

Introduction

IN THE PAST TWENTY YEARS, the social sciences have witnessed a development of a new field of interdisciplinary studies. This has managed to focus the thoughts of historians and political scientists on the particular phenomenon of large political structures, multinational in nature, characterised by a pattern of domination and collaboration running along the centre-periphery axis, by a particular ideology, legitimising expansion, by specific techniques of control and, finally, the resistance that they meet. A phenomenon of — to use a single word — empires, with the new field of studies that may simply be termed “imperiology.”

The studies of empire have not grown out of a political vacuum, but rather in close relation with the crisis, and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union. What came to the fore at that point was one of the most interesting venues of interpreting this phenomenon, through reference to the concept of empire. It equally became a tool of political discourse over the present state and the future of the post-Soviet territory. At that time, the Soviet Union came to be described not simply as an empire but as the last empire — a particular relic, unadjusted to the (post)modern requirements, and one bound to collapse. So it was easier to seek the elements of continuity, or at least congruence between the structures, functioning and the crisis of the Soviet empire and the preceding Russian Empire that developed from the 16th century until the year 1917. This muse at the past, to some extent, necessitated joint efforts of both political scientists, as well as historians.

The past several years, once again not without reference to current affairs — this time to what has appeared, and has been noted by the observers (as well as the architects) of American policy to be its imperial inclination, but also with reference to the equally clear neo-imperial inclination in policies advanced by Russia under Vladimir Putin — have witnessed a new wave of interpretations, relating to the phenomenon of an empire. Thus not all scholars

are willing to discard it into “the dustbin of history,” while the Soviet Union comes to be seen not as the last, but as the first empire of the new type — intentionally concealing its imperial nature behind the facade of formal realisation to the call for the self-determination of nations. What has been disclosed (or perhaps merely strengthened) in the process, was, in the words of Mark Beissinger, “the positive discourse of empire.”¹

Regardless of the changing political trends and interpretations, hundreds of books, thousands of articles, new periodicals (with the most interesting among them, published in Kazan, “Ab Imperio”) and Internet sites solely dedicated to the subject, numerous academic conferences with the word “empire” placed in the title — are all results of a visible trend, as well as a valuable research attainment. It has been strongly marked by the studies undertaken by Anglo-Saxon scholars: beginning with the already classic introductions to imperiology by Shmuel Eisenstadt and Michael Doyle, through the syntheses by Geoffrey Hosking, Dominic Lieven, all the way to the new theoretical propositions by Alexander Motyl or the already mentioned Mark Beissinger — without even making a reference to the authors of the many exceptionally important monographic works. Equally important in this field are the works of German-language scholars — to mention at least Andreas Kappeler or Andreas Renner, the French (beginning with the pioneer studies by Hélène Carrère d’Encausse), the Japanese — among whom it would be difficult to disregard the enormous research effort of Kimitaka Matsuzato. In Russia, the amount of work undertaken in imperiology — considering only those attempts, which fulfil the highest scholarly criteria — is particularly large, to mention, simply as an example, the studies carried out by Alexei Salmin, Emil Pain, Mikhail Iliin, Sviatoslav Kaspe — among political scientists, or Alexei Miller, Leonid Gorizontov, Mikhail Dolbilov, Alexander Etkind, Andrei Zorin — among historians. The new field is developing in an equally intensive manner on the western *okrainy* of the Russian Empire — particularly in Ukraine, where the inspiration came from the work of American and Canadian researchers of Ukrainian origins (Roman Szporluk and Zenon Kohut), as well as in Lithuania — where the main outpost of the new trend in studies is held by Darius Staliunas.²

¹ See: M.R. Beissinger, *Rethinking Empire in the Wake of Soviet Collapse*, in: *Ethnic Politics and Post-Communism: Theories and Practice*, eds. Z. Barany, R.G. Moser, Ithaca 2005; cf.: T. Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939*, Ithaca 2001.

