinji Yamashita, Joseph Bosco, and J. S. Eades (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004).

26 Krystyna Piątkowska, "Od Bronisława Piłsudskiego do przestrzeni Urzędu Pracy. Meandry refleksji antropologa" [From Bronisław Piłsudski to the space of the Labor Office. The meanders of an anthropologist's reflection], *Etnografia Nowa* 6 (2014), 85-86.

27 Chociłowski, *Bronisława Piłsudskiego pojedynek z losem*, 58.

> tack and sour cabbage, poor-quality water, abscesses and indigestion, and strong rocking in the Sea of Japan causing water to flow everywhere, flooding the floor, plank beds, and personal belongings –these were the main reasons why I wanted the tiresome journey to come to an end.[28]

Edmund Płuski, another Polish political prisoner condemned for revolutionary activities, travelled the same route one year before Piłsudski and later wrote a detailed account which confirms the conditions described by Piłsudski. As Płuski wrote in his memoir, "in the ports where the ship stopped, Colombo and Singapore, southern fruits were bought for the prisoners.... They were meant to prevent scurvy. A big sensation was the distribution of soap with a pineapple flavor, some prisoners ate it."[29]

The acclaimed Polish socialist writer Stefan Żeromski portrayed Bronisław Piłsudski (as Gustaw Bezmian) in his 1912 novel *Uroda* życia (The Beauty of Life). It is notable that Żeromski belonged to the relatively numerous group of mutual acquaintances of Piłsudski and Conrad Korzeniowski. Żeromski described a prisoners' rebellion on board a prison-ship, organized by Bezmian and suppressed by Russian guards. In reality no such rebellion took place and the prisoners were delivered to their destination as planned. It is difficult to establish the precise date of Piłsudski's stay in Singapore, but it is known that he started his journey from Odessa on June 8, 1887 and reached his final destination of Sakhalin on August 3, 1887.

Given the similarity in the social backgrounds of Piłsudski and Conrad Korzeniowski, the contrast in their position while both of them found themselves in Singapore was indeed striking: one was a prisoner of a European imperial power (Russia), while the other was a functionary of the colonial trade mechanism of another European imperial power (Britain). The latter's status as a member of an occupied nation serving the occupiers of other nations stood in direct contradiction to the nineteenth century Polish Romantic motto which emphasized the internationalism of the then Polish patriots: "For your freedom and ours."

While Piłsudski was being transported to Singapore, Conrad Korzeniowski was about to join the crew of the trade ship *Vidar* which regularly commuted between Singapore and the smaller ports on the eastern shores of Borneo. He started his service sailing out from Singapore on August 22, 1887 as

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28 Sokolov and Belyaeva Sachuk, "Bronisław Piłsudski—an Outstanding Polish Researcher, 19.

29 Chociłowski, *Bronisława Piłsudskiego pojedynek z losem*, 62.

the first officer of the *Vidar*. By then he was a naturalized British citizen and held a captain's license. He spent four and a half months on the ship and—as Maya Jasanoff notes—those months arguably had a greater impact on his future creative work than any other period in his life. This was when Józef Korzeniowski started to become Joseph Conrad.[30]

Conrad as the Anti-Kipling of Southeast Asia

Reportedly Conrad started writing his prose around that time and eventually became a full-time author in the 1890s. International audiences appreciated his creative genius, but it took many decades before Conrad's biographers began to identify details of the reality which inspired his novels: it transpired that his books were often based on real, rather than fictional, characters and events experienced by Conrad and/or his fellow sailors operating in Southeast Asia. To be sure, Conrad's work belongs to fiction, but it is undoubtedly informed by the writer's biography. The imagery and mental frames of reference in his novels were the direct fruit of Conrad's life and travels in the colonial world.

The names of real people and places were often changed but the novels frequently contain an almost photographic reflection of the maritime and colonial realities of the region. For example, Singapore was referred to as "the eastern port" rather than by its actual name, but the descriptions of the shore and the emerging city are in fact detailed and accurate. Many of the stories subsequently included in Conrad's novels had been heard by the future author in the Charles Emmerson Breakfast Rooms, one of Conrad's favorite spots in Singapore, in the course of the 1880s.

