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# GEOPOLITICS AND GEOPOETICS IN STANISŁAW KOLBUSZEWSKI'S BALTIC ESSAYS

*A nation begins with a promise.*
Józef Tischner,
„Polski młyn"

*The paper discusses Stanislaw Kolbuszewski's essays devoted to the capitals of the Baltic states (W stolicach państw bałtyckich, Poznań 1939; (In the Capitals of the Baltic States).) the author visited in the 1930s. Kolbuszewski's aim was to familiarize the Polish reader with modern Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia as seen through the eyes of a (friendly) stranger. His book clearly transcends the conventional limits of its genre (travel writing, journalism, reportage). The three capitals function there as extended conceptual metaphors of the Baltic states, their history, architecture, urban layout, and local color being viewed by the Polish "tourist" as symbolic manifestations of their inhabitants' national mentality.*

*The paper focuses on the geopolitical and geopoetic ideas implicit in Kolbuszewski's account, exploring the connections between "imagined" geographical space and the nation's collective memory. Curiously enough, though a Polish nationalist at heart, Kolbuszewski does not make any territorial claims on what was once "Polish Livonia". Instead, he enthusiastically endorses Baltic nationalisms, dismissing the German and Russian cultural contributions as hostile foreign intrusions. The tropes of ethnic "purity" and folk cultures viewed as pillars of national identity, recurrent in Kolbuszewski's Baltic essays, bring to mind the anti-German propaganda employed by Polish National Democrats after WW1 and Polish communists after WW2 in their attempt to justify Poland's annexation of German Silesia, Pomerania, and Masuria, symbolically redefined in the Polish political discourse as the so-called Regained Territories. The connection between Kolbuszewski's Baltic essays and his affinities with the Regained Territories narrative, as developed by Polish Western Thought and the Piast historiography, is our focus in this article.*

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**Keywords:** Stanisław Kolbuszewski, Baltic states, nationalism, National Democracy, Regained Territories, Piast narrative.

### *ĢEOPOLITIKA UN ĢEOPOĒTIKA STAŅISLAVA KOLBUŠEVSKA ESEJĀS PAR BALTIJU*

*Nācija sākas ar solījumu.*
Józef Tischner, „Polski młyn"

*Pētījumā ir aplūkotas Staņislava Kolbuševska esejas, kas veltītas Baltijas valstu galvaspilsētām (W stolicach państw bałtyckich, Poznań 1939, (Baltijas valstu galvaspilsētas, Poznaņa, 1939)), kuras autors apmeklēja 20. gs. 30. gados. S. Kolbuševska mērķis bija iepazīstināt poļu lasītāju ar mūsdienu Lietuvu, Latviju un Igauniju, raugoties draudzīga svešinieka acīm. Viņa grāmata nepārprotami pārsniedz ierastos žanra ierobežojumus (ceļojumu apraksti, publicistika, reportāža). Trīs galvaspilsētas darbojas kā paplašinātas Baltijas valstu konceptuālas metaforas, to vēsturi, arhitektūru, pilsētu izkārtojumu un vietējo kolorītu poļu „tūrists" uzskata par šo pilsētu iedzīvotāju nacionālās mentalitātes simboliskajām izpausmēm.*

*Pētījumā galvenā uzmanība pievērsta ģeopolitiskajām un ģeopoētiskajām idejām, kas ir ietvertas S. Kolbuševska pieejā, pētot saiknes starp „iedomātu" ģeogrāfisko telpu un nācijas kolektīvo atmiņu. Interesanti, ka, būdams pārliecināts poļu nacionālists, S. Kolbuševskis neizvirza nekādas teritoriālas pretenzijas tam, kas reiz bija „poļu Livonija". Tā vietā viņš ar entuziasmu atbalsta baltu nacionālās kustības, noraidot Vācijas un Krievijas kultūras ieguldījumu kā naidīgu ārvalstu iejaukšanos. Etniskās „tīrības" un tautas kultūras tropi, kas tiek uzskatīti par nacionālās identitātes pīlāriem un atkārtojas S. Kolbuševska esejās par Baltiju, vērš uzmanību uz Polijas nacionālo demokrātu pretvācu propagandu pēc Otrā pasaules kara un poļu komunistiem pēc Otrā pasaules kara, kuri mēģināja pamatot Polijas rīcību sakarā ar Vācijas Silēzijas, Pomerānijas un Mazūrijas teritoriju aneksiju, kuras Polijas politiskajā diskursā simboliski tika pārveidotas par tā sauktajām atgūtajām teritorijām. Šajā rakstā mūsu uzmanības centrā ir saistība starp S. Kolbuševska Baltijas esejām un viņa attieksmi pret atgūto teritoriju stāstījumu, ko izveidojusi poļu Rietumu doma un Piasta historiogrāfija.*

**Atslēgas vārdi:** Staņislavs Kolbuševskis, Baltijas valstis, nacionālisms, nacionālā demokrātija, atdzimstošās teritorijas, Piasta stāstījums.

