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# THE VARIETIES OF EUROPEAN COLONIALISM IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE: THE POLISH AND THE CZECH CASES

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**Colonialism**  
**Czech lands**  
**Europe**  
**Poland**  
**race**  
**“varieties of European colonialism”**  
.....

*This essay examines the Polish and the Czech engagements with colonization. Whilst the present-day Poland and the Czech Republic are often perceived as nations “without colonies”, the Central European region throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries developed colonial imaginations as part of the “varieties of European colonialism” channeled towards the local needs. By focusing on individuals as well as collective entities linked to various territories in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), we re-engage the conventional discussions on colonialism from a region often considered peripheral to global colonial histories. The form of colonialism re-engaged here is intrinsic to the processes of inclusion and exclusion that continue to influence the perceptions of “race”, Europeanness, and non-Europeanness across CEE.*

## Introduction

Until recently, scholarly research on European colonial histories has predominantly centered on well-known colonial powers such as Spain, Portugal, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands. However, the involvement of peripheral European nations in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in broader European colonial projects has received limited attention. This neglect extends not only to CEE but also to the Nordic nations, where the topic of colonialism is just beginning to emerge within the larger European colonial framework. This lack of consideration has been attributed to the enduring notion of “colonial exceptionalism”, as highlighted by Loftsdóttir and Jensen (2012). The neglect of colonialism in the Nordic nations has led to the perception and representation of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden as “the odd ones out in the post-colonial Western world” (Palmberg 2009, 35). These nations are assumed to have no colonial histories and thus are not burdened with the cultural oppression, economic exploitation, and political repression typically associated with colonialism. As a result, they are often seen as deviating from the pattern of Western prejudice, racism, and paternalism towards non-white societies (Palmberg 2009).

In contrast, the Nordics’ interactions with the Sámi people in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland had produced broader colonial and economic advantages for the Nordics. However, the most telling of these colonial undertakings have been the activities of the Danish West India Company which played a significant role outside Europe, engaging in colonial activities in Africa, Asia, and North America (Olson 1991; Ward 1930). Of particular importance to this colonial endeavor are also the Swedish colonial efforts, through the activities of the New Sweden Company, that surpassed those of the French, English, and Dutch in the Americas and the Caribbean islands of St. Thomas and Saint-Barthélemy (Glete 2010, 2012). Indeed, the economic benefits of colonialism for many Nordic nations extended beyond their continental pursuits, encompassing Christian missionary activities as part of the Western civilizing mission. Their involvement in colonial enterprises in South-East Africa (Namibia) and the Congo had significant economic implications (Vuorela 2009; Waehle 2006).

Similarly, Austria’s role in colonial histories rarely appears in the broader colonial discourses, leading to a significant misunderstanding of the nation as having a “clean colonial past” (Sauer 2012, 6). In particular, the involvement of Austrian (or Austro-Hungarian) individuals in geographical research in Africa as part of the broader European overseas expansion contradicts the assumption of Austria’s lack of colonial connections. These individuals, both men and a few women, were integral to the informal and sometimes formal aspects of overseas expansion, similar to travelers from other European countries (Sauer 2012). An essential aspect of this involvement was

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the recruitment of Austrian mercenaries as part of the Association Internationale pour l'Exploration et la Civilisation de l'Afrique Centrale, a joint effort involving all European nations to support King Leopold II of Belgium in exploring mostly “uncharted regions” of the Congo (Aleksander 1971). Although the Austro-Hungarian state itself may not have directly participated in these specific expeditions, the involvement of Austrian explorers in overseas territories on various missions – be they commercial, scientific, or touristic – had significant colonial implications (Sauer 2012).

All this leads to Kaljundi's (2022) critical question: How can we find a method and a voice to use when speaking about the colonial realities of Eastern Europe and its decolonization, while these concepts are defined by a mass of historical and theoretical work on the colonial and racial experience of the West? And is there such a thing as a specifically Eastern European colonial legacy? Grappling with the interrelated histories of colonization, despite their complexities in CEE, might offer a productive way of addressing these challenges (Balogun 2024).

