

The role of the “frontier” in conceptualising the Russian imperial identity: a study based on Polish political prisoners

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ABSTRACT. This article explores the intricacies of constructing and defining the identity of individuals residing at the southern and eastern frontiers of the Russian Empire. The inhabitants of these imperial cities and fortifications, nestled between two cultures, primarily consisted of forcibly displaced individuals and their progeny, apart from those in military or administrative service. The presence of Polish exiles in the eastern and southern peripheries of the Russian Empire was a direct consequence of its expansionist policy. Through the diaries, correspondence, and published works of three Polish political prisoners – Adolf Januskiewicz, Bronisław Zaleski, and Seweryn Gross – we delve into the complex, ambiguous, and multifaceted identities of their oppressors, the steppe dwellers,

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Siberia and Central Asia / Polish exiles / Polish “Siberian triangle”; Russian imperialism / postcolonialism

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and the political exiles themselves, all intertwined in complex colonial relations. This investigation challenges simplistic distinctions such as “us” versus “them” and “here” versus “there”.

RÉSUMÉ. *Le rôle de la «frontière» dans la conceptualisation de l'identité impériale russe : une étude basée sur les prisonniers politiques polonais.* Cet article explore les subtilités de la construction et de la définition de l'identité des individus résidant aux frontières du sud et de l'est de l'Empire Russe. Les habitants de ces cités impériales et des fortifications, nichées entre deux cultures, étaient principalement constitués d'individus déplacés forcés et leurs descendants, à l'exception de ceux en service militaire ou administratif de l'Empire. La présence d'exilés polonais dans les périphéries est et sud de l'Empire Russe était une conséquence directe de sa politique expansionniste. À travers les journaux intimes, la correspondance et les travaux publiés de trois prisonniers politiques polonais – Adolf Januskiewicz, Bronisław Zaleski et Seweryn Gross – nous plongeons dans les identités complexes, ambiguës et multiformes de leurs oppresseurs, les habitants des steppes et les exilés politiques eux-mêmes, tous entrelacés dans des relations coloniales complexes. Cette enquête remet en question les distinctions simplistes telles que « nous » contre « eux » et « ici » contre « là-bas ».

RESUMEN. *El papel de la «frontera» en la conceptualización de la identidad imperial rusa: un estudio basado en prisioneros políticos polacos.* Este artículo explora los entresijos de la construcción y definición de la identidad de los individuos que residían en las fronteras meridional y oriental del Imperio ruso. Los habitantes de estas ciudades y fortificaciones imperiales, enclavadas entre dos culturas, consistían principalmente en individuos desplazados a la fuerza y su progenie, aparte de los que prestaban servicio militar o administrativo. La presencia de exiliados polacos en las periferias oriental y meridional del Imperio ruso fue consecuencia directa de su política expansionista. A través de los diarios, la correspondencia y las obras publicadas de tres presos políticos polacos –Adolf Januskiewicz, Bronisław Zaleski y Seweryn Gross– nos adentramos en las complejas, ambiguas y polifacéticas identidades de sus opresores, los habitantes de la estepa y los propios exiliados políticos, todos entrelazados en complejas relaciones coloniales. Esta investigación pone en tela de juicio distinciones simplistas como «nosotros» frente a «ellos» y «aquí» frente a «allí».

MOTS-CLÉS :
Sibérie et l'Asie centrale / Exilés polonais / « Triangle sibérien » polonais ; Impérialisme russe / Postcolonialisme

PALABRAS CLAVE:
Siberia y Asia Central / Exiliados polacos / «Triángulo siberiano» polaco; imperialismo ruso / Postcolonialismo

1. The geography of imperial power

In discussing the south-eastern boundaries, the Grand Duchy of Moscow opted for the term “frontier” rather than “border”, a choice that suggested a less definite demarcation line. From the late 16th century onwards, Russian authorities embarked on a project of constructing fortifications to safeguard these outlying areas, thereby establishing a defensive line that progressively penetrated deeper into the steppes. Consequently, a network of settlements and fortresses emerged, housing local centres of imperial power (Remnev, 2004) and military deployments, and effectively drawing a line that marked both the external and internal “temporary borders” of the Russian state. This strategic layout legitimised the steady integration of frontier territories. Over time, this system of fortifications proved to be an invaluable tool for Russian domination, helping to organise social life and trade in the region, and providing a significant economic and military advantage over nomadic groups (Khodarkovsky, 2004).

