



Colonial Ambivalence and Its Aftermath: Colonialism and Anti-Colonialism in Independent Poland and Ireland

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In a memoir published in 1925, an Irishman recalled an encounter with a Polish priest while travelling across Poland nearly three decades before, in 1896. The priest, upon discovering that his companion was a foreigner and a Catholic, complained at length about the ill treatment of the Poles by the Russians—the restrictions placed on the Polish language, on the Catholic faith, and the plight of so many Polish exiles in Siberia. The priest concluded the conversation, however, by admitting that “one cannot but be proud to belong to such a great and mighty Empire” (O’Dwyer 1925, 86). His companion, Michael O’Dwyer, was much amused by the combination of indignation at the Russians’ subjugation of the Poles and pride in the Russian empire. As an Irishman, he was also subject to foreign rule at home and part of another “great and mighty Empire,” but, unlike the priest, appeared to regard all complaints about his empire with contempt. He dismissed both Irish and Indian grievances as “sentimental or fictitious”, respectively (O’Dwyer 1925, 86). As the former lieutenant-governor of the Punjab, O’Dwyer had defended one of the

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most notorious British atrocities, the Amritsar Massacre of 1919. Yet, as Séamus Nevin has recently pointed out, O'Dwyer's own views were not, in fact, so clear-cut. Shortly before the massacre, O'Dwyer had expressed support for home rule, calling it "a lofty and generous ideal" that befitted Ireland's experience of self-government, although not India's less advanced stage of civilisation (Nevin 2021). Like the Polish priest, O'Dwyer combined enthusiasm for empire with a conviction that his own people should be spared its excesses. Such views point to a complex and even contradictory relationship towards empire among subject peoples across Europe.

This chapter uses a comparison between Ireland and Poland in order to situate the East Central European experience of colonialism within a broader European framework. It draws upon a scepticism regarding the customary division of Europe into distinct historical regions, whether simply east and west or a tripartite division into Western, Central, and Eastern Europe. Despite its position on the western periphery of Europe, Ireland demonstrated many features that are often associated with East Central and Eastern Europe in the long nineteenth century. First, it exhibited a high degree of linguistic and religious diversity. Ireland had a sizeable portion of speakers of Gaelic, a Celtic language distinct from English, well into the nineteenth century. Linguistic boundaries were fluid and bilingualism common, although the trend was clearly towards English mono-glottism.¹ While three quarters of the population was Roman Catholic, the rest was composed of several different Protestant denominations, principally Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Methodists, along with just 5,000 Jews, mostly refugees from the pogroms of late nineteenth-century Imperial Russia.² Second, Ireland occupied a peripheral position in the world economy. Apart from a small highly industrialised area in the northeast, the country remained largely agricultural and exported much of its produce to the industrial heartland of Britain. The economic elite of Ireland, much like in Lithuania and Ukraine, belonged to an

¹ Estimates vary widely, but it is likely that around 40% of Ireland's inhabitants spoke Gaelic as their first language up until the famine of the late 1840s. For a recent study of the language, see Aidan Doyle, *A History of the Irish Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

² The census records from 1821 to 1901 for Ireland were destroyed. The 1911 census gives figures of 73.8% Roman Catholic, 13.1% Church of Ireland, 10% Presbyterian, 1.4% Methodist, 1.3% other Christian denominations, and 0.1% Jewish.

ethnic minority—the Anglo-Irish community descended from sixteenth and seventeenth-century settlers. Although not afflicted by serfdom, Irish peasants were, by European standards, impoverished and subject to unfavourable tenancy contracts until a series of land acts from 1885 provided for the gradual break-up and sale of large estates. Third, Ireland's nationalist tradition was not produced by the state, but against the state. A local intelligentsia developed national consciousness among the population with the purpose of gaining autonomy or even independence from Britain.³ Fourth, Ireland was subject to its own particular political arrangements and not governed as a normal part of a unitary state. Unlike Scotland and Wales, Ireland had its own civil service, led by a Lord Lieutenant, a minister of the British crown in Dublin. Jürgen Osterhammel has suggested that this makes Ireland a good point of comparison with Eastern Europe, given the huge variety of political arrangements from centralised control to autonomy in operation across the Tsarist Empire (Osterhammel 2008, 24). Andrzej Chwalba has also pointed to the logic of comparing the Irish relationship to Great Britain to that of Poland to Russia (Chwalba 1991, 4). A similar argument could be made for the lands of the Habsburg Monarchy, especially from 1867, when new arrangements were created not just for Hungary, but also for Croatia and Galicia.