CEE's entanglements with colonialism can be better understood by examining the processes of nation-building in the region. This sheds light on how the Polish, Czech, and other nations saw themselves as part of the collectives of “European race” with a particular civilizational status. Throughout the nineteenth century, these nations lacked statehood and experienced real or perceived oppression and discrimination within the multinational Habsburg Empire. Their struggles for national independence, which were only successful in 1918, added another dimension to their engagement with the colonial issues. Their unique self-representations intertwined with the prevailing colonial manifestations in Western Europe, whilst also setting themselves apart from it (Mark 2022). Understandably, histories of colonialism differ depending on the context and location, but their overall implications seem to be overwhelmingly linked to whiteness and Europeanness, as Łazor (2022) argues:

It seems that in Poland, like in other European peripheries at the time, the ideology of race mirrored concepts from the colonial core. This ideology did not [only] result from colonial endeavors, or from any large-scale interaction with non-European peoples, but was largely adopted from the west. (Łazor 2022, 136)

As will be shown in the present analysis, the emulation of the above colonial accounts took different trajectories across CEE; nonetheless, their varieties overlapped to contribute to what appears to be a broader European project (Bhambra 2022a, 233–4). It is a recognition that brings into view the ways in which colonialism and its enduring legacies parallel postcolonial theory that emphasizes diverse logics of colonialism.

Despite the adoption and adaptation of colonial practices, CEE’s accounts of colonialism, as Mark (2022) and others have argued, have long seemed unassignable to the global accounts. Therefore, it is essential to acknowledge and study the colonial roles played by these seemingly less explored European countries to gain a more comprehensive understanding of Europe’s colonial expansion. To bring these considerations further, we explore two cases within CEE, namely the Polish and the Czech “entanglements with racialized projects of empire” (Baker 2018, 772) at the end of the nineteenth and in the first half of the twentieth century. Here, we focus strictly on the Polish and the Czech colonial-inspired activities both before and immediately after their attainment of statehood. This close examination not only provides essential accounts of their involvements in the European imperial projects but also explores the local and global implications of such involvements. To achieve this, we adopt various critiques of colonialism that are emerging in CEE. Specifically, we modify Bhabra’s (2022a) perspective on the “varieties of European colonialism” to challenge the notion of colonialism as a singular Western process. In doing so, we emphasize the unique characteristics of colonial experiences in CEE within that broader variety. Locating our analysis within the framework of the “varieties of European colonialism” is crucial as it allows us to shed light on the intricate reproduction of colonialism in several areas that are often overlooked by colonial and postcolonial scholars. This complex reproduction predominantly revolves around the belief in the superiority of whiteness and Europeanness, perpetuated by individuals and collective groups associated with various territories in CEE. In addition to emigrationist colonialism, the efforts encompassed the establishment of scientific and literary organizations, which gave rise to “national enclaves within the settler colonial projects of other nations” (Bhabra 2022a, 234).

In what follows, we seek a larger framing of Polish and Czech Lands as illustrative case studies of the “varieties of European colonialism” in CEE, as part of the broader colonial endeavors that brought resources and production benefits to the whole of Europe, whilst projecting the supreme European identity. In pursuing this argument, we aim to bring a number of incidents in Polish and Czech Lands into closer dialogues with recent and unfolding debates on colonialism, especially those debates initiated by Hansen and Jonsson (2011), Boatcă (2007), and Bhabra (2014). Through the analysis, we draw out the “blindspots” in the discourses on colonialism in contemporary Poland and the Czech Republic. Doing so allows us to provide evidence of both nations’ entanglements with the prevailing account of colonialism. Importantly, we acknowledge that the perception of a physically distinct “other” and the attempts at domination and/or exclusion did not originate solely in CEE. In particular, the centuries-long wars with the Ottoman Empire led to a wide range of mental adjustments and

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discourse strategies for the region to grapple with various internal and external “others”. However, the European colonial expansion of the nineteenth century brought about significant and transformative changes in CEE, primarily due to its strong connection with modernization processes, scientific advancements, and disciplinary practices.

### Locating Poles within the “colonial orbit”

1 It is important to state that Poland as well as the Czech Republic did not exist as sovereign nations until 1918. However, there was no shortage of Polish individuals in the German colonial dominations and the acquisition of overseas territories. As Kowalski (2012, 57) points out, a “large number of Poles did become committed to foreign colonial undertakings in the 17th and 18th centuries”. Some of the events described in this section focus on the activities carried out by Prussian Poles in the partitioned Poland in the nineteenth century. The activities were part of the struggle to ensure that the Polish nation prospered under German domination (see Ureña Valerio [2019] for more details on this).