The nation-building strategy employed on the peripheries of the Russian Empire (Gerasimov, Glebov, Kaplunovski, Mogilner & Semyonov, 2012) was predicated on an artificial *orientalist* bifurcation of “us” and “them”, and “here” (referring to protected cities or settlements) versus “there” (alluding to the unknown, menacing steppes). This crafted imperial “topography of Otherness” acted as a distinguishing feature for the Other inhabitants of the Empire (Schick, 2012). A broad swathe of borderland not only distinguished nomads from the settled populace and grazing lands from agricultural fields, but also demarcated Muslims from Christians, and tribal federations from a sovereign state led by a monarch. The close proximity of nomadic communities directly influenced the construction of the peripheral Russian identity, which employed *xenotopic* (Schick, 2012),¹ antinomic, and binary structures, defining the Otherness of nomads through the lens of their origins. Such binary pairs further bolstered imperial dominance strategies over ethnic groups, achieved through their absorption and incorporation into the administrative and legal framework of the Empire while pushing the amorphous borderland further afield (Khodarkovsky, 2004). This resulted in an internal dynamic of (re)defining what was considered “familiar” versus what was “alien”. On one hand, elements of exotic cultures and nations were domesticated and interpreted; on the other, elements resistant to assimilation were expelled beyond the borderland. Consequently, the distinctions between territories initially belonging to the Russian state and those annexed during its expansion became blurred, creating the illusion of cultural ho-

¹ Irvin Schick used the term *xenotopia* to describe the “technology of place” in Oriental discourse.

mogeneity within the Empire. The fluidity of the borderland's physical and ontological framework (Bassin, 1991) aligned seamlessly with Russian colonial strategies, mirroring the geography of imperial power, which hinged on the multifaceted subjugation and integration of the eastern and southern peripheries into the broader Empire, in terms of political, economic, administrative, and cultural facets (Remnev, 2000).

Willard Sunderland highlighted not only the non-overseas nature of Russian conquests (Hobsbawm, 1989, p.59; Thompson, 2000, pp.15-16) but also the multicultural aspect of the Russian colonial project, asserting that it was not solely ethnic Russians who participated in it (Sunderland, 2003). One factor contributing to this was the persistent shortage of qualified administrative and military personnel that the Russian Empire experienced throughout the 19th century. The relocation of “undesirable individuals” from the western provinces to “areas beyond the Ural” enabled the harnessing of their physical and intellectual potential for the pacification and security of vast territories within the ever-expanding Empire. These particular conditions also facilitated the integration of political criminals into the ranks of imperial agents without disrupting the hierarchy of subordination. The ambivalence of the position of Polish exiles involved in imperial politics is illustrated by the fact that their only route to pardon and subsequent return home was to acquiesce to the rules of the state system, which had effectively enslaved them. Consequently, the presence of Polish exiles in the Siberian borderlands was a result of the Empire's expansionist policy, directed simultaneously towards both the East and the West. For a more detailed analysis, I have chosen texts authored by three 19th-century Polish political prisoners: Adolf Januszkiewicz,² Bronisław Zaleski,³

² Adolf Januszkiewicz (1803–1856) was born in Nieświz and pursued his studies in Vilnius. There, he became a member of a clandestine student organisation known as the “philomaths.” Following his involvement in the November Uprising, he was exiled to Western Siberia in 1832. His residences included Tobolsk, Iszuma, Omsk, and Nizhny-Tagilsk. Between 1842 and 1849, he served in the borderland imperial administration in Omsk. During this tenure, he embarked on three expeditions to the steppe. The longest of these voyages, lasting six months, occurred in 1846, during which he maintained a diary and corresponded with family and friends. After Januszkiewicz's passing, his younger brother, Eustachy Januszkiewicz, gathered all the materials and, in 1861, published them in Paris as a book titled: *Żywot Adolfa Januszkiewicza i jego list ze stepów kirgiskich*.

³ Bronisław Zaleski (1820–1880) was born in what is now Lithuania and pursued his studies in Dorpat. He was first exiled to Chernihiv in 1838. Following his release, he completed his education in Kharkiv. Zaleski was arrested for a second time in 1848 and dispatched as a soldier to the Orenburg Line, where he remained for nine years. During his exile, Zaleski participated in two scientific expeditions in 1851–52 and a military operation against the Khanate of Kokand in 1853. He was granted a pardon in 1856. In 1860, he made the decision to emigrate and subsequently resided in Paris. There, he joined the group of patriotic exiles at Hotel Lambert, led by Adam Czartoryski (Jedlicki, 2014; Macińska, 2014), and served at the Polish Library until his death, during which time he published an impressive array of texts.

and Seweryn Gross,⁴ who were exiled to Western Siberia⁵ due to their activities advocating for independence.⁶ Engaging in the imperial administration, they each contributed, to varying degrees, to the execution of the Empire’s colonial plans, participating in diverse activities such as diplomatic missions, scientific research, and military expeditions. Consequently, the texts they produced whilst fulfilling their official duties, despite their individual substantive and methodological differences and varied writing “aspirations”, laid bare their intricate involvement in the operation of the Russian bureaucratic framework. Through their diaries, correspondence, and published texts, they crafted a unique portrait of the “oppressor”, the exotic “Other”, and the political prisoners, as observed through the complexities intrinsic to the frontier nature of the colonial identity laboratory.