If Ireland shared enough similarities with East Central and Eastern Europe to merit comparison with them, the question of colonialism is a particularly obvious focus of attention. Historians of Ireland have grappled for over half a century with the validity of the concept for the relationship of Ireland to Britain in the centuries from the so-called second conquest in the seventeenth century through independence and partition in 1922 to the present status of Northern Ireland. Much of the original impetus to studies of colonialism within Europe, such as the special issue of *Ethnic and Racial Studies* in 1979, in fact came from the work of Michael Hechter on Ireland. (Hechter 1975; Stone 1979). Scholars of Central and Eastern Europe are now taking an interest in Ireland as an intra-European example site of colonialism to bolster the case for a colonial reading of power relations in East Central Europe. This is evident in the many references to Ireland in the special issue of

³ On the historiographical division of Europe on the basis of state-based versus intelligentsia-led nationalism, see Paul Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 352–354.

Teksty Drugie published in 2014, entitled Postcolonial or Postdependence Studies. Ewa Thompson, for instance, uses Hechter to dismiss claims that colonialism only operated in far-flung sites (Thompson 2014, 68).

Specialists on Ireland and Poland have noted the parallels between them in particular. Most obviously, Ireland lost its domestic parliament in 1801 in the wake of the unsuccessful United Irishmen Rising, just a few years after Poland was fully dissolved into the surrounding three empires after the failure of Kościuszko Uprising (Davies 1979, 18). Two of these empires were not Roman Catholic—the Russian was Orthodox and the Prussian Protestant. Irish nationalists also responded to their country’s denigration in similar ways to the Poles, with a mixture of emigration, cultural regeneration, political negotiation, and violence (Foster 1988; Zamoyski 1989). Detailed historical comparisons between Ireland and Poland have now been attempted for a range of themes (Healy 2011; Petruszewicz 2004; Belchem and Tenfelde 2003; Wilson 2010; Eichenberg 2010; Kenney 2012).

In the following I wish to address three aspects of the relationships of both Ireland and Poland to colonialism: first, the extent to which each can be considered objects of colonialism; second, the extent to which each is implicated in the operation of colonialism globally; and third, the ways in which each challenged colonialism globally. Finally, I will suggest some reasons why Ireland, but not Poland, identified itself after independence as an anti-colonial power.

IRELAND AND POLAND AS OBJECTS OF COLONIALISM

A strong case has been made for the colonial character of Ireland in the nineteenth century. The fact that the process of conquest two centuries earlier brought a sizeable number of English and Scots to take up land and positions in Ireland means that one can speak of settlement, a criterion commonly found in definitions of colonialism. Literary scholars have highlighted the extent to which British official and popular discourse on Ireland from the time of conquest onwards denigrated the Irish as culturally inferior. The British satirical journal, *Punch*, was particularly prone to such an approach, producing cartoons depicting Irish people as simians, but even more serious publications and national politicians caricatured the Irish as irresponsible and unfit for self-government (Foster 1994). Moreover, Dennis O’Heerne has shown that economic policy helped to produce the very helplessness that such attitudes assumed. British trade

legislation disadvantaged Irish manufactures to the point that the thriving Irish cotton industry collapsed (O’Hearne 2005). The catastrophic losses of the Great Famine of the 1840s further suggest that the British establishment put lesser value on Irish lives. Without succumbing to popular claims that the famine was a deliberate effort to clear the Irish countryside of small peasant farmers, it is clear that Britain failed to respond to the disaster as it might have, had it happened in England, Scotland, or Wales. Despite the obvious decline in incomes in Ireland, the government tried to foist the financial burden for famine relief onto Irish taxpayers rather than drawing on central funds (Kinealy 2005; Ó Murchadha 2013). The fact that Ireland was denied Home Rule until 1914, when it was suspended due to the war, demonstrates the disregard that successive British governments had for the freely expressed wishes of the Irish electorate from the time of Daniel O’Connell in the 1830s and 1840s.