Jerry Allen and Norman Sherry provided numerous facts regarding Conrad's life on the sea and in Southeast Asia, respectively.[31] It was established that the literary character Lord Jim had been based on the real biographies of the British-born sailor Podmore Williams (who, together with other members of the crew had escaped from the *Jedah*, a ship carrying Muslim pilgrims, and lived

30 Maya Jasanoff, *The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World* (London: William Collins, 2017). The Polish edition: Maya Jasanoff, *Joseph Conrad i narodziny globalnego świata* (Poznan: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2018).

31 Jerry Allen, *The Sea Years of Joseph Conrad* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1965); Norman Sherry, *Conrad's Eastern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966). I used the Polish editions: Jerry Allen, *Morskie lata Conrada* [Conrad's sea years](Gdansk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1971); Norman Sherry, *Wschodni świat Conrada* [Conrad's eastern world] (Gdansk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1972).

in Singapore when Conrad was there) as well as other real-life figures such as William Lingard (aka Rajah Laut), an English merchant and protector of the Malay in the area of the Berau river in east Borneo. Conrad probably met Lingard at the Emmerson Breakfast Rooms in 1883 and later included him as a character in several novels.[32] Moreover, Lord Jim's character has echoes of at least one other real person. William Lingard's son, Jim, had been a trader based in Berau, who exported local goods through Conrad's ship, the *Vidar*. His local nickname, Tuan Jim, gave the famous novel its title.

Jasanoff's book on Conrad was published almost a century after the great writer's death, but it finally shed some light on an aspect usually absent from previous biographies of the former sailor: at the time of Conrad's service on the ship, the *Vidar* was singled out by the Dutch consul for its alleged conspicuous role in smuggling arms and transporting slaves from Donggala (on the island of Celebes or Sulawesi). Conrad, as the first officer, was responsible for the loading and unloading of passengers and cargo on the vessel. In his future writings he admitted to playing a role in the arms trade on Borneo, but never directly alluded to his own role in the slave trade. According to Jasanoff, there are enough hints in Conrad's writings to suggest he was at least aware of it.[33] To be sure, slavery was outlawed by both the British and the Dutch colonizers, but it continued, not least because the competing colonial powers did not yet exercise full control over the territories, and slavery was in fact frequently tolerated for the sake of profit. While he never spoke openly of his role in transporting enslaved human beings, the awareness that there were slaves on his ship may have been too heavy a burden for the Polish officer. Upon returning to the home port of Singapore after one of the regular voyages, he unexpectedly terminated his employment on the ship, a scene vividly described in one of his future masterpieces, the autobiographical short novel *The Shadow Line*.

Douglas Kammen reminds us that the main cargo on Conrad's ship was in fact of a different type:

> But what were Conrad and the ship on which he briefly served as first mate doing 34 miles upriver in this "God-forsaken hole"? The answer is coal—a commodity to be bought or appropriated by legal means or by outright force, and also one requiring labor that, likewise, could either be "free" or coerced.[34]

32 Allen, *Morskie lata Conrada*, 305.

33 Jasanoff, *Joseph Conrad i narodziny globalnego świata*, 134.

34 Douglas Kammen, "Conrad and Coal," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, December 11, 2019.

At best, Conrad's role was morally equivocal. After all, as Jasanoff notes, as a white officer in Asia, he belonged to a privileged minority on the basis of his race and religion.[35] A child of freedom fighters, raised in the spirit of resistance against imperialism and injustice, as a European in colonial Southeast Asia he himself navigated the imperialist system of exploitation in another part of the world. His subsequent writings earned him the moniker of "the Kipling of the Malay archipelago," even though he did not praise "the white man's burden."[36]

Judging by his own words, he truly enjoyed being a sailor and he became fascinated by the world of the East. Arguably, it satisfied his Romantic urges (after all, even while at sea, he remained an enthusiast of Polish Romantic poetry). Nevertheless, for various reasons, he also felt increasingly uncomfortable about serving the system. One can argue that the growing awareness of the moral ambiguity of his position vis-à-vis the colonial system can be at least partly related to Conrad's Polish identity.

It took some more years and experiences before Conrad could speak out openly against the cruelty of colonial exploitation in *The Heart of Darkness*, another autobiographical novel written in the wake of the author's experience in the Congo, but one can discern elements of an emerging critique of European colonialism on the pages of his "Asian" novels as well. To be sure, Conrad was not an overtly political writer (if anything, his orientation can probably be best described as "small c" conservatism), but he had a special sensitivity to the plight of the outcast, the marginalized, and the uprooted. In many of his works, one may identify traces of empathy with the people of Southeast Asia (and other non-whites) and of contempt for the mechanism of European colonization.