2. The city as an imperial projection

The Siberian borderland towns depicted by the selected exiles were more than merely Russian cities; they were distinctly Russian imperial cities. The fortification lines, delineating the sphere under the Russian Empire’s control, offered diverse means of exerting influence while linking various cultures (Remnev, 2000). As Jürgen Osterhammel highlighted, empires were governed from cities (2014, p. 243). Unlike Kazan or Astrakhan, which were subsumed by the expanding Muscovite state, cities such as Orenburg, Omsk, Semipalatinsk and others were meticulously constructed under the

⁴ Seweryn Gross (1852–1896) was born in the Kaunas area. He studied law in St. Petersburg, where he developed associations with the Russian Narodniks. Arrested in 1880, he was sent to Semipalatynsk for five years. In 1884 with the assistance of the Kazakh poet Abai Qunanbaiuly, he compiled a study of the customary law of the Kazakhs, which was published in 1886 under the title *Materialy dlya izucheniya yuridicheskikh obichayev kirgizov*. A Polish version of the article, entitled *Ze stepów Azji Środkowej*, was published posthumously under the name of his friend, Jan Witort, in 1899 (Milewska – Młynik, 2012).

⁵ Following the loss of state independence in 1795, a new era in Poland’s history commenced, characterised by political repression from the Russian authorities against any “nation-building” activities. With the fall of Napoleon’s campaign and the establishment of the Kingdom of Poland in 1815, the mass exile of Poles to the eastern reaches of the Empire began in earnest, sparked by the trial of the Philomaths in Vilnius between 1823 and 1824. This trial also represented a significant shift in Russia’s domestic policies. Prior to this, deportation to Siberia was chiefly reserved for prisoners of war. However, for over a century following this trial, deportation became a punishment extended to conspiratorial activities and any actions advocating independence. Subsequent major waves of exile occurred following the defeat of the November Uprising (1831-1832) and the January Uprising (1863-1864) (Adamczewski, 2019; Caban, 2001; Kaczyńska, 1991).

⁶ In addition to the published works of the three exiles, I will also utilise archival resources, including handwritten travel diaries and personal correspondence.

stringent supervision of the imperial state and exclusively for its interests – forming a precisely designed “power landscape” (Osterhammel, 2014, p. 283). Borderland towns, unlike other cities within the Empire, took on a “representative” role in addition to their administrative and military functions. The intrinsic duality – a peripheral location paired with Russian territorial ambitions – shaped their character, the primary purpose of which was to denote, segregate, defend, and control the region and its population on either side of the city walls.

Bronisław Zaleski highlighted the fluid nature of the Russian borderland in his article *Polish exiles in Orenburg*: “in the initial years, the banks of the Ural [river] were the final frontier. However, over time, it advanced incrementally further into Central Asia,” encapsulating the Empire’s territorial and colonial advancements with the declaration that, “Russia has no borders in the east” (Zaleski, 2008, p. 30). There was good reason to perceive the city of Orenburg, founded in 1736, both literally and metaphorically as the “gate to the East” (Khodarkovsky, 2004, p. 156), opening the doors to the heart of the continent⁷ (Vasil’ev, 2014; Bekmakhanov, 1992). The Siberian capitals – Orenburg, Omsk, and Irkutsk – served as centres of political and military control, adapting colonial projects to the diverse reality of the imperial peripheries (Remnev & Sukhih, 2006). Bronisław Zaleski also drew attention to the expansion of the fortification line’s both “regulating” and “civilising” aspects, as well as the borderland’s bipolar, transcultural dimension. He wrote, “The Ural [region] became fully domesticated – on its other side, Orenburg merchants began striking deals with caravans from Central Asia. The Kyrgyz sultans joined the Russian border administration” (*Z Orenburga*, 1881, p.79)

The grandeur of state and military buildings in the frontier capitals presented a public display of power and opulence, embodying the Empire through the imported styles of Western architecture, thus transforming notions of political order into tangible expressions of geometry and stone (Osterhammel, 2014, p. 268). For instance, Orenburg, one of the strongest bases for the Russian frontier army in the mid-19th century, was in itself a tangible “projection of the Empire” (Pavlenko, 2015, p. 29). Omsk similarly safeguarded imperial interests with its distinct military and administrative character, as noted by many travellers (Remnev, 2009, p. 62). Adolf Januszkiewicz underscored the striking nature of the West-Siberian capital in his letter to Gustaw Zieliński:

⁷ The Empire’s interest in Central Asia was related to the Silk Road, leading caravans with luxury goods from India and China through the centre of the continent – through the great Central Asian Khanates – and further to the West. The first on the Russian “land route to India” was the Kazakhs, then called Kyrgyz-Kaisaks or simply Kyrgyzs.

The city of Omsk left a profound impression on us. [...] The government edifices, which house almost all the administrative bodies, are awe-inspiring. The military academies are quite magnificent. [...] Here, one can find a multitude of sturdy walls and squares reminiscent of those in the capital. [...] We haven't yet heard the music, but each day we are roused by the booming of cannons from the fortress. It is the artillery battery, which fires daily at a target across the Irtysh river. (Januszkiewicz, 2003, p. 182)

The goal of regular, almost ritual military exercises was to demonstrate to the residents and the eastern delegates visiting the city the power of the Empire and its capacity and willingness to resist in case of a sudden contest of its hegemon position. However, the impact of the imperial symbols had a reversal trajectory, as dissatisfaction with the colonial policy was unloaded back onto the cities. For instance, sultan Kenesary Khan, whom Januszkiewicz mentioned in his diary, began an open revolt against the Russian Empire by attacking the city of Akmola, which was built on lands formerly belonging to his family, leaving only ruins after it (Bekmakhanov, 1992).