While the status of Ireland as a colony has now been widely if not universally recognised, the same is far from true about partitioned Poland (Moloney et al. 2000).⁴ Poland is rarely included in general studies of the colonial adventures of the partitioning powers. With the exception of the recent volume by Sebastian Conrad, for instance, histories of German colonialism do not consider the case of Poland, instead concentrating on territories in Africa and Asia, beginning in 1884 and usually ending in 1919 with the formal loss of the colonies or in 1945 to include the expansion of Germany under the Nazis (Conrad 2012, 154–159; Gründer 1985; Speitkamp 2014; Baranowski 2011). The case for seeing Poland’s history as colonial is complicated by the different experiences of the various partitions and the wide variety of features associated with colonialism—political subordination, economic disadvantage, cultural denigration, and settlement. If in the case of Ireland, the colonial model operates plausibly across all four vectors, this cannot be said of any of the Polish partitions. The evidence for colonialism is probably at its weakest in the Russian partition; at least the Kingdom of Poland is ambiguous. This region was more prosperous than the Russian interior, saw minimal Russian settlement, and enjoyed greater political representation than other parts of the Russian Empire from 1815 to

⁴ Irish texts are included in anthologies and handbooks of colonialism, e.g., Douglas Hyde, “On the Necessity of De-Anglicizing Ireland” in *Colonial Voices*, ed. Michael Brillman (San Diego, CA: Cognella, 2013).

1832 (Kieniewicz 2008). Yet the relationship between Russia and Poland became more colonial in subsequent decades as the Russian authorities suppressed all vestiges of self-government in response to the November Uprising of 1830–1831 and engaged in a renewed round of political repression after the January Uprising of 1863–1864. Sebastian Conrad has pointed out, moreover, that as far as the more industrially developed Germany was concerned, the Vistula Land operated as a colony from which it could draw essential migrant labour (Conrad 2012, 154–159). The case for the Austrian partition is also mixed, although, unlike the Russian part, it became less colonial over time. Larry Wolff has shown that, in the wake of the first partition, Emperor Joseph II and his administrators treated Galicia as a backward region in need of a civilising mission (Wolff 2012; Kaps and Surman 2012). Austrian economic policy did little to raise it out of extreme poverty, leading to high rates of emigration from the province. That said, its political position within the Habsburg Monarchy improved in the late 1860s, especially relative to regions like Bohemia and Slovakia. The Prussian partition offers the strongest evidence of colonialism. As Kristin Kopp and Izabela Surynt have shown, the Poles in this region were subjected to “discursive colonisation,” most notably in the work of Gustav Freytag, but also later in the *Ostmarkenroman* genre which featured tropes that associated Poles with Africans (Kopp 2012; Surynt 2004; Orłowski 1996). The Prussian government institutionalised its contempt for Polish culture by introducing legislative measures to undermine the Polish language and the Catholic faith practised by the majority of its Polish subjects. While the so-called *Kulturkampf* targeted the Catholic Church throughout Prussian territory, it was implemented earlier and more severely in the eastern provinces where Poles were concentrated (Blanke 1983). Moreover, the Prussian government manipulated economic development to favour the ethnic German community in these mixed provinces. This was evident not just in the ambitious land distribution programme inaugurated by the Resettlement Commission in 1886, which attempted to transfer land in West Prussia and Poznań from Poles to Germans, but also in a state-led reforestation campaign in the Tuchel Heath in West Prussia (Nelson 2009; Eddie and Kouschil 2002; Wilson 2008).⁵

⁵ For a recent assessment of the plausibility of the colonial model for Prussian Poland, see Healy (2014).

The colonial model is not without its critics. Some historians have pointed to alternative frameworks for the Irish experience, centred on confessionalisation in the early modern period or world systems theory (Connolly 1992, 2008). Economic historians have questioned, for instance, the role of sovereignty in promoting economic development. Bogdan Murgescu's analysis of existing or new regimes of self-government in various peripheral nations (Romania, Denmark, Serbia, and Ireland) over five centuries cautions against the assumption that independence would have brought immediate improvement to Poland (Murgescu 2010). The work of Jacek Kochanowicz suggests that the partitioning powers did not hamper Poland's economic growth, but that Poland simply followed general European patterns of growth before and after the partitions (Kochanowicz 2006). The objection in terms of Ireland is all too obvious from recent history: Irish sovereignty may have assisted the emergence of the Celtic Tiger, but it did nothing to stop its demise. Moreover, the focus on ethnic difference at the heart of theories of colonialism may not be that helpful for certain contexts even into the nineteenth century. Klemens Kaps notes, for instance, the continued importance of class in the Polish setting: Polish nobles in Galicia considered their own peasants as outsiders, using terms similar to those used by overseas colonisers to describe indigenous peoples (Kaps 2012). Finally, critics of the colonial model have also pointed out the vast difference in the experience of European and overseas subjects of the empire. It should be acknowledged that both the Irish and the Poles in the Prussian and Austrian partitions, at least, enjoyed parliamentary representation for much of the long nineteenth century, whereas this was not true for the populations of India or Southwest Africa. Jens Boysen also notes that the educational opportunities and legal framework of the Prussian state allowed Poles to develop a national consciousness and improve their living standards, an opportunity that was far less accessible to subject peoples in overseas colonies (Boysen 2016, 163).