In this section, we explore the colonial imaginations in Poland.<sup>1</sup> Many nations such as contemporary Poland, though not explicitly recognized as colonial players, possess a distinct self-perception of being separate from colonialism. However, they have still been involved in the colonial project in various ways and have derived benefits from such interactions (Lüthi, Falk, and Purtschert 2016, 1). To understand the expansion of the boundary of colonialism, it is important to begin with a nuanced historical framing that places Polish individuals within the “Colonial Orbit”. These individuals sought to navigate through a hierarchy of European nations, whilst simultaneously pursuing “internal policies that reflected an ongoing repositioning on global civilizational scales. In all these processes”, Ciancia (2020, 3–4) argues, “the meanings of civilization were never static”. The fluidity of such internal policies equally manifested in the colonizing mission that was later embarked on by Poland as a sovereign state. As Bhambra (2022a, 234) contends, colonial projects were not only driven by states, trading companies in collaboration with states, but also through individuals and communities from various European populations.

The above assessment brings into view Stefan Szolc-Rogoziński’s anthropological exploration of West Africa between 1882 and 1883, often seen as Poland’s important point of entry into the hierarchies of Europeanness, most notably outside Europe (Rhode 2013). Until recently, this exploration has not received adequate attention as part of the broader European colonial projects initiated by Portugal, Spain, France, Britain, and Germany. Szolc-Rogoziński was a Polish explorer who campaigned to raise funds for his exploration with an attempt to create a Polish colony in Cameroon (Rhode 2013). His exploration was largely supported by Polish intellectuals such as Henryk Sienkiewicz, Filip Sulimierski, and Boleslaw Prus, who once likened the exploration to Christopher Columbus’s 1492 discovery of the Americas. Szolc-Rogoziński also received support from a few organizations in Warsaw that assisted in raising funds for the exploration of the “unknown Lands of Cameroon” (Ureña Valerio 2019, 119). The exploration, seen as “the first Polish Expedition to Africa”, was perceived as an opportunity for Polish individuals to showcase their capabilities in the exploration of

the world along with other European nations in the areas of geographical discoveries:

The explorer proposed to fill in the black regions in Africa that have not yet been penetrated by any other European nation. He wanted to reach the lands in the eastern part of the Cameroon Mountains where very little was known about the inhabitants, and thus give Poles a place among the great nineteenth-century European discoverers. (Ureña Valerio 2019, 119)

Upon arriving in Cameroon, Szolc-Rogoziński and his fellow explorers settled near the Victoria colony, a British administrative territory, situated on the edge of Douala where German trading companies had established posts (Austen 1983). After gaining the trust of the locals, he was appointed by the British colonists to serve as an agent in the interior of Cameroon (Rudin 1938, 46–7).

Szolc-Rogoziński's perception of black Africans later became evident in his 1886 book, when recounting his encounters with the locals. His views reflected the prevalent Eurocentric attitudes of the time, portraying black Africans as lazy, dishonest, and following "barbaric" customs. He believed that a paternalistic relationship between white Europeans and black Africans would be a means of civilizing the latter (Szolc-Rogoziński 1886, 162–3). Throughout his voyage from Europe to Africa, he frequently pondered the concept of "race" and the contrasting lifestyles of black people compared to the affluent European elite. Though Szolc-Rogoziński's expedition may have been framed as an anthropological study, it was not without implicit ambitions for colonial influence on behalf of Poland, as he operated within the broader framework of European imperial rules governed by the British and the Germans.

To view this exploration simply as an individual's ambition would be a misinterpretation of the complex processes involved in colonial expansion. Remarkably, Szolc-Rogoziński's exploration served as a precursor to a massive transatlantic migration of Polish people to the New World during the early 1800s, as they attempted to establish a colony in Latin America (Balogun 2022a; Ureña Valerio 2019, 148–62). This significant migration history, in turn, revitalized the activities of the Liga Morska i Kolonialna (Maritime and Colonial League, LMiK) beyond European borders. Therefore, it is worth pausing to reflect on the establishment of LMiK and its envisioned operations outside Poland.

### **The emergence of Liga Morska i Kolonialna (Maritime and Colonial League)**

Following the re-establishment of Poland as a modern state in 1918, a group of twenty-five Polish men saw colonization as the first step towards great

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power status, and established a colonial society called Polska Bandera (Polish Flag) in Poland (Balogun 2018; Hunczak 1967). The purpose of the organization was mainly to reveal sea and maritime exploration as Poland's national interest. Polska Bandera quickly transformed into the League of Polish Navigation and then to Liga Morska i Rzeczna (Maritime and River League, LMiR), later named the Union of Colonial Pioneers. The organization reached its pinnacle when it adopted its official name – Liga Morska i Kolonialna – in 1930 (Hunczak 1967). The step towards the acquisition of colonies in Africa was further intensified by the following LMiK activities in Poland and abroad.