## 1. Introduction

Stanisław Kolbuszewski (1901–1965) was a Polish academic, who in September 1934 moved to Latvia to teach Slavic Literatures in Riga. He returned to Poland in

1945 and settled down in Wrocław – today the capital of Lower Silesia, a province then newly reclaimed (together with Upper Silesia, Pomerania, Varmia and Masuria) by Communist Poland from Nazi Germany as a result of postwar border changes. For the rest of his life he taught Polish Literature at the University of Wrocław and later at the Opole Pedagogical College (Opole being another Silesian city in Southwestern Poland that changed hands after World War Two). Before his premature death in 1965 Professor Kolbuszewski was widely recognized – both in his native country and abroad – as a prominent literary scholar, a renowned expert on Polish Romanticism and Modernism[1].

In 1939, years before his permanent return to Poland, Kolbuszewski published (in Poznań, Poland) a collection of essays entitled *W stolicach państw bałtyckich* (In the Capitals of the Baltic States). The book consisted of three chapters covering Riga, Kaunas and Tallinn, respectively[2]. Kolbuszewski wrote them during his prolonged stay in Latvia (from 15 September 1934 till 15 October 1945), aiming to introduce the Polish audience to the past and present of the region (Ozols 2008, Ihnatowicz 2008). Thus in the essays he focused not only on the history of the three Baltic capitals but also on their architecture, infrastructure, traditions and local color, political life and the collective mentality of their inhabitants. Journalistic in style and apparently belonging in the travel writing tradition, the book goes clearly beyond the conventional limits of its genre. The three capitals function there as extended conceptual metaphors of the Baltic states, their history, architecture, and local color being viewed by the (friendly) Polish observer as symbolic manifestations of their inhabitants' national mentality. In Riga, for example, the Polish essayist takes note of the material legacy of the city's multicultural past – Latvian, German, Polish, Jewish, Russian – relying on the conceptual metaphor of "speaking stones", i. e. on the idea that the city's buildings are representative of the national cultures that produced them. In contrast to today's standards of political correctness, Kolbuszewski does not even try to pretend he is being objective in his appraisal of the four non-Baltic nations' contributions to Latvian culture. Openly dismissing the German and Russian influences as imperialist or barbaric, and denigrating the Jewish presence as exploitative or parasitic, he gives an occasional credit to Riga's Polish past. First and foremost, however, he eulogizes the Latvian aboriginal/Baltic "spirit", both past and present. In short, the Polish academic sounds very much like a hard-core Latvian nationalist.

[1] As it happened, he proved not only an excellent scholar but also, as Rector of the Opole Pedagogical College and editor-in-chief of a local academic quarterly, an able organizer and a committed promoter of Polish academic and cultural life in Opole, resolutely supporting Poland's historical claims to the lands that had been under German rule for centuries.

[2] In 1939, Vilnius was part of Poland. Following the so-called Żeligowski's Mutiny, which had resulted, first, in the creation of the Republic of Central Lithuania and, second, in the formal annexation of the area by Poland in 1922, Lithuania moved its capital city to Kaunas. Lithuania, of course, never officially recognized the annexation of the Vilnius province and referred to those lands as territories "occupied" by Poland.

## 2. National Democracy and Western Thought in Interwar Poland

In this respect Kolbuszewski stands out among other Polish intellectuals of his day writing about *Kresy*, Poland's Eastern Borderlands that once belonged to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (*Rzeczpospolita*). In general, the Polish stance on *Kresy* fell into two major categories: the nationalist and the multiculturalist one. The former, represented by National Democrats (*Narodowa Demokracja*) in practice equated a nation with an ethnic group, postulating uncompromising, state-sponsored Polonization of Poland's Belarusan, Lithuanian, and Ukrainian minorities. The latter group, who referred to themselves as *Krajowcy* – which could be roughly translated as "Fellow Countrymen", "Local Patriots", or "Natives" – postulated the existence of a multi-ethnic political nation residing on the territories of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania and united by a shared attachment to ancestral land, regardless of the cultural and religious affinities of the diverse ethnic groups (Poles, Lithuanians, Belarusans, Jews, Russians, Tatars, Karaites, etc.) residing there (Bujnicki et al. 2005). In Lithuania and Belarus the *Krajowcy* were, as it happened, mostly supported by Polish-speaking landowners, partly supported by Belarusan activists, and fiercely opposed by Lithuanian nationalists. In ethnic Poland, ironically enough, the only thing that united Polish followers of the nationalist leader Roman Dmowski and their Lithuanian counterparts following Antanas Smetona was the shared hostility towards the political vision of the Local Patriots (Bujnicki et al. 2005, Dmowski 1925).