IRELAND AND POLAND AS AGENTS OF COLONIALISM

The strongest challenge to the notion of Ireland as simply a British colony is the growing evidence of Irish engagement with the British Empire in Africa and Asia. While Irish Catholics barely penetrated the officer ranks of the British army, so strong was the prejudice against them, this was not

true for the rank and file. This *voluntary* military service, which culminated in the recruitment of 200,000 Irish to fight in World War I, formed part of a much longer tradition dating back to the admission of Catholics into the British army in the Napoleonic Wars and made an important contribution to the expansion and defence of the Empire (Bartlett and Jeffery 1996). In addition, many Irish men and women entered the imperial civil service. For instance, University College Galway prepared many Irishmen, both Catholic and Protestant, for the Indian Civil Service exam, including Antony MacDonnell, a member of an Anglo-Irish family from the north of Galway, who served as Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal in the 1890s (Brillman 2009; Crosbie 2011; O’Leary 2011). While some Irish administrators, including MacDonnell, were relatively benign—his effective management of famines in the region is thought to have saved many lives—others were not, as the example of Michael O’Dwyer shows. Added to these are the numerous Irish missionaries who did so much to promote Christianity within the Empire (Rafferty 2011).

It is becoming increasingly clear that Poles were also implicated in the European colonial project. There is much to suggest that most Poles shared the general European belief in the superiority of European culture. The Polish legionaries who were sent by Napoleon to suppress the slave revolt in Haiti in the first decade of the nineteenth century depicted the local population as marvels of nature rather than fellow humans, speaking of “naked Negroes, Negresses who throw their breasts about the shoulders” in the same breath as pineapples, sea turtles, and monkeys (Pachonski and Wilson 1986, 82–82). Henryk Sienkiewicz’s novel, *W pustyni i w puszczy* (1911), clearly placed the Polish protagonist on a par with the English colonial community rather than the indigenous population in Egypt (Rhode 2013, 9). Exhibitions in Cracow and Warsaw museums presented artefacts from the Far East, South America, and Africa as objects of ethnographic interest (Rhode 2013, 9). There is also evidence that Poles were active in promoting colonialism on the ground. If we agree with Clemens Ruthner that Bosnia-Herzegovina was the Habsburgs’ European colony, then the 10,000 Poles who settled it on behalf of the Empire at the turn of the twentieth century must be seen in some respects as participants in a colonising project. As settlers, they benefited from privileges denied the local population (Bandić and Drljača 1985; Ruthner 2014). Ironically, as Maria Rhode has recently shown, colonial activity by Poles could result from their own political dependency. Remarkably, the Polish ethnographer, Stefan Rogoziński,

sought to establish a Polish colony in Cameroon to compensate for the lack of a Polish state (Rhode 2013, 29–33). Another Polish ethnographer, Benedykt Dybowski, took advantage of his position in the Polish exile community in Siberia to examine local non-Christian communities, concluding that they were uncivilised and capable only of trading, and thus supporting their political repression.⁶

More usually, however, Polish involvement in the colonial project came as an extension of their careers at home, as servants of the empires to which they belonged. In addition to political exiles like Dybowski, Russia hosted a coterie of Polish nobles such as Adam Jerzy Czartoryski and Jan Potocki, who, as Daniel Beauvois has shown, were willing to collaborate with the state during the partitions. These were directly or indirectly associated with the massive colonial project of the empire. Alexander Etkind has recently shown how Imperial Russia applied the cultural and political tools used by other European powers in overseas territories to colonise territories within and beyond its own borders (Etkind 2011).⁷ Despite the growing hostility towards Poles in the wake of the uprisings of 1830–1831 and 1863–1864, Poles were disproportionately represented in the Russian officer corps responsible for directing the conquest of neighbouring lands. In 1897, they constituted ten per cent of officers, but just six per cent of the overall population of the empire (Rhode 2013, 8). Although it did not acquire overseas colonies, Austria too offered opportunities for colonial-style activity. As an ethnic elite within Galicia, the Poles can be said to have exercised a colonial relationship towards the Ruthenian population. In an example of “nesting colonialisms,” the Polish community took advantage of its greater wealth and status to undermine Ruthenian demands for greater political and cultural autonomy from the 1860s (Beauvois 2005). The Prussians, unlike the Austrians, saw the Poles as their most unreliable minority and did not call on them specifically to assist in implementing their colonial agenda. Indeed, Poles were virtually excluded from senior officer positions in the Prussian army (Boysen 2008, 62). Nonetheless Poles availed themselves of the opportunities open to them as German subjects, acting in some

⁶ Benedykt Dybowski, “Wyjątki z listów dra Dybowskiego z Petropawłowska na Kamczatce,” *Wszechświat* 2 (1883), 419, cited in Rhode (2013, 24).