The first step was the establishment of monthly and quarterly publications, *Morze* (Sea) and *Polska Na Morzu* (Poland at Sea) and *Sprawy Morskie i Kolonialne* (Maritime Affairs and Colonial), dedicated to maritime issues, colonization, migration, and sea transportation. This was quickly followed by the successful establishment of the Polish Colonial Society, with membership reaching 500,000 individuals and 1,200 units throughout Poland, including 1,000 school societies, making it one of Poland's largest organizations in the 1930s (Białas 1983, 40–1). In addition, Friends of the Polish Sea was established in Australia, Austria, Canada, Czechoslovakia, France, Germany, and the United States (Hunczak 1967). To enhance its colonial imaginations outside Europe, LMiK purchased “Indian reserve land” in Brazil, acquired a number of plantations in Liberia as a means of enhancing Poland's economic growth (Skulimowska 2022), whilst pioneering trading activities carried out on the west coast of Africa.

It has been argued that the above initiatives would eventually allow Poland to recruit several African soldiers (Puchalski 2017, 23). But very much more than that, as Grzechnik (2020, 828) has pointed out, the moves were partly meant “to prepare Poles for the desired position of one of European colonial empires dominating Africa and its resources”. Given the above widespread nature of LMiK's influence, it was not too long before the organization “started a nationwide campaign to popularize the idea of Polish colonies” (Hunczak 1967, 649), and its main target was Africa following in the steps of Portugal, Spain, Britain, France, Germany, and Italy (Balogun 2018). Although LMiK had expressed special interest in colonizing Togo and Cameroon (Hunczak 1967, 2016, 41), the organization also hoped to obtain some of the former German colonies in Africa. However, the closest to the realization of colonial acquisition was in Angola, considered as a possible space for Polish settlement outside Europe, as Kazimierz Głuchowski, an emigration activist, believed that Angola would provide the Polish settlers with great developmental opportunities (Głuchowski 1928, 29).

A major part of the above ambitious project was the perception of Gdynia, the famous Polish port city, often presented as Poland's “window” or “gateway to the world” with the potential and resources to transform



Poland “from a nation of farmers to one of seafarers; of modernization, civilizational development, and even overseas expansion and acquiring colonies” (Grzechnik 2022, 204). To make this effective, between 1928 and 1930, a non-binding agreement was established between Poland and Portugal, leading to Committees for Angolan settlement and a “Polangola” partnership being set up in Poland (Puchalski 2022). The agreement paved the way for LMiR and Poland’s Emigration Research Institute and Station of Tropical Research exploration of Angola with the task of overviewing potential plantations. According to Franciszek Łyp, a prominent LMiR advocate and activist, it was expected that such plantations would be acquired easily and cheaply by potential Polish settlers (Grzechnik 2020). In this plan, it was anticipated that Angola would serve as a suitable settlement for colonists, enabling the cultivation of crops by potential Polish settlers. In the long term, this approach may transform migrationist colonialism into an idea of *Lebensraum* (Young 2001, 2) – the territory outside the metropole deemed essential for organic expansion and natural development. Despite the problematic nature of *Lebensraum*, its remnants are evident in a colonial-inspired workbook presented by Łyp. The purpose of such a workbook was to act as a manual for the planned Polish colonial settlement in Angola. Its main aim was to provide practical advice related to Christian missionary activities, European efforts to civilize, and crucially, to offer guidance to the colonial authorities on how to handle the black population, lands, and race relations in Angola (Grzechnik 2020, 831). Economic development and a much-needed modernization were at the heart of the above activities initiated by LMiR, but embedded within such activities were a global ambition and recognition that insisted on Poland’s “imperial maturity”. As Grzechnik (2022) aptly frames it, such maturity operated through maritimism would entail “a network of trade connections with the whole world, seafaring, and colonies in Africa and South America. The sea was to be a way to build a strong state, or even an empire with an overseas presence”. It was anticipated that such colonial manoeuvring would act as Poland’s gateway and connection to the whole world (Grzechnik 2022, 219).