Stanisław Kolbuszewski was in those days an outspoken supporter of National Democracy when it came to such issues as the concept of nationhood or Poland's political mission in East-Central Europe. His fervently pro-Baltic stance in the 1939 book seems therefore doubly puzzling; though an outspoken Polish nationalist, he was not advocating Poland's cultural (let alone political) expansion in the area. Neither was he supportive of any forms of multiculturalism in the Eastern Borderlands that would presumably secure the social standing of the Polish minority there. In short, he was poles apart (pun intended) from those of his compatriots who would rather speak of Polish Livonia (*Inflanty Polskie*) than Latvia. This otherwise mind-boggling fact, however, can be easily explained if one situates Kolbuszewski's "tourist" account in the context of his lifelong ideological adherence to the so-called Western Thought (*Myśl Zachodnia*) in Polish political tradition.

Grounded in the legacy of 18th-century Enlightenment and 19th-century Romanticism, Polish Western Thought was firmly established as a geopolitical concept at the beginning of the 20th century. It was called "Western" not because of any explicit credit due to Western European intellectual currents, but because of its focus on Poland's Western Territories – an umbrella term for the lands of Silesia and Pomerania that, though belonging to Poland in medieval times, eventually came under Germanic cultural dominance and German political rule. The pioneers of Western Thought were mostly essayists and activists afiliated with National Democracy. By the same token they presupposed the primacy of national interest in the country's internal and foreign policy. Basing on ethnicity as a frame of reference, they defined

national identity in organicist terms. By contrast, they understood national territory in broadly inclusive terms covering not only the territories of ethnic Poland but also those of Eastern Borderlands as well as the provinces of Silesia, Pomerania, Varmia and Masuria. To justify their extensive territorial claims National Democrats championed the idea of a "historic nation", an extended ethnic group that through cultural domination, civilizational advances and/or military expansion gains the right to colonize its "non-historic" neighbors (e.g. the Eastern Borderlands). For obvious reasons this concept was inapplicable to the formerly Slavic/Polish territories once annexed by Poland's western neighbor. Germany, judged by the historic-nation criteria, might be seen as superior to Poland on a number of fronts. Therefore, Polish claims to those lands had been based on an altogether different idea. The provinces of Silesia, Pomerania, Varmia and Masuria were regarded as "ancestral" or "native" lands that had been temporarily remaining under foreign rule. The lands traditionally inhabited by Polish-speaking Slavs or territories that had once belonged to the Polish state were thus considered Polish by National Democrats and duly claimed. The story justifying those claims was the so-called "Piast Narrative"[3], originally formed by 19th-century and early 20th-century Polish historians, journalists and writers. Because of the territorial conflict involved and the attendant historical grudges both the Piast Narrative and the Western Thought had a decidedly anti-German tinge (Jędrzejczyk 2008).

When Stanisław Kolbuszewski's collection of essays *W stolicach państw bałtyckich* came out in Poznań in 1939[4], the concepts of "ancestral lands" and "regained territories" had been well-entrenched in historical writings and political discourse. After the annexation of Trans-Olza (*Zaolzie*) by the Polish military in 1938 the Regained Territories narrative was also endorsed by the press, state-supported propaganda and the government's official documents. Discussing the material legacy of the past and noting the dynamic interplay of local German, Russian, Polish, and Scandinavian influences on the cityscape, Kolbuszewski seems particularly interested in the emergence of modern national identity in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. Although their political traditions and cultural heritage were far from identical, the growth of the three countries' national identities seems to have followed a pattern typical of that part of Europe. It is, arguably, this nation-building mechanism – with its emphasis on the ethnic aspect of nationhood – that might have proved particularly appealing to the Polish scholar, given his lifelong interest in Poland's "regained" Western territories in general, and the province of Silesia in particular.

[3] Thus named after the Piast dynasty that ruled Poland between, approximately, mid-10th and mid-14th century. The founder of the dynasty, pagan Prince Mieszko I, converted to Christianity and was baptized in 966. It was Mieszko who managed to unite, mostly through military conquests, the diverse Polish-speaking tribes inhabiting the lands in-between the Odra and the Vistula rivers, thus laying the foundation for what was eventually to become Poland.