For the Polish political prisoners, these border towns primarily represented symbols of modernisation and a broad notion of European civilisation, bridging the East and the West. The postal system, for instance, allowed them to maintain contact with their families, friends, and other prisoners. These towns also offered fundamental amenities necessary for the functioning of the "modern man," like access to healthcare or cultural outlets such as local libraries, theatres, and museums. These museums, sanctified by an apotheosis of art (which Paul Connerton compared to cemeteries (1989, p. 62)), took exotic objects and handicrafts out of the everyday context of nomadic life and presented them to Western audiences as collections, complete with precise, unambiguous descriptions. Essentially, these museums created new and "safe" spaces for contact with foreign cultures (Mitchell, 1991) that were a part of the Empire. Both Seweryn Gross and the Kazakh poet Abai Qunanbaiuly (Käkitai, Tutgul Kunanbai, 1909) contributed to the creation of the first collections for the ethnographic museum in Semipalatinsk.

Libraries, which Habermas referred to as the 19th century's "temples of knowledge" that "were a mark of civic pride" (Osterhammel, 2014, p. 10), took on additional distinctive values in Siberian cities. These institutions became local repositories of Western civilisation and the epicentres of its propagation. It is noteworthy that all three chosen Polish exiles were involved in compiling library resources. For instance, while residing in the city of Ishim, Januszkiewicz amassed a significant collection of books and magazines sent to him by his family, which he shared with his

friends. Upon moving to Nizhny Tagil, one of his tasks was caring for the local library (Januszkiewicz, 2003, pp. 323, 330). Starting from 1854, Zaleski also took care of the library in Orenburg, systematically organising materials on Central Asia and its inhabitants. During his free time, Gross organised the library in Semipalatinsk. The catalogue was so impressive that it elicited praise from American traveller George Kennan, who remarked that “the selection of books deserves applause for the founders of the library” (Kennan, 1906, pp. 83-84). The case of Gross demonstrates that despite the formal separation of the tasks of the aforementioned institutions, they were often established by the same individuals. Their common objective was to systematise knowledge about the exotic Siberian reality, presenting it from different perspectives in line with totalising, supposedly universalising, scientific categories. However, these “institutions-carriers of memory” (Le Goff, 2007) were also found to be affected by the Foucauldian marriage of power and knowledge (Foucault, 1981).

3. “At the edge of European civilisation”

The “domestication” of the borderland by the Russian Empire resulted in the development of homogenising identity concepts for its citizens. The physical distance from the centre of the Russian colonial settlements led to an internalised sense of marginality among the borderland inhabitants. This provincial inferiority complex was offset by emphasising close historical and traditional connections with Western civilisation and projecting the mission of bringing progress (as proclaimed by the Empire) to the steppes (Remnev & Sukhih, 2006). This reinforced their sense of superiority over their “primitive native” neighbours. The imperialist discourse served as a “good ideological cement” that bound together diverse social groups; it alleviated existing antagonisms within the borderland community and gave each member the sense of being a true “citizen” of the Empire (Hobsbawm, 1989, p. 70). The belief in cultural continuity and indivisibility between European Russia and its Siberian peripheries was a distinguishing feature of Russian imperial ideology. However, in reality, neither the frontier nor the steppe community were organised “in accordance with a two-class or two-race stratification” (Osterhammel, 2014, p. 287). The “permanent temporality” of imperial borders suggested that drawing a clear dividing line – be it internal or external, territorial or ethnic, or even epistemological – was impossible.

The indeterminate space of the Siberian borderland led to the emergence of a new type of community, which, drawing on Homi Bhabha, can be termed a “hybrid product of imperialism” (Driver & Gilbert, 1999, pp. 4-5). To highlight the “displa-

cement" of the colonial encounter, Bhabha proposed the concept of the "Third Space" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37). According to him, this space is riddled with contradictions, repetitions, and "meanings and symbols of culture" that lack any "primordial unity or fixity" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37). Such a perspective moves beyond rigid, essentialist dichotomies (like "us versus them" or "here versus there"), revealing the "radically open" (Soja, 1996, p.107) bidirectional and reciprocal influence of cultural patterns. For example, Januszkiewicz noted the dynamic (hybrid) nature of the frontier cities, offering a succinct portrait of Semipalatinsk, a Siberian settlement located "at the edge of European civilisation" (Januszkiewicz, 2013, p. 29). This town had a population of "7,000 people, largely Tatars, Tashkinians and Bukharians", and "the Kyrgyz language was in common use" (Januszkiewicz, 2013, pp. 26-27). Bronisław Zaleski, in turn, internalised the dichotomous discourse of *xenotopic* oppositions. In a letter to his patroness Róża Sobańska, he claimed: "Although Ural people have their character, which is not so easy to define, they are not so interesting to us, as they are always our people" (Bcz. rkps. sygn. 6928, p. 5).⁸