⁷ On Russian indifference to ethnic background, see Lieven (2000, 241–261).

cases as teachers and missionaries in German Cameroon (Daheur 2018).⁸ It is also conceivable that some Poles, like their German colleagues in the imperial German army, volunteered to serve in the *Schutztruppe*, the military forces defending the colonies.

As this survey demonstrates, Irish and Polish involvement in colonial activity was at times deliberate, at times opportunistic, and at times accidental. Some Irish and Polish subjects volunteered to advance the colonial projects of their empires as senior administrators, teachers, and missionaries. Others saw in the colonies opportunities for personal advancement, whether for simply a steady income or for prestige. Ordinary soldiers often ended up in the colonies simply as a by-product of having been conscripted or having signed up to serve in their imperial armies. Whatever their motives, it is ironic that some of these servants of the empire repudiated at home the kind of practices they endorsed in the colonies. For all their professions of national difference, in their commitment to colonialism abroad they were no different from their British, Russian, Austrian, or Prussian counterparts. Yet it must be remembered that the notion that the right of self-determination might be applied to all peoples was far from an established norm in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As the following section will show, this notion was growing, but its appeal was contingent on the particular political circumstances in which each nationalist community found itself.

IRELAND AND POLAND AS CRITICS OF GLOBAL COLONIALISM

Many Irish nationalists condemned colonialism outside Ireland as well as inside it. They identified strongly with the Poles and the Hungarians as fellow victims of colonial-type policies within Europe (Healy 2017; Zarka 2012). They also looked further afield at Britain's overseas territories and expressed sympathy for other subjects of the British Empire. Examinations of popular nationalist publications demonstrate a repeated repudiation of the principles underlying colonialism, which embraced a wide range of subjects within the British Empire, such as the Indians and the Afghans and even occasionally the Zulus (Ryder 2006; Townend 2007). Mindful

⁸ Daheur cites the cases of two teachers from Silesia and a Pallottine priest, Alojzy Majewski.

of British claims that the Irish were unfit for Home Rule, the moderate newspaper, the *Nation*, challenged contemporary racist assumptions by insisting that Indians were capable of self-government (Regan 2008). More famously, Roger Casement condemned the exploitation of indigenous peoples in the Belgian Congo and the Amazon Basin, before coming to the conclusion that his own compatriots in Ireland were also victims of colonialism and colluding with Germans to overthrow British rule in the Easter Rising of 1916 (Mitchell 2003).

That is not to say that Irish nationalists were free of racism or that they were equally supportive of all subject nations—even among East Central Europeans, they privileged historic nations over others, such as the Bosnians and Ukrainians, who arguably faced greater challenges from their imperial rulers. There were also limits to their sympathies for non-European peoples. Irish nationalists were hugely enthusiastic about the Boers' struggle against the British in the Anglo-Boer Wars but overlooked their heroes' treatment of the indigenous black population (Howe 2002, 43–49). Michael O'Dwyer continued to defend the actions of Reginald Dyer at Amritsar and to celebrate the British Empire as a forum for the personal and professional advancement of Irish Catholics even after Ireland broke away from the United Kingdom in 1922 to become a dominion, a move of which he approved (Nevin 2021). Moreover, the intense missionary activity of Irish Catholics in Africa and Asia in the three decades or so after independence has been interpreted as a “spiritual empire” whose reach rivalled that of Britain's political empire (Bateman 2008).

What is clear, however, is that most Irish nationalists saw *themselves* as anti-colonial. When the revolutionary leader and later prime minister and president, Eamon De Valera, visited the Chippewa Indian Reservation in Wisconsin as part of a fundraising tour of America in 1919, he proclaimed his anti-colonial credentials: “Though I am white I am not of the English race. We, like you, are a people who have suffered, and I feel for you with a sympathy that comes only from one who can understand as we Irishmen can. You say you are not free. Neither are we free and I sympathise with you because we are making a similar fight” (History Hub. De Valera—the Chief). This rhetoric even led to Indian nationalists assuming that the Connaught Rangers Mutiny by Irish soldiers in 1920 was motivated by anti-colonial solidarity rather than concern about British actions in Ireland and, more importantly, poor relations between officers and the rank and file, as has recently been made clear (Draper 2020). The