Putting all this into a broader colonial context, the most effective objective of Poland’s Colonial Society was as part of the wider imperial actions of “bringing Africa as a ‘dowry to Europe’” through the exploration and exploitation of lands, sea, and labor (Hansen and Jonsson 2011, 455). It is an implication that Africa’s natural resources – its land, labor, and market – were seen to be available for the successful completion of the European project. The aforementioned commentaries hold significant importance, particularly concerning the reproduction of the modern concept of “race”, which originated from the explorations and colonial activities of imperial states. This concept was later drawn upon by Poland as a European successor state and became evident when examined through the context of the “varieties of European

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colonialism”, particularly in relation to the role of Africa as a central defining feature of the emerging European project, marked by extractive policies (Bhambra 2021).

## The Czech racial/colonial manifestations

2 The historical territories of Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia that compose the Czech Republic had been since the Middle Ages ruled independently by the kings of Bohemia; from 1526 they were incorporated into the complex political system of the Habsburg monarchy. In the historical literature, these three regions are commonly called “the Czech Lands” (the phrase is a contemporary construct that aims to grasp the territorial-social-cultural integrity of the territory). Following the collapse of the Habsburg monarchy at the end of World War I, the Czech Lands, Slovakia, and Ruthenia became parts of the new Czechoslovak Republic. After the rigmaroles brought by the twentieth century (disintegration in the

Emerging around the same time as the above Polish colonial activities were the Czech racial and colonial manifestations, but these need to be considered within their local specificities. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, discourses on colonialism and “race” were rarely addressed openly in the Czech Lands.<sup>2</sup> From the present-day perspective, the specificities of modern histories of CEE often connect “race” mainly with the horrors of Nazism and the Holocaust, a fact that diverts the attention of scholars from more comprehensive considerations of the problem of the construction of otherness, biologically and/or culturally. What needs to be accentuated as a starting point is the fact that the advent of nationalism in the Czech Lands was accompanied by the exaltation of vernacular language, local history, and culture (Macura 1998), and also an explicit competition with the German-speaking population in the Czech Lands. There was also the scientific study of the “body” of the nation (Schmidt 2016), as part of efforts to identify its specificities, its position in the hierarchy of the genus *Homo*, and also to accentuate its differences from “others” (Fuchs 2003; Herza 2020a, 2020b; Lafferton 2016).<sup>3</sup> Thus, the research of “us” led necessarily to an interest in “them”, including non-Europeans.

Landlocked within the European mainland, Czechs scarcely participated in the overseas explorations and exploitations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Rampley 2022). Yet there were desires for colonial assets and also a sense of entitlement to these possessions, notions of the right to rule even on the part of Europeans not yet involved in colonial expansion – a right stemming precisely from belonging to the entity of “Europe”, but also from the supposed character traits of the Czechs that would make them better colonizers than the members of the imperial nations. As persuasively demonstrated by Dean (2014), the Czech intellectuals and politicians made use discursively of massive labor migration (by 1914, around one million Czechs from a nation of six million permanently resided outside the Czech Lands) by framing it not only as the spread of European or Slavic culture to backward parts of the world, but in fact as a feat of colonization (Dean 2014).

An illustration of the above outlook can be found in the writings of Emil Holub, a Czech physician, explorer, and amateur ethnographer, considered as the Czech counterpart of the Polish Szolc-Rogoziński. Between 1872

wake of World War II, reunification without Ruthenia in 1945), Czechoslovakia split in 1992 into the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic (Dickins 2011; Pánek et al. 2018).  
3 However, as was also the case in other parts of CEE, the terminology of racial was not firmly established. The terms “people”, “nation”, “tribe”, and “race” (in various translations) are often used interchangeably, and their meanings overlapped. Race could mean the “human race”, undivided, or refer to the opposite, to essential human difference (races in the plural), but could designate class and other differences (Lafferton 2016, 5; Turda and Quine 2018, 58). This lack of clarity, most notably the interchangeable use of the term, makes the analysis of race difficult at the time.

and 1879, and again between 1883 and 1887, Holub embarked on numerous voyages into the interior of Southern Africa. Subsequently, he published books and articles and delivered extensive lectures in both Europe and the United States. He repeatedly articulated the need for Czech peasants to seek acquisition of colonial settlements in Africa, as he put it: “for their benefit and that of the natives” (Holub 1882, 10–1; Burrett 2006). In doing so, he was appraised for his contributions to the exploration and civilization of Africa by Austro-Hungarian, British, and German commentators, including King Leopold of Belgium. Upon his return to Prague in 1879, Holub was hailed as the nation’s first representative to explore previously uncharted regions in Africa, celebrated with enthusiastic crowds, addresses from cultural and political organizations, banquets, and congratulatory telegrams by the Czech press. Holub’s view of the innate superiority of Czechs over black Africans and their consequent civilizational mission concurred with the popular conviction of natural distinctions between people promoted by various Czech authors at the time. This view was further cultivated via travelogues depicting various parts of non-European regions (Lemmen 2018) and also within the museum of anthropology that bore the name of its founder, Vojta Náprstek, a Czech philanthropist and propagator of science, in the 1870s.