Conrad was not a soldier, but a civilian sailor. He sailed on vessels flying the British flag, but he was not in Her Majesty's Navy. Ostensibly, his role was not to unleash violence or discipline colonial subjects, but to facilitate and conduct trade. Nevertheless, numerous utterances in his books express the author's dislike of greed, the instrumentalization of human relations, and the hypocrisy of the free trade ideology underpinning the unequal, exploitative colonial economy. It is known that Conrad made little money in his job and was reluctant to accept lucrative trade opportunities that were available to him in his later (brief) role as a ship captain, as he somewhat ironically noted in *A Smile of Fortune*, another short autobiographical novel. Conrad noted dryly: "Ah! These commercial interests—spoiling the finest life under the sun. Why must the sea

35 Jasanoff, *Joseph Conrad i narodziny globalnego świata*, 131.

36 Jasanoff, *Joseph Conrad i narodziny globalnego świata*, 142.

be used for trade—and for war as well? Why kill and traffic on it, pursuing selfish aims of no great importance after all?"[37]

His aloofness vis-à-vis commerce and material self-interest can be at least partly related to his early socialization, i.e. his Polish Romantic upbringing and the Polish nobility's ethos which notoriously frowned upon mercantilism and utilitarian materialism. In the course of the nineteenth century, the impoverished nobility of Poland's East transformed itself into the country's intelligentsia, maintaining the noblesse oblige values of the social strata, emphasizing the sense of moral duty to society at the expense of personal enrichment. Many of the representatives of the intelligentsia devoted their lives to progressive social causes.[38]

Unlike Piłsudski, Conrad could not and did not immerse himself fully into the indigenous culture of Asia. As Jasanoff writes, he knew more about the Anglo-Dutch rivalry and the lives of European merchants and sailors than about topics such as the Islamic faith or Dayak communities in Borneo.[39] The narrators and main characters of his books were usually Europeans in Asia rather than Asians themselves, although complex, independent Asian characters also appear in his novels. At the same time, he can hardly be accused of an ignorant Eurocentric perspective. As one of very few Poles who had mastered a command of the Malay language at the time, he was able to communicate with Asian sailors on his boat. He studied the language further with the help of dictionaries upon his return to Europe. He took care to back up his own observations and other sailors' accounts of Malay culture by reading broadly the available literature on the subject. It is apparent that upon his return to Europe, Conrad repeatedly suffered from long bouts of depression, and perhaps writing about Southeast Asian landscapes was also a self-therapeutic exercise, rooted in personal memories and nostalgia.

Conrad's books often dwell on the fascinating interface between European and Asian identities, and the interplay and interaction of cultures, values, and civilizations. It is not accidental that so many characters in his books (often women) live at the crossroads of cultures; many of them have multiple identities and backgrounds, and in many cases they are of mixed race and ethnicity. Numerous characters in Conrad's novels set in Southeast Asia belong to the space in-between cultures, having mixed loyalties and uncertain identities.

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37 Joseph Conrad, "A Smile of Fortune," *The London Magazine* 25 (1911): 699.

38 Bohdan Cywiński, *Rodowody niepokornych* [Pedigrees of the rebellious] (Cracow: Znak, 1971) is a seminal work on the origins of the Polish progressive intelligentsia.

39 Jasanoff, *Joseph Conrad i narodziny globalnego świata*, 143.

Almost all of them are nomads, migrants, or members of dislocated diasporas. Conrad's world is the world of the borderland—the space of cultural diffusion, diversity, co-existence as well as confrontation. In this sense the Polish-British writer could be seen as a precursor to contemporary postcolonial and intercultural discourses.