² See: a synthetic summary of the attainments of world imperiology studies over the past several years by Kimitaka Matsuzato (*Russian Imperiology and Area Studies*) and Jan Kusber (*The Russian Empire as a Subject Matter of East European Historic Research*), in: “Ab Imperio” (2005) 3, pp. 443–453; see a separate volume: *Novaia imperskaia istoriia postsovetского prostranstva*,

As Thomas Kuhn noted years back, the academics sometimes fall prey to a misleading proposition — when they make claims that the change of a scholarly paradigm changes the world. Has this new “imperiological” paradigm truly changed the historical reality of pre-revolutionary Russia, the Soviet Union, post-Soviet Russia? Naturally — not. Yet through the intensive and multifaceted application of that very paradigm, we have come to see and appreciate many new details that have so far remained overshadowed by earlier research, we have discovered many new connecting lines, far better is our understanding of the relations that tie the growth of modern nations and nationalisms with the crises of imperial structures.

And what about Poland? In Poland, historical research on the Russian Empire has been carried out rather independently of the new trend, independently of its theoretical and methodological postulates. The significant and growing achievements of this research, marked by important source studies conducted by various historians (among them Wiktoria Śliwowska, Elżbieta Kaczyńska, Wiesław Caban, Leszek Zasztowt, Andrzej Szwarz, Janusz Sobczak, Leszek Jaśkiewicz, Henryk Głębocki, Stanisław Wiech or Witold Rodkiewicz — to mention only the authors of the most momentous studies), penetrate mainly the key issue for the crises of the Russian Empire in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, the Polish problem — Polish resistance, the national movement, but also the efforts at suppressing that very problem, efforts undertaken by the imperial centre and its bureaucratic agents, the methods used to “adapt” former Polish *okrainy* to the structures of the Empire, and finally, to promote collaboration.³

One might be inclined to say that Polish historians — much like Monsieur Jourdain, who did not even know that he has been speaking prose — in undertaking this issue, have in a natural way carried the advance of contemporary imperiology. And while they did carry (and continue to carry) the advance of that field with much interesting — research-wise — results,

eds. I. Gerasimov, S. Glebov, A. Kaplunovskii, M. Mogilner, A. Semenov, Kazan 2004; *Rossiiskaia imperiia v sravnitelnoi perspektive*, ed. A. Miller, Moskva 2004. I have undertaken an attempt at acquainting the Polish readers with the new approaches to the history of Empire in the article: *Ab Imperio — nowe spojrzenia na historię Rosji*, in: A. Nowak, *Od imperium do imperium. Spojrzenia na historię Europy Wschodniej*, Kraków 2004, pp. 13–42.

³ I have presented a historiographic overview of this subject in the article: *Bor’ba za okrainy, bor’ba za wyzhyvaniie: Rossiiskaia imperiia XIX v. i poliaki, poliaki i imperiia (obzor polskoi istoriografii)*, in: *Zapadnyie okrainy Rossiiskoi imperii*, eds. M. Dolbilov, A. Miller, Moskva 2006, pp. 429–464; to compare the works of historiography treating the subject of Empire over the entirety of post-Soviet territories see, e.g.: A. Kappeler, *The Russian Empire and Its Nationalities in Post-Soviet Historiographies*, in: *The Construction and Deconstruction of National Histories in Slavic Eurasia*, ed. T. Hayashi, Sapporo 2003, pp. 35–52.

the imperiology all around the world (be it Anglo-Saxon, German, Russian, trans- or post-national, global) should, to a much greater extent become acquainted with their research. This is the first reason why I have decided to present here “a Polish perspective” in contemporary imperial studies.

Is there any specific, common trait of the works prepared within such a perspective? I would look for one of possible common traits in a combination of imperial studies with memories of victimhood. In the past twenty years, discussions on the problem of victims and empires, or victims of empires, have had two disparate threads. The first is characterised by the re-discovery of the concept of “the evil empire:” an empire as a monster which we have come to know through its victims. We can remember them, count them up, demand account of their fate, draw up political and moral balances. This tendency exploits the more general phenomenon of contemporary culture: the tendency to take an interest in what is marginal, what lends itself to violence, who is the real or potential victim. Being a victim, having a victim on one’s own side, gives legitimacy in debates which perhaps are not so much historical as political. For certain, we find these types of tendencies, with differing degrees of intensity, in the historiographies of countries which escaped the grip of an empire — e.g. the Soviet empire.⁴

In parallel, however, after the fall of that empire, a new branch of international historical-political studies has developed, which jocularly could be called imperiology. Like once upon a time the academic world of Western historiography and political science distanced itself from the Reaganite concept of “the evil empire,” similarly, this new discipline accentuates its strictly scientific research purposes, distancing itself from the binary opposition of empire-victim and, in preference, seeks to identify the phenomena of circulation, discontinuity, inconsistency, acceptance, semantic games, dialectics of discourse, functions stemming from structural conditions. In general, in its research remit, the new imperiology avoids topics in which “the evil empire” was in evidence *viz.*: brutal repressions, political executions of opponents, deportations...