Originally an industrial museum, the Náprstek Museum was to document scientific and technological progress in the world and assist Czech industrialists in developing their skills whilst keeping up with European supreme civilization (Křížová 2018). But from its foundation, exotic souvenirs were integrated into the collections at the museum, as demonstrations of early developmental stages of various arts and crafts and to serve as mirrors accentuating the documentation of the progress of European (and specifically Czech) industries. These particular collections provided the museum and the locals with the initial colonial fantasies that were later put to use elsewhere. Deprived of possibilities of physically dominating and exploiting overseas territory, the Czechs participated indirectly in the general colonizing thrust of Western Europe – through scientific acquisition, description, and categorization of “treasures” and “trophies” brought from afar (Křížová 2022; Zantop 1997).

The endeavors to study and preserve the bodies of “exotic savages” were part of the supreme Czech self-national determination. “Ethnographical shows” – displays and performances of the “everyday life” of non-Europeans in front of paying audiences – were popular all over Europe and since the late 1870s were also visiting Prague and other bigger cities within the Czech Lands. The performers, old and young alike, were perceived by the local press as childlike, immature, at least mentally; but, at the same time, especially black Africans were simultaneously ascribed dangerous, barbaric sexuality. Visitors to the shows were invited to “explore” their cultural

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specificities, participating symbolically in the domination of the “savages” and confirming their conviction of their cultural superiority (Herza 2016; Křížová 2020a).

The dominating attitude to “savages” was clearly patent in the case of Vasil Kanjuk, a member of the group of “Samoyed” performers – the ethnonym itself denoting colonial attitudes, as it was a pejorative colonial term developed in the Russian imperial context to describe the indigenous people of Siberia (Herza 2016). In 1882, the “Samoyed” visited the Czech Lands. They captivated Czech academics as well as lay audiences not only because of their apparent physical otherness, but also because they allegedly demonstrated the ways the human body and mind adapted to the extremities of a harsh climate. Following Vasil’s death during his stay in Prague, his body was dissected at the Anatomical Institute of the Charles University in Prague, and later buried at the city’s cemetery – but ten years later it was disinterred, for the purposes of measurement and human classification. The data gathered during the measurements were used in discussions between Czech and German anatomists on comparative differences between “races”. Vasil’s remains are currently housed in the Hrdlička Museum of Man (Hrdličkovo museum člověka), established within the Faculty of Natural Sciences of Charles University, where Kanjuk’s skull has been used to highlight differences between European and non-European skulls (Herza 2016; Matiegka 1893).

The case of Hrdlička and his museum was another instance of colonial modernity within the Czech milieu, the manifestation of efforts to possess and exercise authority over non-Europeans. Hrdlička, a Czech-American curator of the anthropological department of the Smithsonian Institution, migrated to the United States with his family from Bohemia as a young boy. Although often recognized as one of the protagonists of the idea of racial equality, Hrdlička mostly argued against the idea of the inner diversity and hierarchization of the “white race”, whilst the other “races” he considered subordinate and warned against their crossbreeding (Brandon 2020, 2023). Hrdlička had for his whole life maintained contacts with his native country and endowed its scientific institutions (Škerlj and Božek 1952). As one of the few intellectuals of Czech descent who acquired prestigious positions abroad, he was widely appraised in his native country, and his theories were repeatedly cited and followed. The more so because Hrdlička was convinced that the study of the “primitive human races” might not be of “special benefit” to themselves, but certainly would lead to “proper understanding of the fundamental problems of our own race and of humanity in general” (Hrdlička 1918, 19). To this end, the permanent exhibition of the Anthropological Museum at the Faculty of Natural Sciences of Charles University was to be as representative as possible, and must therefore include

4 Details are available in Hrdlička's letter to Matiegka, 30 October 1907,

### **Czechoslovak colonial fantasies**

Archive of the Smithsonian Institution, Fund Papers of Aleš Hrdlička, box 44, file Matiegka.

non-European specimens, a necessity not inconvenienced by the fact that the Czechs lacked colonial possessions.<sup>4</sup>

The above individual efforts soon became a national project in 1918, when Czechoslovakia was established as a multiethnic state composed of several groups of citizens, differing in language and culture, of which the Czechs considered themselves the superior group. The insecure political, economic, and cultural position of Czechoslovakia within CEE, coupled with pressures especially from Germany, provided a further justification for the racialization of ethnic “others” in the country as well as outside it. As the newly established states in CEE embraced nationalism as part of their official politics, so did Czechoslovakia. For these emerging states, a nation was not defined culturally, but as a product of “common descent”, as an objectively existing physical entity (Turda and Quine 2018, 58–9). This was evident immediately after 1918, similar to the Polish case, when Czech popular opinion continued to focus on the possibility of acquiring overseas possessions as the European imperial powers decided to strip Germany of its imperial ambitions and colonies in Africa.