The Burden of Polishness

Of course, Conrad could relate to those of mixed or multiple identities—as well as to outcasts and loners—so well not least of all thanks to his own status and life experience. He came from the multicultural town of Berdyczów in the east of Poland (now in Ukraine), where Polish, Jewish, Ukrainian, and Russian cultures confronted each other and intermingled.[40] In the words of Stefan Zabierowski: "Conrad's birthplace was exactly the space where many cultures blended together, and such coexistence and mutual understanding of different cultures is a distinguishing feature in Conrad—which he derived from home."[41]

Having been brought up in a fiercely patriotic Polish spirit, as a child he went with his parents into forced exile into the depths of Russia (a form of punishment for his father's revolutionary activities), an early experience of being an alien in a strange land. Having lost both parents, he came of age in Kraków, in the Polish part of the multinational Austro-Hungarian Empire. At the age of seventeen he embarked on a sailor's career, first in France, then in England. Throughout his life on the sea, he was always the only Pole among the crew. It should not be surprising he was often referred to as a Russian, and until 1888 he was in fact a Russian citizen before taking up British citizenship. In Southeast Asia he was not only a European, but a stranger among the Western Europeans. He was a British subject, proud to be sailing on and commanding British ships, but he remained somewhat Polish at heart too. In the words of Michał Komar, "it is sometimes claimed that from a political or ideological viewpoint, Conrad remained a Polish nobleman until the end of his life."[42] One of the greatest masters of English literature, he did not learn his adopted language until he was in his twenties and occasionally spoke of

40 On the multicultural sites of Conrad's youth in the Polish-Ukrainian borderlands, see for example Agnieszka Rybak and Anna Smółka, *Kresy—Ars moriendi* (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2020), 204, 214.

41 Stefan Zabierowski, "Conrad's Lord Jim in Poland," *Yearbook of Conrad Studies (Poland)* 2 (2006): 112.

42 Michał Komar, *Piekło Conrada* [Conrad's hell] (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1978), 122.

the difficulty in writing his prose in a non-native language (interestingly, he switched from English to French whenever he had a choice in a conversation).

An important thread in Conrad's novels is the longing for a community, for a sense of belonging. He frequently portrayed the ship crew as a community for which he felt the most affection. The crew members he wrote about, based on his experiences, were typically multinational, multicultural, and multiracial, composed of individuals of diverse class backgrounds. Conrad identified with the sailor's ethos, with the camaraderie, the bond, and the spirit that united the community on the ship in the often hard and dangerous work on the Indian Ocean and in the waters of Southeast Asia. His British maritime career up to the rank of captain was remarkable. As a writer he won fame and acclaim as one of the towering figures in the history of English literature. According to numerous accounts, he felt attached to his adopted country, its symbols and virtues.

At the same time, Conrad's novels revolve around the fate of the outsider, the outcast, the black sheep, such as the only Black man in the crew of the *Narcissus*, or Lord Jim, who unsuccessfully attempts to find his peace of mind and a sense of harmony through repeatedly relocating in the space between Burma and Borneo while being haunted by the ghosts of his past. Arguably, that was the way Conrad could have felt himself as the lone Polish sailor in the cosmopolitan environment of the Southeast Asian ship business. He stood out due to his national and class origin and he was sometimes, perhaps mockingly, referred to as "the Russian count" by his fellow sailors. Paul Langlois, a sugar trader from Mauritius, who had known Conrad in the late 1880s, wrote in a letter in 1931: "He [Conrad] was not too popular with his colleagues [ship captains in the Indian Ocean – R.P.] who ironically called him a 'Russian count'"[43]

It is through his interest in, and a high degree of identification with, the "other," the uprooted, and the defeated that he finds his empathy with the underdog, the colonized, and the exploited. Yet despite all his empathy with the colonized world and criticism of imperialist colonialist exploitation, he did not join or endorse any anti-colonial organizations or liberation movements. On the contrary, he expressed scepticism about political activity and radical groups. This stance might also be related to his traumatic personal past, the past of the Korzeniowski family, and the then fate of Poland. His father had

43 Quoted in Allen, *Morskie lata Conrada*, 374. There is no doubt that Conrad himself did not identify or present himself as a Russian and he renounced his Russian passport in 1886. Cf. Christiane Maria Binder, "Cosas de Russia: Joseph Conrad's Confessions about Russia and Russians," *Практики и интерпретации: журнал филологических, образовательных и культурных исследований* 2, no. 2 (2017): 55–90.

been an ardent revolutionary conspirator and a Romantic poet. The failure of the 1863 uprising against the Russian Empire resulted in the family's forced exile and subsequent poverty and ill health leading to the deaths of both parents of the young Józef. As an orphan, he was acutely aware of the collapse of the hopes of the Polish independence movement and the widespread disillusionment after its defeat. A new wave of intellectuals and writers championed "positivism," i.e. the renunciation of armed struggle and political radicalism, and concentrated on everyday economic and cultural activity instead. Conrad's lack of faith in anti-colonial activism arguably echoed the lack of faith in the Polish national liberation efforts.