The ambiguous status of the political prisoner was also a consequence of the liminal nature of exile itself, which blurred previous roles and social privileges. These conditions fostered closer relationships between individuals like Zaleski, a nobleman, and Taras Shevchenko, a former serf. During scientific expeditions, a precious but fragile friendship emerged between them due to their shared status as political prisoners, which equalised their social and economic standing. Shevchenko taught Zaleski painting *en plein air*, while Zaleski assisted Shevchenko in selling his artwork in Poland. However, upon their return from exile, old antagonisms resurfaced, pertaining to issues such as the political and economic implications of peasant emancipation. Disagreements on these matters, influenced by their social backgrounds, resulted in their mutual estrangement (Caban, 2006).

During his exile, Seweryn Gross maintained amicable relationships with other political prisoners, including Russians and Ukrainians such as Aleksandr Blek, Aleksandr Leontiev, Yevgeniy Michaelis, and others. He also developed a rapport with the Kazakh poet Abai Qunanbaiuly (*Uly Abaigha adaldyk*, 2002), who could be considered a paragon of hybridised Otherness. Their common ground was found in progressive revolutionary-democratic beliefs and aspirations. Notably, after returning to Poland, Gross reverted to a strict dichotomous division between "us" and "them" in his later articles, underlining the *oriental* divide.

⁸ The Princes Czartoryski Library, manuscripts.

Adolf Januszkiewicz's relationships and assessments transcended the conventional framework of contemporary Eurocentric, dualist, Manichean dichotomies. On one hand, he felt a genuine cultural and civilisational bond with a part of the Russian aristocracy. As a proponent of progress in a Russian uniform, he advocated for the anti-conquest (Pratt, 1992) ideas of modernisation endorsed by the Russian Empire, such as the expansion of education and healthcare, as well as the reorganisation of the nomads' economy (BPP476, pp. 389-393).⁹ Conversely, despite employing binary oppositions inherent in colonial discourse, Januszkiewicz frequently acknowledged and admired the intellectual and eloquent abilities of Central Asia's inhabitants (Januszkiewicz, 2013), defending their "reputation" in front of his family. He maintained that, "despite their flaws partly due to religion, lack of enlightenment, and superstitions, they are a nation no worse than any other" (BPP476, p. 439).

Another Polish exile serving the empire – Wiktor Iwaszkiewicz – who was Januszkiewicz's friend and guide to nomadic culture, and who "knew perfectly" (Januszkiewicz, 2013, p.47) the Kazakh language, offered an even more intricate example. The esteem Iwaszkiewicz held among the nomads was evidenced by one of the *biys*,¹⁰ who humorously urged him to finally confess that he too had "Kyrgyz blood flowing" (Januszkiewicz, 2013, p. 48) in his veins. However, such recognition heightened Iwaszkiewicz's (subconscious) urge to underscore his affiliation to "civilisation". He did this by demonising the primitivism of the nomads and amplifying their "wildness", as demonstrated by one of his stories about a guide who, as per Iwaszkiewicz, after slicing off a chunk of a prisoner's ear, began to "gnaw it" (Januszkiewicz, 2013, pp. 191-192). The reason behind Iwaszkiewicz's introduction of questionable elements into some of his narratives lay in the "abjective" (Kristeva, 1982) strategies of identity construction and a desire to accentuate his stark contrast from the inhabitants of the steppes. Partial assimilation of foreign cultural patterns and customs, or even recognition by the Other as "one of them", suggested a blurring of binary divisions between the "coloniser" and "colonised", which threatened the colonial ideological structure in itself (Stoler, 2009). Therefore, emphasising, and sometimes even conjuring differences, legitimised the civilisational "gap" that differentiated the representative of Western civilisation from the "primitive nomads".

⁹ Polish Library in Paris, manuscripts.

¹⁰ A *biy* is a judge or "guardian" of social order and justice, rooted in the oral tradition of customary law (Sapargalijew, & Djakow, 1982, p. 83).

4. On the other side of the city walls

The nebulous concept of the frontier facilitated colonial expansion and exploration, simultaneously shaping the so-called “contact zones” of Russia. These zones, characterised by fluctuating proportions of “conflict and cooperation” (Osterhammel, 2014, p. 356), possessed a transformative capacity affecting all that came into contact with them. As Mary Louse Pratt articulated, these “spaces of encounter” were distinguished by asymmetrical power relations in terms of dominance and subordination, facilitating interactions among individuals historically and geographically separated from each other (Pratt, 1992, p. 6). The liminality and transitory nature of these imperial borderland “contact zones” structured colonial relationships and determined the transmission of knowledge and cultural patterns, material commodities, and human migration. These zones thus served to fortify connections among different regions of the Empire. The Russian system of fortifications and settlements functioned akin to seaports, symbolically serving as a double gateway that both opened the path towards subjugated territories and linked them with the rest of the Empire (Remnev, 2004).