⁴ See, e.g.: E. Koresaar, K. Kuutma, E. Lauk, *The Twentieth Century as a Realm of Memory*, in: *The Burden of Remembering. Recollections & Representations of the 20th Century*, eds. iidem, Helsinki 2009, pp. 9–36; H. Rousso, *History of Memory, Policies of the Past: What For?*, in: *Conflicted Memories. Europeanizing Contemporary Histories*, eds. K.H. Jarausch, Th. Lindenberger, New York–Oxford 2007, pp. 37–54; W. Jilge, *Competing Victimhoods — Post-Soviet Ukrainian Narratives on World War II*, in: *Shared History, Divided Memory: Jews and Others in Soviet-occupied Poland*, eds. E. Barkan, E.A. Cole, K. Struve, Leipzig 2007, pp. 103–135; *The Construction and Deconstruction of National Histories in Slavic Eurasia*; see also: E. Domańska, *Historie niekonwencjonalne. Refleksje o przeszłości w nowej humanistyce*, Poznań 2006, pp. 160–194 (here a brilliant analysis of the contemporary phenomenon of “the politics of dead bodies”).

Insofar as part of the historiography of the former imperial peripheries abuses, not without political overtones, the vantage point of the victim, in turn, some historians who come from the centre of the former empire, echo the tendency of world imperiology by discreetly relegating the problem of repressiveness and its victims to the status of a secondary issue, or to dilute it in a multiplicity of contexts and structures. In both cases one can muse over the influence of political motives on the construction of a picture of the past.⁵

Is there any possibility to avoid these traps and to present a perspective which unites (academic) sense and (memorial) sensitivity? Is this at all worth achieving? I try to deal with these questions practically in the first part of the book. These questions obviously stem from the specific heritage of Eastern European — Russian, Polish, and other — intelligentsias. It seemed to me tempting to look at this heritage from three different angles of imperiological studies. How the development of intelligentsias as social groups was influenced by imperial structures and dynamics, and how it influenced the Empire's fate in turn. How the revolution which overturned the Empire has been perceived by these intellectuals who shared a perspective of Eastern European "imperial victimhoods" and those (from the so called West) who didn't. Finally, how the Post-Soviet Intelligentsia in Russia develops imperial discourses. These three problems or questions form a narrative axis of the second part of this volume.

The third one comes back to "a Polish perspective." This time to the problem of historical Polish intellectual discourses of Poland itself — perceived either as an empire (or rather failed empire), or as a centre of anti-imperial rebellion for all Eastern (and Central) Europe. How to put these discourses into a context of the contemporary memorial debates (even "memorial civil wars") waged in Poland? — this is one more question I have tried to present in this last part of the book, along with a problem of historical representation of these Polish (and other "Eastern European") perspectives in contemporary "Western" studies of the region.

And so it ends. Or rather, I should hope, it opens new venues for reflections on empires and victims in Eastern European histories which (probably) have not ended yet.

⁵ For more on this topic see: A. Nowak, *Zsyłka w kontekście imperialnej polityki Rosji*, in: idem, *Historie politycznych tradycji. Piłsudski, Putin i inni*, Kraków 2007, pp. 101–106; cf.: idem, *Istoria kak prestuplenie*, „Ab Imperio” (2009) 3, pp. 122–138 and idem, *Istoryk na poli bytwy za pamiat*, „Ukraina Moderna” XV (2009) 4, pp. 95–102; L. Zasztowt, *Inconvenient Neighbor: Some Reflections on Polish Historical Research concerning Russia and the USSR*, in: *East and West. History and Contemporary State of Eastern Studies*, eds. J. Malicki, L. Zasztowt, Bibliotheca Europae Orientalis, XXXIV, Didactica 5, Warszawa 2009, pp. 305–3024; J. Malicki, *Polish Pre-war Sovietology: Two Examples — Eastern Institute in Warsaw and East Institute in Vilna, and the Centre for East European Studies Today*, ibidem, pp. 289–295; *W objęciach Wielkiego Brata. Sowietci w Polsce 1944–1993*, eds. K. Rokicki, S. Stępień, Warszawa 2009; p. 504.