[4] Rather revealingly, the book's publisher was The Head Institute of Catholic Action (*Naczelny Instytut Akcji Katolickiej*).

## 3. The Grand Narrative of Regained Territories in Latvia and Silesia

Kolbuszewski was not only an eminent Polish philologist specializing in the literature of Romanticism but also, following his return to Poland in 1945, one of the major Silesian Studies experts. His scholarly output in the field of Silesian Studies blazed the trail for Polish academic expertise in the literary heritage of the region (cf. Kolbuszewski 1988). Arguably, Kolbuszewski's otherwise mind-boggling Baltic "nationalism" resulted from the fact that his perspective on identity and culture in borderland regions in the late 1930s had a lot in common with his approach to the history and cultural legacy of Silesia. Both attitudes, we would argue, were grounded in the grand narrative of Regained Territories[5]. It is, therefore, the connection between Kolbuszewski's Baltic essays and his affinities with the Regained Territories narrative, as developed by Western Thought, that remains our focus in this article. Focusing on the Polish scholar's descriptions of the Latvian capital, we intend to demonstrate how his openly biased, metaphorical renditions of Riga's cityscape resonate on a number of levels with the Piast Narrative and Polish Western Thought. The Romantic and Modernist ingredients of Kolbuszewski's Latvian geopoetics[6] all fall in place when viewed through the lens of the Regained Territories narrative as applied by interwar Polish National Democrats and, after World War Two, by Polish communists to the annexation of Silesia. That narrative, we would argue, was either an integral part or a natural consequence of the modern concept of a nation state, grounded in late 19$^{th}$- and early 20$^{th}$-century European literature and philosophy (cf. Anderson 2006, Gellner 2008).

The concept of Regained Territories was a formidable blend of National Democrats' political realism, Polish Romantic martyrology and philosophy of history,

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[5] Needless to say, that narrative was never a purely academic enterprise disentangled from politics. In interwar Poland it was an instrument of state propaganda, supported by such social organizations as Union for the Defence of Eastern Borderlands (*Związek Obrony Kresów Wschodnich*). In Stalinist Poland, in turn, communists eagerly appropriated the narrative, rightly seeing in it one of the precious few areas of concord with a society that was otherwise predominantly hostile to communism. (Even the anti-communist Polish underground resistance movement supported the annexation of the Regained Territories.) Renowned Polish scholars – such as Karol Maleczyński, Stanisław Rospond, Tadeusz Mikulski, Bogdan Zakrzewski and Stanisław Kolbuszewski, to mention but a few – shared a deeply-held conviction that genuine "re-Polonization" of the region's past and present culture was in the best interest of Poland and felt it their academic duty to endorse the process. Well-aware of the contextual contingencies of the Regained Territories narrative and the role of state propaganda in its promulgation (both in interwar and postwar political realities), those patriotic Polish scholars nevertheless decided to take up the challenge of intellectual appropriation of Silesia in accordance with the traditions of Western Thought (cf. Nicieja 1988, 16-17).

[6] We define the term "geopoetics' by analogy with "geopolitics". Just as geopolitics is, simply speaking, the study of cause-and-effect relationships between a given area's geography and its politics and international relations, so is geopoetics the study of the long-term effects of geography (or the "lay of the land") on the poetics of writers coming from that area.

European ethnicist concepts of the national community, and the phantasm of Poland as a historic nation and regional superpower. Though fully aware of multicultural traditions of East-Central Europe, Polish nationalists (just like their counterparts in Lithuania, for example) insisted on remodelling the nation's collective memory along highly exclusive lines. At this point, however, it should be emphasized that, contrary to the popular misconception, the ultimate political practice implicit in the Regained Territories narrative was not a foregone conclusion. Admittedly, the narrative does contain a potential for chauvinist ideologies, notorious for rationalizing mass deportations, arbitrary border changes, symbolic colonization of annexed territories, or even ethnic cleansings. Simultaneously, however, the very same narrative implies a possibility of interpreting international relations in ethnically-mixed areas in terms of a mutually-enriching cultural dialog and exchange, emphasizing a beneficent transfer of ideas and technologies. The latter vision fosters an inclusive collective memory, one that accommodates the histories of both "natives" and "strangers" – or the "indigeneous" and the "immigrant" populations – giving them equal recognition, if not equal billing. Writing about multicultural borderlands, Kolbuszewski applied both perspectives in his own idiosyncratically ingenious, if arbitrary, manner, drawing heavily on the tradition of Polish Romanticism[7].