The "heroism" of Conrad's characters lay not in subversive engagement but rather in simply living out one's everyday duties and obligations towards others against the odds. This stance was often met with criticism. A leading Polish Marxist literary critic, Jan Kott, criticized it in 1946 as "the heroism of slaves."[44] Previously, the famous Polish novelist, Eliza Orzeszkowa, accused Conrad of betraying his native language and homeland, a charge Conrad took exceptionally badly.[45]

Bronisław Piłsudski (who also experienced personal and family misfortune as a bitter result of radical political engagement) also strayed away from direct revolutionary activity for the next years and decades. Even upon his return to Poland he did not actively re-join the Polish independence movement led by his brother Józef. Bronisław remained an independent intellectual and researcher.

In both cases, the outbreak of the First World War between the European imperialist powers spelled the restoration of hopes for Poland's freedom and the reignition of political engagement. In the first months of the war, Conrad and his family were stuck in Galicia, the Polish part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. He had travelled to Poland in the company of Józef Rettinger, a Polish-born top-level international political operator of the twentieth century. He spent the bulk of the time in Zakopane, the place where Bronisław Piłsudski and Malinowski had met just a few years earlier. During that period he met and discussed current events with numerous members of the Polish cultural and political elites.[46] Evacuated to London via Vienna and Genoa, he authored

44 Stefan Zabierowski, "'He was one of us.' The Polish reception of the work of Joseph Conrad Korzeniowski," *Yearbook of Conrad Studies (Poland)* 10 (2015), 171.

45 Stefan Zabierowski, *Polska misja Conrada* [Conrad's Polish mission] (Katowice: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1984), 31; Kocówna, *Polskość Conrada*, 120.

46 Stefan Zabierowski, *Polska misja Conrada*, (Zabierowski devoted the whole book to describing the episode).

a memorandum to the British government outlining the possibility for Polish independence, the most political act of his life. Piłsudski, too, became politically active during the war, most notably as a member of the Paris-based Polish National Committee.

It is said that in spite of the lack of any overtly patriotic themes in Conrad's novels, they became a major source of inspiration for the next generations of those who wanted to fight for Poland, including members of the resistance during the Nazi occupation. Apparently Conrad's principles, such as "duty" and "honor," hardened during his sailor's career in Southeast Asia, resonated with the new generations of readers in his Eastern European country of origin. It should also be noted that the world's top authority on Conrad's life and work, Zdzisław Najder, became a leader of the clandestine Polish Independence Movement (Polskie Porozumienie Niepodległościowe) in the 1970s, later a political exile and head of the Polish section of Radio Free Europe, sentenced to death in absentia in 1983 by a martial law court of the regime subjugated by the Soviet Union. Polish history, burdened with its cycles of anti-imperial liberation struggle and repression, seemingly made a full circle since the years of Conrad's youth. Even more dots can be connected when we note that Najder was the co-editor of a collection of writings by Józef Piłsudski (Bronisław's brother and national hero).[47]

Many Polish critics interpreted the "jumping ship" moment in *Lord Jim* as a metaphor for Conrad's own "jumping ship," i.e. leaving his country suffering foreign occupation, not participating in the Polish émigré world of patriotic networks, abandoning his patriotic duties, not writing in Polish, and leaving behind completely his previous Polish identity. In other words, it was a subtle reflection of the author's own bad conscience,[48] one which underpinned his sense of loss and deprivation. In fact, there is little or no evidence to support this Polonocentric interpretation. Conrad did compare a country to a ship—in the *Heart of Darkness* and *The Nigger of the Narcissus*—but the metaphor was explicitly about Britain. The nature of Jim's original sin, based on the real story of a crew abandoning a ship carrying hundreds of Muslim pilgrims from Singapore on their Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca), was a betrayal of the sailor's ethics and of one's human duty to another, even to those of a different creed or culture.