anti-colonial claims of the revolutionary period were matched by an official repudiation of colonialism after independence, expressed by an Irish diplomat in 1935, “The Irish nation has no imperialist ambitions. Though a mother country we covet no colonies and have no dominions. Our sole claim is that the ancestral home of our people, unmistakably delimited by the Ocean, should belong to us.”⁹ Indeed the Irish Department of External Affairs saw Ireland’s history as a colony as allowing it to play the role of a bridge between Europe and Africa and took a lead in promoting decolonisation after World War II (O’Sullivan 2012).

Poles often look to Joseph Conrad as a major critic of colonialism, and the links between his early life as a Russian subject and his subsequent views have been well documented (Etkind 2011, 214–230; McClure 1981, 92). His impact, however one might assess it, should not obscure other instances of Polish anti-colonialism, though. If we agree that the Habsburgs were engaged in colonial rule in at least some of their territories, then one might take the voluntary military activities by individual Poles on behalf of Hungarians and Italians from the 1840s to 1860s as anti-colonialism in action (Feichtinger et al. 2003; Zamoyski 2001). Individual Poles also criticised the German colonial project. While this critique was often motivated by the desire to emphasise the extent of Polish suffering as analogous to that of non-European subjects, it is not possible to discount a certain sympathy for the latter. Take, for instance, the comments made by Polish member of the Reichstag Franciszek Morawski-Dzierżykraj. In March 1914, he lamented that the lack of newspapers and political representation left Germany’s subjects in Africa very vulnerable to exploitation by their German overlords (Daheur 2018, 499). Poles also contributed to the international anti-colonial organisations which emerged in the early twentieth century. Poles were members, for instance, of the Subject Races International Committee, formed at the International Conference at The Hague in 1907, in order to promote “the principle of nationality, to claim for each nation the management of its own internal affairs, to protect subject races from oppression and exploitation.” Alongside Poles and Irish people, the committee included

⁹ Letter from Frederick H. Boland to Joseph P. Walshe (Dublin), enclosing Éamon de Valera’s speech to the sixteenth Assembly of the League of Nations, 16 September 1935. *Documents on Irish Foreign Policy* IV, No. 279 National Archives of Ireland Department of Foreign Affairs 26/94; <http://www.difp.ie/docs/1935/Speech-by-de-Valera-at-League/1648.htm>.

the Anti-Slavery Society, the Aborigines' Protection Society, the Egyptian Committee, and the Anti-Imperialist League (*Nationalities and Subject Races*; Sluga 2013, 16–18). Polish immigrants in the US were also very supportive of the efforts of Cubans to free themselves from Spanish rule. In 1897, the Polish National Alliance endorsed the struggle, comparing the Cubans to “the Polish heroes of yore” who had sacrificed so much in the national cause (Jacobson 1993, 4–5).

Yet Poland did not make a virtue of its anti-colonialism after independence in the way that Ireland did. Indeed, in their visions of Poland's place in Europe, Polish leaders betrayed evidence of the colonial practices of the partitioning powers they had so decried. Already before World War I, the leader of the National Democratic Party, Roman Dmowski, had elaborated an ambitious agenda for a future Polish state, which should extend to the full reach of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and in which the Poles would dominate the other ethnic groups found on its territory, principally Jews, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. His rival and chief of state from 1918 to 1922, Józef Piłsudski, advocated a federation of Eastern European states, which would guarantee freedom and equality to all constituent nations.¹⁰ Yet, in so doing, he too assumed that Poland would play a dominant political role and overlooked the evident desire of the Lithuanians and Ukrainians to enjoy full sovereignty, even to the point of seizing Vilnius, claimed by Lithuania, for the new Polish state on the grounds that the city contained far more Poles than Lithuanians.¹¹ The Second Republic also engaged in colonial-type policies in the *kresy*, for instance, settling the area with Poles and undermining the Ukrainian language in favour of Polish, which they saw as culturally superior. The government converted most Ukrainian schools into bilingual schools and ensured that the Polish language dominated. It stripped Lviv University of its chairs in Ukrainian literature and turned it into a purely Polish-language institution, leading many Ukrainians to seek education abroad (Fiut 2003, 155–156; Bakula 2017; Mick 2014).

Moreover, there emerged in the interwar period a lobby for overseas colonies. Plans were mooted for Polish settlements in Mozambique, Liberia, Madagascar, Cameroon, Nicaragua, and Ecuador. Driven by

¹⁰ For a recent analysis of the attitude of the Polish Socialist Party to other ethnic groups in this period, see Brykczyński (2014).