It was the Romantics who laid the foundations for the concept of a historic nation by appreciating the formative role of history in general and the medieval spirit in particular. Likewise, the Middle Ages play a prominent role in the Piast grand narrative wherein ancestral lands are being reclaimed by a victorious nation. The Piast legacy of Slavic Silesia provided a strong historical argument for Poland's claims to the province[8]. Applying similar arguments, Kolbuszewski starts his descriptions of Riga and Tallinn with Gothic buildings and the medieval urban grids of the two cities. The past, after all, speaks to us with the "voices of the stones" (Kolbuszewski 1939:31). The Romantic and nationalist affinities could not have been clearer when the Polish scholar argues that an adequate interpretation of history nurtures the "national instinct" and collective memory of modern-day citizens (1939:22). The essay on Riga starts with a description of the cityscape in which architectural contrasts function as poignant reminders of the city's dramatic history[9]:

It is the right bank of the *Dźwina* river, called *Daugava* in Latvian, some 15 kilometers away from its mouth, that the capital of the Latvian republic – the "white" Riga – has rested itself against. It has skyrocketed with steeples of several churches, those still remembering the Middle Ages, assembled in the oldest part of the city. From the river's side, however, the city has been girded with ugly, barracks-like

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[7] This explains why he would, for example, endorse the Polish cultural legacy in Riga, while contemptuously dismissing the Russian one.

[8] During the partitions there emerged, motivated by historiosophic thought, a new concept of the Polish nation according to which "yours is what is historically justified" (Joachimsthaler 2009:499).

[9] All the translations from Polish into English by Piotr Zazula, unless otherwise noted.

19th-century tenements, sprawled close to the river bank with the crass coquetry of a Russian petit-bourgeois housewife, luring the passer-by, diverting his attention from the gorgeous church steeples that gaze into the currents of the Daugava beyond their backs. This contrast illustrates one of the city's characteristics and a fragment of its history. Two epochs left their heavy imprints here, two cultures – German and Russian – attempted to penetrate the urban organism. What is beautiful in old Riga comes from the Middle Ages, some artistically interesting traces have also remained since the Polish days. The Russian broom, however, has smeared Riga's surface with ugly stains of malformed buildings and grotesque houses scattered all over the city. There is, finally, the new Riga, young and earnest, carefully looked after by the municipal and state authorities. The Latvian Riga – built, renovated, and cultivated in the Latvian days, the Riga of paved streets and modern buildings, of flowers and gardens, the 380.000-strong capital as well as spiritual, economic, and political center of a young state with its two million citizens. Spanning the centuries [of the city's history], it reaches out to Latvia's ancient beginnings, reminding us that already centuries ago Latvians were lords and stewards of their own domain here. (1939: 5–6)

In Kolbuszewski's account the entire history of the Baltic states breaks down into two major parts: medieval and modern. The medieval era encompasses the days of the region's political independence and the subsequent German/Latin colonization. Modernity, in turn, organically linked to the medieval spirit, is synonymous with the national revival and the regaining of political independence in the 20th century. In-between these two epochs there are seven centuries of enforced foreign rule (or "yoke"), a long and poignant cultural interval marked by heroic suffering, denationalization policies, and destructive subaltern relations with the neighboring superpowers. The heroic episodes of those days, preserved for the nation's collective memory by literature, symbolic painting, monuments and museums, have provided a semiotic foundation for a sacrificial identity, one that is closed and hostile to any foreign influence. This vision of history comes with an axiological division into the good times prior to the enslavement and after the regaining of independence and the bad times of Teutonic and Muscovite rule. The only exception within the latter category are the years of "the Polish concern with the city's growth" (Kolbuszewski 1939:10).

Kolbuszewski constructs a clearly "nationalized" hierarchy of the past. The worst days, in his view, were those of Teutonic and Russian rule, though he gives limited credit to some selected episodes of German or Scandinavian (Swedish and Danish) dominance. By contrast, the Polish presence in the Baltic region is eulogized throughout the book. It is precisely at this point that the aforementioned multicultural potential of the Regained Territories narrative comes to the fore. Of all foreign imprints left on Riga's cityscape it is only the Polish cultural legacy that puts cultural diffusion and civilizational transfers, as well as the multinational state

as such, in a positive light. The epoch that left a valuable material legacy is, of course, the Middle Ages. The fact that the medieval times in the Baltic region were roughly synonymous with German rule is, needless to say, rather uncomfortable for Kolbuszewski – both for political and historiosophic reasons. That is why German dominance is compensated, as it were, by the rhetoric of universalism or that of local, ethnocentric antiquity.