The strengthening of ties between the imperial centre and its eastern and southern peripheries also involved the implementation of a series of reforms¹¹ that facilitated an indirect or “hybrid” form of administration. On one hand, these measures allowed for the gradual integration of Kazakhs into the bureaucratic system,¹² progressively adapting and limiting the range of powers of traditional institutions (Remnev, 2000). On the other hand, by intensifying cultural and civilisational interferences, these measures sparked internal transformations in relationships between various kin groups, presenting career opportunities for more ambitious nomads. The representative form of administration, grounded in collaboration with local Kazakh aristocracies¹³ – such as sultans, *biy*, *batyrs*,¹⁴ elders and heads of kin groups (Bek-

¹¹ Every subsequent reform and statute (implemented in 1822, 1855, 1867-1868, 1886, 1891) reinforced the Russian position in the Central Asian region, implying the need for standardisation and unification of the administrative system for such an expansive and culturally diverse territory (Remnev & Sukhih, 2006).

¹² Russian policy hinged on preserving the illusion of political and cultural autonomy by backing khans who were loyal to the Empire and quashing any insurrections or unifications of nomads opposing imperial control (Vasil'ev, 2014, pp. 33, 148-149).

¹³ The steppe aristocracy comprised both hereditary (the so-called “white bone,” which included sultans) and elective (the “black bone,” consisting of *biys*, *batyrs*, and elders) elements.

¹⁴ *Batyr* – a warrior, commander of the army.

makhanov, 1992, p. 31) – enabled some of them to attain high-ranking positions and privileges within the structure of imperial power (Walikhanov, 1904). Consequently, a phenomenon of *comprador*-like (Gawrycki & Szeptycki, 2011) behaviour among the nomads emerged, marking the formation of a group of intercultural intermediaries who reaped material benefits from cooperation with the colonisers. This is exemplified in the organisation of legations, or so-called *divans*, in peripheral capitals as mentioned by Zaleski in his article (*Z Orenburga*, 1881, p. 79), or in the appointment of judges and “senior sultans” loyal to the government, about whom Januszkiewicz wrote in a letter to Zieliński.¹⁵ The exclusivity and elitism of Russian posts, reserved for a select few steppe deputies lured by “career opportunism” (Cywiński, 2013, p. 598), allowed the Empire to dictate interaction rules, which progressively assumed an authoritative tone. Nomads who accepted these new conditions found themselves in an inherently submissive, dependent position.

From the perspective of the nomads, the imperial cities held a dual symbolic significance, being perceived both as an alien, threatening force and as a source of novel opportunities. Despite their unequal standing, the Kazakhs were not mere passive recipients of the imposed imperial paradigms, but instead actively engaged in cultural exchange, manipulating the prevailing political conditions to their advantage. For instance, Adolf Januszkiewicz, in a letter dated May 22, 1846, addressed to his younger brother January Januszkiewicz, recounted a court hearing that lasted several days concerning the election of a senior sultan in one of the regions near Semipalatinsk:

A few Kyrgyz [...] submitted a request to the borderland governor, complaining that Biyseke, taking advantage of his position as the senior sultan, was oppressing them. They demanded Koichubai to be elected in his place. [...] Wiktor [Iwaszkiewicz] [...] asked: ‘Who wrote it?’. All unanimously replied that the complaint’s author was Koichubai’s secretary, a young mullah. He confirmed it, confessing that he had drafted the document according to the elders’ words, who had put their tamga [stamps] on it [...]. Then dozens of Kyrgyz, who had their signatures under the complaint, yelled [...] that they held no grievances against Biyseke and had never placed their marks, and even mentioned that a few among them had passed away years ago. (Januszkiewicz, 2013, pp. 34-35)

¹⁵ “Khan was one, and today, in the Middle Horde, there are seven senior sultans.” (Januszkiewicz, 2013, p. 75).

The described attempt to falsify the document highlights a deliberate manipulation of impersonal correspondence mediated by written materials (Goody, 2001). It also indicates the gradual erosion of the existing (proto)democratic nature of power in the steppes, which had previously ensured self-regulation within the nomadic community. The emergence of individualisation through economic emancipation undermined the social relations based on reciprocity and the principle of *do ut des* (Malinowski, 2001). The Russian Empire’s encouragement of internal conflicts between traditional behavioural patterns and advancing “liberalisation” led to the emergence of a new type of crime. Simultaneously breaking both legal structures ultimately thwarted Koichubai’s attempt to assume the coveted position, as Januszkiewicz and Iwaszkiewicz’s task was to verify the legitimacy of the complaint.

5. A stranger in their own homeland

Starting from the 18th century, the Russian Empire increasingly emphasised its affiliation with the Western world. In pursuit of this goal, certain nomads were granted access to secular, reformed education, under close state supervision. The aim was to cultivate a qualified cadre of officials of local origin, who were “Europeans” “in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect” (Anderson, 2006, p. 91). As a result, the first generation of Kazakh intelligentsia emerged, receiving a Western education in the Russian Cadet Corps located in Orenburg, Omsk, and other borderland cities. Pedagogy became a powerful tool in the promotion of cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), transforming the perceptions, ideas, and aspirations of subjugated nations by presenting them with role models to emulate (Hobsbawm, 1989, p. 76).