At the peace conference in Paris, the Czech and Polish representatives presented an aspiration to acquire territories outside Europe. The most mentioned territory of interest to the Czechs was Togo, the Western African enclave on the shores of the Bight of Benin. The acquisition of Togo was to function as the Czech colony that would cater for the needs of the metropole. Besides, the nascent Czechoslovak nation was to become more visible on the global game board (Křížová 2020b). Throughout this negotiation for colonial space, the Czech representatives failed to take into account the fact that the regions in question were inhabited by local populations. For them, it was simply a “colonial question” that could not be ignored. Therefore, it was not uncommon to read in the daily press phrases such as “Czech Overseas Colonies”, “Our Colonies”, “Czech West Africa”, “Czech New Guinea”, and “Czech Togo”, all of these being included in the discourse of the Czechoslovak nation-formation (Dean 2022, 82). Togo, in the end, became the mandate of the Society of Nations under French administration. However, the Czech colonial discourse found its arena in Carpathian Ruthenia, a territory attached to the Czechoslovak territory in 1918. For two decades, Carpathian Ruthenia served as the site for the Czechs’ modernization and civilizing mission, where the local Ruthenian and Jewish populations were often depicted as different, a patronized and exoticized “race” (Holubec 2014). It was an attitude that was reworked into portrayals of

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the Roma population as “primitive” and their subjection to cultural, biological, and civilizational purification (Baloun 2019).

Importantly, it was also within the above attempts at nation-formation that eugenics took shape within the frame of biomedicine and the assumption of superiority in Czechoslovakia and Poland (Turda and Balogun 2023). There was a continued interest in the problem of human differentiation, apparent in Czech reactions to the German anthropological discourses of the 1920s and 1930s, especially after the commencement of the Nazi regime in 1933. Czech anthropologists dedicated themselves to defending the idea of the essential unity of the white “race”, in contrast to the idea of a superior “Aryan race” as the bearer of European civilization. With the financial support of Aleš Hrdlička, a joint volume entitled *On the Equality of European Races and the Ways to their Betterment* was published in Prague in 1934 under the auspices of the Czechoslovak government. The volume, promptly translated into German, and reviewed and commented upon in leading European anthropological journals, contained proposals for racial hygiene championed by leading Czech eugenicists including Jindřich Matiegka, Lubor Niederle, and Jiri Malý (Brandon 2023; Turda 2017; Weigner 1934).

### **Towards a global “varieties of European colonialism”**

In this final section, it is important to recall the “varieties of European colonialism” that we started with in order to bring into view their implications in CEE and globally. This is more visible when viewed through the “global formations of race [that] do not just concern the societies around the Atlantic rim” (Baker 2018, 771), but also requires a significant expansion of the current boundaries of raciality and coloniality. For this reason, there is still a lot to learn from works especially by the Latin American subaltern studies group (Grosfoguel 2007; Maldonado-Torres 2007; Mignolo 2007; Quijano 2000; Wynter 2003) in terms of colonial domination. The period that gave rise to racial and colonial domination, Bhambra (2022b, 11) observes, was “precisely a period of colonial expansion that saw some European states consolidate their domination over other parts of the world”. As Quijano (2000) confirms, global power remains essential to the colonial domination that created “the social classification of the world’s population around the idea of race”. In this sense, the relationship between the conquerors and the conquered is structured around a particular knowledge of “race” – “a biological structure that placed some in a natural situation of inferiority to the others” (Quijano 2000, 533) – and therefore provided a justification for their colonization (Balogun 2022b).