The same dichotomic model of history was applied to Poland's "regained territories" after World War One and World War Two (by National Democrats and communists, respectively). The main roles in that historical drama, however, had been assigned somewhat differently. Predictably enough, the Teutonic Knights remained the bad guys, but they had been joined by Bismarck's officials, Prussian landowners, and Nazis, whose epochs were displayed on a similar timeline, dating from the late Middle Ages to mid-20$^{th}$ century. Similarly, excluded from the "good old days" were the times of late 19$^{th}$- and early 20$^{th}$-century expansion of the middle class, urban growth and industrialization (with the exception of the history of working class movements). The Regained Territories narrative presented all those social transformations in a negative light, linking civilizational progress to a "foreign" dominance – alien in both national and class terms – that resulted in either denationalization or proletarianization of the local Polish population.

In a similar manner, Kolbuszewski remains highly critical of the German and Russian legacies in the Baltic states. Accusing the Germans of oppression and material exploitation of the natives, combined with a symbolic violation of their identity, he blames the Russians for polluting the local urban space with chaos and kitsch.

## Cityscapes and the "Western Eye"

Kolbuszewski looked at the three capitals with the "Western eye", i. e. one that keeps searching for urban order and the rational project implicit in it. He found both in the medieval districts of Riga and Tallinn, and in modern Kaunas. His geopoetics is clearly grounded in an essentially modern, avant-garde sensibility. The ubiquitous automobiles, the modern buildings, the wide streets and the commonly-accessible telephones emblematize to him the three cities' advanced civilization and the high quality of life enjoyed by their inhabitants. The pervasive modernity of the three young republics results, in Kolbuszewski's account, both from their contemporaneous vigor and their centuries-old liaisons with Latin culture. Thus, St. Peter's Church in Riga "closes the list that the Roman one [St. Peter's Basilica] opens" (Kolbuszewski 1939:12). By contrast, the Russian legacy evokes only negative connotations. Looking at its artifacts, Kolbuszewski sees only "thoughtlessness" and "crassness". Curiously enough, his orientalizing perspective exhibits no traits of Slavophilia, which otherwise featured prominently in the writings of National Democrats. Instead, it seems permeated with the Romantic aversion to Russian imperialism and

authoritarianism, sometimes verging on the scorn and loathing of the entire Russian civilization. The Polish scholar would look at its traces in the Baltic cityscapes with the "Western eye" but without the naive idealization of and fascination with the East typical of Western intellectuals. Kolbuszewski's Central European experience made him fear Russia's influence and her historically attested expansionism.

The Regained Territories narrative featured an equally outspoken aversion to all things Prussian, the traces of German culture being all-too-conspicuous in the regions incorporated by Poland after the two world wars. Interestingly enough, the very same arguments as those brought against Russian legacy in the Baltic states were habitually used – despite the numerous factual evidence to the contrary – by anti-German propaganda in the Polish Silesia. Just like its Russian counterpart, the imagined Prussianness was indiscriminately identified with violence, brutality, ignorance, backwardness, no sense of decorum and a lack of empathy. This axiology was attendant on mass deportations of Germans in the late 1940s followed by the takeover or destruction of their material legacy and "de-Germanization" of cultural space.

Analogous processes took place in the Baltic states after World War One. Shortly before the outbreak of World War Two the "Lettonization" of Latvia gained impetus due to a popular increase in nationalist sentiments, typical of East-Central European countries in the late 1930s. As Kolbuszewski tells us,

> The nation's unification was carried out under the banner of "Latvia for Latvians", which manifested itself, among other things, in the limitation of the rights of ethnic minorities. Thus the country's pre-existing trilingual status was abolished, with Russian and German being ousted from public domain and Latvian installed as the only official language. (1939: 21)

Kolbuszewski approvingly notes the nationalist policy directed against the former "occupiers" (now turned into minorities) and their cultural legacy in Latvia and Estonia. As for Lithuania, he leaves no doubts about his political sympathies when he writes that in Kaunas "the Russian veneer was stripped off the city as soon as its migrating birds, the Russian officials, had left the place" (1939: 27). The only exception in the essays, as already noted, is the Polish tradition. Created by Adam Mickiewicz, the Polish Romantic literary legend of the Kaunas region is viewed by Kolbuszewski as a huge cultural asset. In a similar manner, the Regained Territories narrative in communist Poland would treasure the Polish/Slavic traces along the Odra river and on the Baltic coast. Incidentally, an affirmative attitude towards the German legacy resurfaced in Polish public discourse only in the twilight of communism, prompted by the process of replacing the authoritarian-nationalist master narrative[10] with the one of modernity and multiculturalism, following the political transition

[10] We use the terms "master narrative" and "grand narrative" interchangeably here. Both are understood in the sense introduced by Jean-François Lyotard in his (now classic) 1979 book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (see Lyotard 1991).

of 1989. Simultaneously, the new generation of Silesia- and Pomerania-born Poles began to mentally appropriate and internalize their regions' entire past, not only its Polonized or politically sanitized fragments.