Despite the opportunities for progress within the new social order, imperial educational initiatives also harboured a hidden threat from the perspective of the nomads. When questioned by Januszkiewicz, one of the sultans of the Middle Horde named Usman expressed his reluctance to send his son to school, he replied that: “it is useless because if God gave someone reason, then people will not add more” and – as Januszkiewicz continued further – “it took significant evidence to convince him [Usman] that it is indeed possible to learn something from others” (Januszkiewicz, 2013, p. 127). However, the sultan’s concerns were not unfounded. The prolonged isolation of nomadic children in borderland towns, often situated far from their family pastures, resulted in the disruption of the translation of cultural patterns (Baliński & Rakoczy, 2015). The extent and significance of identity and ideological transformations that occurred in their minds, personalities, and preferences as a result of

their close relations with the coloniser can be observed in another passage from Januszkiewicz's diary. It evokes Fanon's portrayal of the "Creole newcomer",¹⁶ returning from the imperial centre:

During the inventory registration, a young Kyrgyz approached, and with a soldier-like stance, he took off his hat. This action amused everyone, and Sultan Cholkonbai remarked, "It seems you've just arrived from across the Irtysh; the Russians must have taught you to take off your hat and stand at attention like a soldier". (Januszkiewicz, 2013, pp. 160-161)

The influence of foreign civilisation and the disciplined body of the military environment left deep and noticeable, albeit not fully conscious, imprints on individuals' postures and gestures. This helps to understand the nomads' suspicion and reluctance towards the establishment of new schools in the steppe, as well as their opposition to the obligation of sending their children there (Remnev & Sukhih, 2006, pp. 134-135). The scepticism towards "certified indigenous representatives" serving in the Russian administration was also rooted in concerns about group identity and the future of the traditional social hierarchy, values, and privileges. The growing intergenerational conflict, arising from the "acculturation" (Baliński & Rakoczy, 2015, p. 10) of mediators who returned from the "Third Space" (such as officials, translators, officers, or educated individuals), posed a threat to the stability and "purity" of the steppes' culture. Unintentionally, through the propagation of Enlightenment values, they undermined the very foundations of their own tradition by elevating education to exceptional prestige.

Abai Qunanbaiuly was the epitome of a transcultural mediator. Despite his father's objections, he chose to dedicate himself entirely to science instead of assuming the position of senior sultan. Every winter, he would come to Semipalatinsk, where he delved into the works of Western and Eastern philosophers, as well as progressive or revolutionary Russian literature available in the local library. Unlike the Polish context, where the Russian language was seen as a symbol of political and cultural oppression, and associated with the loss of independence, for the nomads, mastering the language of the coloniser opened doors to European intellectual achievements (Anderson, 2006, p. 116). As Osterhammel argued, languages embodied specific "vehicles of knowledge" (Osterhammel, 2014, p. 781). For Abai, entering the transnational and global imagi-

¹⁶ "There is the newcomer, then. He no longer understands the dialect [...]. Confronted with the most trivial occurrence, he becomes an oracle. He is the one who knows. He betrays himself in his speech." (Fanon, 2008, p. 13).

nary reading community marked a significant turning point in his life (*Uly Abaigha adaldyk*, 2002) – a kind of rite of passage that sparked a division in his personality. By connecting “in himself” and “with himself” two different cultural orders, Abai personified a typical example of a “transcultural translator,” enabling mutual translational flow through his movement between systems of cultural references.

The emerging hybrid forms of identity did not imply a pejorative imitation of the coloniser, but rather a creative incorporation of foreign models into the traditional nomads’ patterns and worldview, resulting in a new quality. Abai, recognising the necessity of these changes, sought an alternative path to “modernity.” In contrast to the previous generation of *compradors*, he envisioned the future of the steppes as aligned with civilisational progress that would consider the needs of the nomads. However, the price of this split perception experienced by transcultural mediators, like Abai, who retained the “mimetic difference,” often faced stigmatisation from both the imperial and nomadic sides. This personal drama of double alienation arose from their irreversible estrangement in their own native land due to their contact with civilisation (Anderson, 2006, p. 93).

Despite apparent similarities, the steppe modernisation initiatives promoted by the Russian and Kazakh sides contained fundamental differences. The Russian Empire aimed to tighten control over its vast territory through fragmentary institutional integration of the colonial Others into the economic, military, and political-ideological structure. In contrast, the inhabitants of the steppes sought to level the differences in civilisation in order to establish an equal position in their relations with the coloniser, defending their interests within the imperial system. These two visions of “development” proved to be mutually exclusive because blurring such sharp *orientalist* dichotomies as “us” and “them” and implementing Enlightenment principles in the long term could potentially challenge the Empire’s position on the steppes and its supremacy over the colonised nations (Bhabha, 1994).