47 Roman Kuźniar and Zdzisław Najder, eds., *Piłsudski do czytania* [Reading Pilsudski] (Cracow: Znak Horyzont, 2016).

48 This interpretation was first suggested by Wiktor Gomulicki in 1905. See Kocówna, *Polskość Conrada*, 134.

Overall, it seems that for over a century, Conrad studies have suffered from a misguided Polonocentrism (among Polish authors)[49] on the one hand, and from a frequent marginalization of discernible Polish threads in Conrad's life and oeuvre (among non-Polish authors) on the other.

There is another theme in *Lord Jim* which might be somewhat more justifiably prone to analyzing through the prism of interplay between Conrad's Polish background and his experiences of Southeast Asia in the late 1880s. This concerns Patusan, an imaginary country located on the island of Borneo. Patusan was long thought of as a product of Conrad's imagination, an amalgamation of fictional characters and locations. Half a century after the publication of *Lord Jim*, and decades after the author's death, Conrad's biographers discovered that part of the novel was also largely based on real characters and locations, apparently in the Tanjung Redeb area of Borneo.

On another level, though, Patusan can be read as an imaginary country with features not just of a nineteenth century sultanate but also of the author's own country of origin, Poland. Proud of its glorious past, inhabited by an ethnically mixed people notable for their kindness, hospitality, and sense of honor, it nevertheless suffers from foreign interference and manipulations, invasions as well as internal strife, disorganization, strategic blunders, and betrayals. Of course, these features could be identified in any country's history, but it seems they have been a particularly omnipresent component of Poland's history (and self-critical national historical consciousness) ever since the seventeenth century (as depicted in the popular novels that shaped modern Polish identity written by Nobel Prize winner Henryk Sienkiewicz, Conrad's contemporary). Lord Jim, a foreigner, becomes the country's de facto leader and effects a degree of modernization and self-organization in the community's interest, but he too makes a fatal mistake and is rejected. Throughout the centuries many of the elected kings of Poland were foreigners with modernizing ambitions. Few of them succeeded, having been faced with rejection, domestic intrigue, and foreign intervention, leading up to the collapse of the state and full-scale foreign occupation in the late eighteenth century (and lasting well into the twentieth).

49 For example, the esteemed Polish writer Stefan Żeromski claimed in 1925: "Because only we can understand him [Conrad – R.P.] completely, feel what he says openly and what he hides, what he conceals and covers with symbols. We alone, because he is also a Polish writer, although he wrote in English" (quoted in: Stefan Zabierowski, "Conrad's Lord Jim in Poland," 100-101. Ironically, Conrad was championed on the pages of *Morze* (The Sea), a magazine published by the infamous Maritime and Colonial League throughout the 1920s and 1930s as a supposed symbol of the Polish colonialist spirit (I am thankful to Marta Grzechnik for providing me with the information about *Morze*, together with detailed documentation).

The same fate awaited Patusan (as well as the really existing state formations of Southeast Asia) barely a hundred years later, as chronicled in the fictional account authored by the Polish nobleman-sailor who had travelled along the shores of Borneo.

Although he rarely talked about it (and on occasion denied it), Conrad himself also experienced more or less subtle forms of ethnic discrimination. Despite passing the ladder of examinations, and eventually achieving the formal level of captain, he found it difficult to obtain employment on par with his qualifications and spent months looking for a position in between jobs. In total he served as captain for one year only, in 1888, commanding the *Otago*, which he led from Bangkok to Singapore in dramatic circumstances (as described in *The Shadow Line*). In most cases, however, he usually worked in positions below his level of qualifications, e.g. he was the first officer rather than the captain on the *Vidar*.

At the same time, there are many other accounts suggesting he never fully assimilated into British society, or, perhaps, was never considered fully British by his social environment—the "native" Britons—either in his onshore or offshore life. During the time spent on the *Vicar* moving along the shores of Borneo, he struck a socially distant figure, often seen alone reading a book or writing in his cabin. Characteristically, on his distant journeys he held on to his books of Polish Romantic poetry, the hallmark of the nineteenth century Polish national identity.

In between commissions, Conrad had lengthy periods of unemployment, even after obtaining high-level qualifications as a result of British seaboard examinations. Such obstacles, as well as his deteriorating health, eventually forced him to abandon his maritime career. Additionally, he often had to accept jobs below the level of his qualifications. Jassanoff attributed this situation to an oversupply of sailors in the Southeast Asian job market at the time.[50] This may be true, but apparently a British-born captain in Singapore had a better chance to find a position in line with his rank than a Polish-born British citizen with similar qualifications. Such discrimination was in fact commonplace.