## Folk and national culture

Kolbuszewski took note of the folk genealogy of the Baltic nations. In his view, removal of German, Swedish, and Russian elites had, firstly, paved the way for a culturally homogeneous society, and, secondly, created an opportunity for upward mobility previously unavailable to the lower classes, whose culture and politcal agency was now officially recognized. Following in Johann Gottfried Herder's footsteps, the Polish essayist acknowledges the crucial role played by folk culture in creating the modern Baltic national identities. At the same time, he embraces the value system of the "peasant republic", extolling the virtues of hard work, frugality, persistence, and determination. Kolbuszewski's stance inevitably brings to mind Ksawery Pruszyński's journalistic reportage entitled "Kraj Polski chlopskiej" (The Peasants' Poland). Published in the 1930s, the text covers the Greater Poland (*Wielkopolska*) region (Pruszyński 2000). Both authors link the country's and the people's prosperity to the harmonious blend of well-developed, regulated capitalism with (Protestant) work ethic and modern technological and social innovations. The process of modernization, as seen by Kolbuszewski and Pruszyński, is conducive to the strengthening of national identity among the masses. At this point the two essayists' perspective clearly overlaps with that of Poland's National Democrats.

A similar image of "folk identity" recurs in the postwar communist version of the Regained Territories narrative, in which Silesians, Kashubians, Varmians, or Lusatians are invariably endowed with the above-mentioned positive character traits. Not only do they faithfully stick to their Slavic languages and traditions, but also constantly strive to upgrade their daily lives on economic and civilizational fronts, working hard with their own hands, of course. Grounded in the Romantic concept of folklore as a source of national culture, this narrative combines the patriotic ethos with socialist utopia, referring also to the ideas of native/folk identity and the pre-feudal self-rule of the commons. Significantly, Kolbuszewski would regard only Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians as "natives", denying the status to all the remaining inhabitants of the Baltic countries, both past and present. Dismissing Germans and Russians as foreign invaders, regardless of how long they had resided in the area, he was equally harsh on the local Jews, stigmatizing their ways as either exploitative or parasitic. "The shabbier, liquor-reeking parts of the city swarm with them", he simply writes (1939: 28).

Much to the same effect, the idea of natives or autochthons as "belonging" in a given region, to the exclusion of everybody else, featured prominently in the Regained Territories narrative in communist Poland. According to that narrative, only Poles, or Slavs in general, qualified as genuine autochthons, whereas Germans,

even those living in Silesia or Pomerania for generations, if not centuries, were considered foreign intruders.

Toponymy was regarded as one of the proofs of the historical primacy of autchthonous culture and as such was used extensively in the public discourse after both world wars in Poland[11]. Kolbuszewski does not devote much space to it in his essays, except for the etymology of the names of Latvia's and Estonia's capitals. In his account, the word "Riga" comes from the Livonian *ring*, which means "to bend" or "curve". The word was used to denote one of the tributaries of the Daugava as well as the nearby fishermen's settlement from the Norman times inhabited by Livonian natives, next to which the "treacherous" Germans later founded their own Riga. Estonia's capital, in turn, discarded its Danish name in order to returm to the old Baltic original. Kolbuszewski endorsed the change, not only because of its "de-Germanizing" aspect, but also for purely aesthetic reasons. The German Reval, which to Kolbuszewski sounded "like the rumbling of a drumbeat" became the charmingly soft and velvet-like Tallinn. Very similar arguments were used to promote toponymic changes in Poland's postwar "regained territories". The communist authorities promptly reintroduced old Slavic-sounding names of cities, towns, villages, and other topographic objects, symbolically severing their pre-existing cultural ties, sometimes dating back hundreds of years. The act was habitually justified not only as a return to the long-lost original toponymy, but also as a "natural" phonetic choice of place-name versions which were aesthetically superior to their "Germanized" counterparts[12].

Back in the late 1940s the administrative (and somewhat magical) act of entirely renaming a large territory seemed historically justified and final. Today, however, many Polish tourist guides and literary texts choose to include, side by side, the current Polish and the past German or Czech toponyms. The former are supposed to connote not only the place's cultural Polishness but also its historical ties to the Polish People's Republic; the latter identify with the tradition of multicultural and multilingual transitional regions. The Regained Territories narrative was, and still is, to a large extent a metalinguistic discourse. In the 20th century the national versions of the same toponym were permanently separated by ideological history and nationalist politics, which precluded the two versions' equal status and ideologically-neutral coexistence. By contrast, in the 21st century, they can be reconnected within the

[11] Needless to say, the very idea of "public discourse" in a communist (i.e. totalitarian) state is a problematic one, "public" discourse in communist states being simply, by and large, government propaganda. By applying the same term to the public discourses of both interwar (i.e. independent) Poland and communist-controlled Poland (i. e. a Soviet satellite state) we do not intend to give them equal billing as far as freedom of speech is concerned. Certain tropes, images, and conceptual metaphors, however, do recur in both.