¹¹ The 1909 census put the Polish population at 37.8% and the Lithuanian at just 1.2%. The rest were Jews and Russians. Snyder (2003, 306).

concern about unemployment, emigration, and ethnic tensions, such plans were not the preserve of eccentrics like Rogoziński, now deceased, but won considerable popular and official support (Jarnecki 2006). One of the main advocates of a colonial policy for Poland, the Polish Maritime and Colonial League, founded in 1918, pledged to work for overseas possessions from 1928 and had gained 250,000 members by 1934. The Colonial Days festival that it organised in April 1938 involved millions of Poles, whether going to special masses, decorating buildings with Polish flags or marching on the streets (Grzechnik 2019, 3–6). Its membership subsequently jumped to a startling 841,278. The Maritime and Colonial League also developed a close relationship with the Polish government from 1930, especially the Consulate Office of the Department of Foreign Affairs. Both as a result of popular pressure and a desire to boost Poland’s international prestige, Józef Beck, Polish Foreign Minister from 1932 to 1939, endorsed the demand for overseas colonies and in 1936 asked the League of Nations to expand the ranks of countries eligible to hold mandate territories with this purpose in mind (Hunczak 1967). While Poles had focused initially on former German colonies as easy prey, justifying their claims on the grounds of the strong Polish presence in Imperial Germany, by the late 1930s, they had their eyes on the possessions of other European powers. Beck proposed that Poland take over Madagascar from France and a committee was sent to assess its potential. In this case, the motive was to use it as a “dumping ground” for Poland’s “surplus” Jewish population, an idea that the Nazis later took up (Caron 1999; Jarnecki 2006, 2010). The westward shift of Poland’s borders after World War II and resettlement of the so-called Recovered Territories provided another vehicle for Polish colonial ambitions. As before, Poland shared its objectives with others. The Soviet Union assisted and facilitated the Polish colonisation of these territories, having itself seized Polish territory in the east and displaced millions of ethnic Poles and Ukrainians (Curp 2006).

CONCLUSION

The experience of Ireland and Poland cautions against assuming any simple relationship between subjection to colonial policies at home, involvement in colonial projects abroad, and attitudes towards colonialism after independence. Although the targets of colonial-type policies by neighbouring powers, Irish and Polish subjects appear to have few scruples about subjugating other colonial peoples on behalf of their own

oppressors.¹² Yet the common ambivalence towards colonialism while under foreign rule was not followed by a unified stance once these peoples gained independence, Poland in 1918 and Ireland in 1922. While both states faced the challenge of re-establishing an economy within new political borders and coping with the effects of wars and the Great Depression, Ireland opted, in the words of Andrzej W. Nowak, for the position of “paternalistic companion” of the Third World and Poland for that of “servile bootlicker” of the First World, embracing its colonialism with gusto (Nowak 2016). It is particularly ironic that Ireland rather than Poland embraced anti-colonialism so eagerly, given that Irish participation in British colonialism was, on the basis of evidence currently available, probably more extensive than Polish participation in European colonialism, whether inside Europe, in Austria’s colony of Bosnia-Herzegovina, or in the outer reaches of the Russian Empire or in Germany’s African and Asian territories.

The explanation for the different paths taken lies in part in the immediate context of the 1930s. It must be remembered that, although colonial discourse was common and the subjugation of Poland’s minorities well in evidence in the 1920s, the official drive for colonies only took off in the late 1930s. As late as 1932, Liberia appealed to Poland for assistance in the context of League of Nations’ discussions to turn it into a protectorate precisely because it saw Poland as a country that did not seek colonies (*Polska na Koloniach* 2009). Poland’s position in between two Great Powers, both of which had earlier governed part of its territory, made it extremely vulnerable. Once the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933, Poland’s territorial integrity and its very existence were in jeopardy. In this sense, the drive for colonies can be seen as a means of projecting power to compensate for real weakness (Hunczak 1967, 656). Ireland, by contrast, enjoyed relative security by virtue of its location on the periphery of Europe and Britain’s acquiescence to its independence in the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1922. The continued enthusiasm for imperialism of maverick Irish nationalist, O’Dwyer, fit well with his sympathy for British fascism (Nevin 2021).