As a writer too—even though he managed to strike a chord with the British audience through his stories of Southeast Asia and the seaman's life—he believed he would have been more successful commercially if not for his baggage as a Polish-born outsider. Despite his masterly command of the adopted language combined with his exceptional talent, for much of his subsequent

50 Jasanoff, *Joseph Conrad i narodziny globalnego świata*, 129.

literary career Conrad felt a sense of alienation from the mainstream literary audience in Britain. He attributed it both to his origins and to a degree of xenophobia in the British literary milieu. Conrad's later rejection of honorary doctorates from Oxford and Cambridge as well as of a knighthood illustrates a long-term detachment from the mainstream institutions of British society.

Symbolically, Conrad's status as a semi-outsider, a semi-stranger on British ships and in British society, was confirmed upon his death. In an obituary, while noting the writer's achievements, Virginia Woolf once again alluded to his position as "the other" among native Britons, calling him "a guest" rather than "one of us":

> Suddenly, without giving us time to arrange our thoughts or prepare our phrases, our guest has left us; and his withdrawal without farewell or ceremony is in keeping with his mysterious arrival, long years ago, to take up his lodging in this country. For there was always an air of mystery about him. It was partly his Polish birth, partly his memorable appearance, partly his preference for living in the depths of the country, out of ear-shot of gossips, beyond reach of hostesses, so that for news of him one had to depend upon the evidence of simple visitors with a habit of ringing door-bells who reported of their unknown host that he had the most perfect manners, the brightest eyes, and spoke English with a strong foreign accent.[51]

Conrad has been one of the most recognized—and perhaps, at the same time, most misunderstood—writers of his generation. Recognizing the place of Conrad in the Western literary canon, Ania Loomba asks: "do we need to use Joseph Conrad, whom Achebe called a 'bloody racist,' to challenge colonialism? To the extent that Shakespeare and Conrad are still taught and still read in the postcolonial world, why not?"[52] His Polishness has been variously overstated and understated. It might be useful to stress his special position at an unlikely interface of cultures, with both his Polishness and love for Southeast Asia as producing a unique blend of artistic and ethical perspectives.

51 Virginia Woolf, "Joseph Conrad," in *The Common Reader* (London: Hogarth Press, 1925), available online: https://www.literature-no-trouble.com/joseph-conrad-an-essay-by-virginia-woolf/.

52 Ania Loomba, *Colonialism and Postcolonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 81.

Conclusion

According to Douglas Kammen's thought-provoking commentary during the "Escaping Kakania" workshop,[53] had Piłsudski and Conrad met in Singapore in 1887, their conversations would likely have centered on the plight of their Eastern European homeland, Poland, as a victim of foreign occupation. Had they met in London in 1910, their conversation would have been different and much broader in scope. They might have additionally touched upon global issues of imperialism, their life-altering experiences in Southeast and East Asia, and overcoming cultural (and "racial") differences within humankind.

Apparently, the contrast in the life situations and social circumstances of Korzeniowski and Piłsudski in 1887 (and in later years) could hardly have been more stark, as one was a colonial ship captain and the other a political prisoner chained under the deck. However, they both entered history as pioneering, dissenting intellectuals who transgressed the global hierarchies of caste, race, and subjugation, championing an interconnected, holistic, and humanistic approach to "travel writing." Arguably, in both cases it was enabled by a combination of the experience of colonial Asia and the rootedness in Polish history and identity, especially the Polish Romantic ethos.

The breadth and ambiguity of the discursive space drawing from both perspectives (Eastern European and global), as well as their potential interconnectedness, is, arguably, an inspiring trope for the future of (post) colonial studies with a Polish tinge.

The Polish historical experience contains a spectrum of positionalities: with roles ranging from the victimizer to the victimized (and everything in between). It may assist in problematizing simplistic binaries and false dichotomies in cultural representations and historical narratives, while also offering a potential source of inspiration for the construction of intercultural empathy and an appreciation of the complexity of human experiences in the colonial and post-colonial era.

53 "Escaping Kakania: Eastern European Travels in Colonial Southeast Asia" workshop hosted online by the National University of Singapore on March 4, 2021.

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