6. “Wearing a Russian uniform.” Key conclusions

The concept of the “finite temporality” of the Russian state borders (Remnev, 2004), discussed earlier in this paper, was inherently contradictory and faced challenges when confronted with the complex reality of the Siberian “Third Space.” The continuous need to question and cross existing frontiers, which was a characteristic of imperial expansion, shaped the relationships between the people residing on both sides of the fortification line. As a result, it became impossible to define the identities of imperial citizens, exiles, or nomads with certainty.

The example of Polish exiles serves to highlight a distinctive aspect of Russian colonialism, which extended not only towards the East and South but also towards the West. Interestingly, the annexation of eastern territories was perceived differently by Polish exiles, who associated it with a process of civilisation. While the Russian perspective primarily emphasised the political and economic necessity of expansion, with ideological considerations being of secondary importance. Examining the involvement of Polish political prisoners and other ethnic groups incorporated into the expanding Russian state reveals the complexity and multicultural nature of its imperial project. It encourages us to move beyond the binary framework of “core-periphery” proposed by Immanuel Wallerstein (2006), as well as *orientalist* dichotomies and top-down dynamics of domination often seen in postcolonial studies. Instead, it highlights the interdependencies, differences, and stratifications of the very concepts of “centre” and “periphery.”

The imperial context shaped the dynamics of encounters between various subjects within the transcultural “contact zones,” where the spectre of colonial subordination loomed. However, upon closer examination, the idea of a “common fate” between Polish exiles and nomads, based solely on their shared experience of Russian oppression, proved to be insufficient. As Gayatri Spivak pointed out, different forms of subordination also gave rise to different interests and groups (1994). Despite the unique circumstances of Polish prisoners’ interaction with the borderland administration, the nomads perceived them as representatives of the Russian authorities. While the abstract notion of shared European origins and the belief in a “civilising mission” fostered a sense of unity between Polish prisoners and certain segments of the Russian upper class and imperial administration, it also led to the internalisation of the imperial discourse, of which they were victims themselves. In the Siberian borderlands, Russian expansion and conquest were seen through the lens of Enlightenment ideology, enabling a shared understanding between historical adversaries such as Poles and Russians. This perception justified the involvement of Polish political prisoners in the imperial agenda of exploration and military expeditions, becoming a central narrative in their writings. However, it also obscured the coercive nature of conquest and control over the steppe region.

The vast and indeterminate Siberian landscape blurred the previously antagonistic divisions and gave way to a policy of negotiating ethnic, state, social, religious, and ideological distinctions. For Polish political prisoners, the established colonial “political and cultural dividing line” (Osterhammel, 2014, p. 326) maintained by the Russian Empire took on additional complexities. The ambiguous nature of their status,

coupled with their interpersonal interactions with superiors, further complicated the dynamics within the “Polish Siberian triangle” and challenged the rigid dichotomy of “us” versus “them.” As a result, the double alienation experienced by the exiles necessitated a (re)evaluation of their identities in relation to a constellation of doubled cultural references. On one hand, the Enlightenment and progressive discourse offered an interpretation that justified the annexation of the steppe, leading the Polish exiles to adopt an imperialistic perspective¹⁷. On the other hand, Polish exiles held proclamations asserting the superiority of Polish culture over Russian culture, which they believed was influenced by Eastern elements such as Mongol and Byzantine. This conviction led them to view the civilisational relations of their oppressors as superficial compared to the authenticity of Western empires (as described by Zaleski), or to condemn the abuses, ruthlessness, and greed of Russian officials (as described by Januskiewicz). As a result, it was only through the *orientalisation* and marginalisation of their historical rival outside the realm of European civilisation that Polish exiles could construct a collective identity as true representatives of the West in the Russian Siberian borderlands. Paradoxically, in Polish-Russian relations, it was the subjugated who *orientalised* the oppressor, perceiving Russian culture as less developed. This belief provided the foundation for Polish exiles to assert their genuinely Western character. Amidst the exotic Siberian landscape, they remained caught between enslavement and a (self-)identification with Western culture, reinforcing and replicating the imperial dichotomies of “steppe space” versus “city space” and “East” versus “West.”

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¹⁷ Poland’s north-eastern neighbour, initially in the form of the Grand Duchy of Moscow and later as the Russian Empire, played a significant role in shaping Polish national identity. Geographically, politically, and culturally, Poland found itself situated on the periphery of the European continent, “to the east of the West and the west of the East” (Janion, 2006, p. 11). However, the Polish elite’s affiliation with the Roman Catholic religious community and the realm of Latin civilisation played a significant role in fostering their belief in “material, cultural, social, and spiritual” superiority. This belief gave rise to the concept of *kresy*, which referred to the eastern borderlands and served as a means of safeguarding the Christian world from potential military aggression from the East (Sowa, 2011). Polish Romanticism, drawing upon a repertoire of national imagery and re-examining the “historical wounds” within the context of statehood loss, solidified the notion of the “barbaric” and despotic nature of their Eastern European rival. This rival was characterised by the Orthodox religion and the influence of Mongol heritage (Kieniewicz, 1977).

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