In other respects, however, geography was less important than Poland’s erstwhile status as a major multinational empire. For all its apparent tolerance, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth had allowed ethnic Poles a

¹² Marta Grzechnik notes a similar phenomenon among Icelanders under Denmark. See Grzechnik (2018).

privileged political and social position among the many ethnic groups present in the region. The state's relatively late demise, in 1795, meant that statehood was, if not a living memory, a not too distant one for those who founded the Second Republic. Throughout the partition era, political leaders envisioned a future Polish state that went beyond territory occupied by ethnic Poles. Thus, upon independence, virtually all political parties embraced the notion of a multinational state in which Poles would play a dominant role, if to different degrees. There was, by contrast, no precedent for Irish domination of other peoples since the unitary Irish state had dissolved as early as the twelfth century, when the Normans conquered parts of the country, well before the population became so diverse. Irish nationalist demands were thus more modest, limited to self-determination, rather than restoration as a major European power. While Irish nationalists like Poles sought to control areas in which they did not enjoy political support, a majority was ultimately willing to accept the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1922. This agreement drew the borders of the new Irish state specifically to exclude the main ethno-religious minority—the Protestant descendants of the original English and Scottish settlers—who were found mainly in the six northeastern counties and who wished to retain the Union with Britain. The homogenous state that resulted deprived the Irish government of the opportunity to exercise colonial ambitions at home in any case. Even the minority of Irish nationalists who rejected the Anglo-Irish Treaty and suffered a military defeat at the hands of the new national government in the Civil War of 1922–1923 came to an accommodation with partition. Although in government from 1932 to 1948, their parliamentary representatives, Fianna Fáil, refrained from military action to claim the North for the Irish state.

The longevity of English rule in Ireland also encouraged the persistence of anti-colonialism among Irish nationalists well after independence. Whereas when seeking international support in the partition era Poles could point to their status as a major European state up to 1795, the Irish had to work much harder to prove their worthiness for self-government because they had not enjoyed a sovereign state in recent centuries. Moreover, the decline of the Irish language and the emphasis on religious discrimination against Catholics by Daniel O'Connell had undermined

their credibility in the eyes of continental nationalists.¹³ Even in the aftermath of World War I, there was a clear bias on the part of Woodrow Wilson and the architects of the League of Nations for nations that had already exercised sovereignty in their own right (Mazower 2012, 165–166; Manela 2007). Unlike Poland, Ireland was not invited to speak at the Paris Peace Conference and was not admitted to the League until 1923, three years after its foundation.¹⁴ In this context, Irish nationalists saw the continued value of employing the anti-colonial rhetoric that had helped them gain support beyond Britain—professions of solidarity with oppressed peoples both inside and outside Europe such as the Poles, Hungarians, Indians, Afghans, and Zulus. Anti-colonial positions allowed Irish diplomats to assert their own national identity in the crowded global space of the League of Nations and later the United Nations, while all the time supporting the development of a spiritual empire through the huge scale of Irish missionary efforts (O’Sullivan 2012).

The anti-colonial identification of the Irish state ultimately had little impact on the peoples of Europe’s overseas colonies. While Britain received thousands of immigrants from its former colonies in the decades after World War II, the anti-colonial rhetoric of the Irish state disguised the extensive involvement of previous generations of Irish people in the British colonial project and allowed it to avoid responsibility for its legacy. Only in the twenty-first century did Ireland receive large numbers of immigrants, but predominantly from Poland and other EU states rather than former British territories in Africa or Asia. We will never know where O’Dwyer’s plea for Irish co-ownership of the British Empire, articulated in his aptly titled *Fusion of Anglo-Norman and Gael*, might have led (Nevin 2021; O’Dwyer 1938). Poland’s colonial ambitions had ultimately little consequence for non-Europeans either. Apart from a handful of small-scale Polish settlements organised by the Maritime and Colonial League, they were never realised as Poland fell prey to the invading forces of Germany and the Soviet Union in 1939.

The comparison of Ireland and Poland suggests that factors commonly associated with East Central and Eastern Europe, such as a high degree of ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity, economic peripherality, anti-state nationalism, and idiosyncratic political regimes, were less important

¹³ On continental nationalist attitudes to Ireland, see Costigan (1973).

¹⁴ On the struggle for inclusion in the international community, see Keown (2016).

in shaping attitudes towards colonialism after independence than longer-term political patterns. The recent experience of statehood and political dominance over other ethnic groups appears to have exercised a decisive role in pushing Poland towards embracing colonial practices both at home and abroad in the aftermath of World War I. This suggests that the attitudes of other East Central Europeans towards colonialism might equally be shaped by their particular domestic political trajectories as well as a common European culture convinced of its own superiority.

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