Advancing Quijano's argument, Wynter (2003, 266) makes the naturalized inferiority even more explicit when she points out that "it was to be the peoples of Black African descent" and "the range of other colonized dark-skinned peoples" who would be constructed as "racially inferior" groups. Consequently, racial and social hierarchies are integral parts of the legacies of colonialism especially in the Americas and Africa. At the heart of this, Mignolo (2007) suggests, were acquisitions of commodities and transfers of resources that were responsible for the "discovery and conquest" of the Americas and Africa. For Mignolo (2007, 481), "[i]t was land, rather than money, that made possible the qualitative jump of mercantile economy into mercantile capitalist economy". These processes of acquisition and appropriation, for over five hundred years, are enshrined in the collective European "modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system" that adopts a universalistic view of the world. The process allows European colonial domination to create "a hierarchy of superior and inferior knowledge and, thus, of superior and inferior people" characterized as "people without writing", "people without history", "people without development", and more recently, "people without democracy" (Grosfoguel 2007, 213–4). The consequence of such characterization is the "Coloniality of Being" and "those who suffer the consequences of such a system are primarily Blacks and indigenous peoples, as well as all of those who appear as colored" (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 256; Walsh 2012).

The above trend of colonialism has been identified as "inside out", a way of looking from Europe to the others as "Eurocentric diffusionism"; as Blaut (1993, 8–10) explains, it is a belief that assumes "past or present superiority of Europeans over non-Europeans (and over minority people of non-European descent)". In this view, Europe is understood as the source through which non-European cultures must be perceived. This implies not only an attempt to rule over others, but also to classify others, and above that classification is the supremacy of Europe, its cultures, and its peoples (Blaut 1992). It is the worldview which Europeans constructed to explain, justify, and progress their colonial expansions globally. Such expansions are better understood through "the rule of European difference" that "sharpen[s] 'Europe's' geographical edge and reinforces the idea of European solipsism by proposing an even smaller territory in which its essence can be found empirically" (Borocz 2006, 130). In this cartography of the world, Europe develops a desire: an obsession with a furtive fascination, miscegenation, and interracial transgression as part of the colonial variant of Eurocentric discourse. The tantalization of this fascination and these fantasies is complicit with colonialism itself because they "are all concerned with forms of cross-cultural contact, interaction, an active desire", produced within a colonial context (Young 1995, 3).



Much of the above standard debates on colonialism and modernity have been largely analyzed in the West. These debates have paid attention to Western Europe's domination of many parts of the world (Bhambra 2007, 2014, 2022a). Understandably, the above colonial entanglement has global consequences; however, its significance in CEE remains largely siloed. Consequently, the region as part of "Europe" is often overlooked in the broader theorization of colonialism and the manifestations of "race" and racism. Although several studies have attempted to engage with colonialism in the region or at least start out well, they often choose migration accounts that are bogged down amid arguments for recognizing the significance of the nation-states. Whilst this body of work provides sufficient information on migration, they are far from enabling robust accounts of raciality and coloniality that explain the inclusion and exclusion of certain bodies within that migration. In doing so, many migration accounts are deployed with less or no attention to the roles of colonial imaginations that are reproduced through "race" and colonization (Benson 2023; Lentin 2014).

However, if the above "histories do not adequately account for our wider shared pasts, ... then those concepts and categories will reproduce the very inequalities that we otherwise seek to resolve" (Bhambra 2022b, 11). The implication of Europe in this context should not necessarily mean the West. As Boatcă has pointed out, "Eastern Europe needs to be named in full in order to be included in [this] overarching term" (2021, 390; 2017). Indeed, the region's colonial and imperial endeavors, either imagined or achieved, need to be brought into a broader analysis of European expansion projects (Balogun 2022a). Despite the region's tenuous claim on whiteness, its nationalistic development was founded on the potential influence gained from a strong identification with an imperial white Europe (Mark 2022, 254). This entails the long-lasting process of racialization experienced by Romani communities, frequently observed in CEE. They are often viewed negatively, being associated with darkness, sin, filth, and malevolence. Throughout history, this particular group has faced accusations rooted in racial and colonial constructs (Law 2012, 37–8). This particular ambition was given credibility through the establishment of eugenics societies throughout the region (Balogun 2024; Turda and Weindling 2007). Beyond this, the above accounts of colonialism need to be seen through their varieties that empowered some nations in CEE, whilst dealing with the complexities of colonialism and modernity. As Łazor (2022) and Puchalski (2022) astutely point out, the framing of Polish and Czechoslovak colonial aspirations was driven not only by the pursuit of economic benefits for both nations but also by the desire to solidify their positions within the great European "race". Therefore, it would be inappropriate to solely focus on Western forms of colonialism when considering critical accounts, as they played a



significant role in nation-formation across CEE, particularly in their interactions with non-European Others.

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