[12] In Polish postwar literature the protagonist of Henryk Worcell's fiction is a representative example of someone who is both witness to and advocate of the symbolic transfiguration of Silesia in the 1940s, imaginatively endorsing the "de-Germanization" of the local landscape "marred" by the rough-sounding German names.

palimpsest or transnational model of cultural space, one that facilitates their dialog and interpenetration.

## Conclusion

Stanisław Kolbuszewski's essays are not only travel-writing variants of the Regained Territories narrative; they can also be seen as acts of negotiation between seemingly incompatible geopoetic and historiosophic discourses. Kolbuszewski argues that close economic and cultural ties between the Baltic countries and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth gave rise in the past centuries to periods of unprecedented prosperity in the region, while all the other relations with neighboring powers brought effects that could be labelled ambiguous at best, if not outright destructive for the Baltic nations. Still, Kolbuszewski consistently avoids making any territorial claims for Poland, postulating instead a rebuilding and strengthening of the Polish-Baltic bonds on the basis of mutual benefit for all the nations involved. Though a Polish nationalist at heart, Kolbuszewski describes the Baltic lands not with an intention of "reclaiming" them for Poland but in order to cultivate the positive elements of the countries' shared historical memory; at the same time he subtly stresses Poland's current regional superpower status and its glorious past. Juxtaposing Germany's, Russia's, or Denmark's political expansionism in the area with Poland's contribution to the histories of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, the essayist interprets the Polish presence as a compelling example of a mutually-beneficial political bond and a fruitful cultural exchange.

Admittedly, Kolbuszewski's perspective is glaringly biased and Polonocentric. Still, let us not forget that his collection of essays is not an academic treatise. One should not, therefore, apply scholarly criteria of objectivity to the writer's purposely selective and idealizing version of Poland's relations with the Baltic states. Collective memory is by definition biased, emotional, allegorical and open to reinterpretations. It is a story composed and told in the interest of a community that needs it as a temporary measure, usually to address a burning social or political issue. One could easily point to a number of crises afflicting Poland in the late 1930s that this type of consolatory narrative might have provided a phantasmagorical remedy for. (The growing hostility between Poland and the neighboring countries, the ever-increasing domestic conflict between right-wing nationalists and leftists of diverse politcal persuasions, or the military conflict over Trans-Olza are but a few examples.)

As an observer and discourse-maker, Kolbuszewski is not only a typical westerner orientalizing Europe's Northeastern borderlands or, occasionally, making them fit in the Latin civilizational model, but also a typical Central European who confronts the West's grand narratives with his own poignant and complicated experience of the periphery-dweller. The site of that confrontation is sometimes the contemporaneous (geo)politics of the Baltic states, which Kolbuszewski analyzes on several occasions, and – more often – the geopoetics of his own text. The essayist's favorite perspective

on Northeastern Europe is that of Adam Mickiewicz, who immortalized in Polish tradition both the idea of one's own native province and that of one's homeland understood as an ideological-spiritual reality, one that unites different provinces in the name of a single Pan-Polish idea. In a similar manner, Kolbuszewski acknowledges the existence of two Latvias, so to speak: the ethnic Latvia and the palimpsest/multicultural one. Concomitantly, he makes the most of modern political science, combining the geopolitical sense of a peripheral nation's representative (with the attendant historical awareness of his nation's difficult situation in the interwar period) and pragmatic endorsement of all economic, urban, scientific, and technological progress. (This perspective on Central European states is, incidentally, reminiscent of Roman Dmowski's and Tadeusz Peiper's.) In sum, Kolbuszewski's essays contribute to the narrative of Regained Territories not because of any belated territorial claims to long-lost Northeastern provinces that the reader might have otherwise expected of a Polish nationalist, but because they draw heavily on the same Romantic and Modernist concepts of culture, nation, homeland, and history that laid the foundation for such claims.

Kolbuszewski's literary sensibility is grounded in symbols, allegories, personifications and cultural patterns that also feature prominently in the Regained Territories narrative. The history of Riga's churches, rebuilt after numerous disasters, epitomizes in his view the history of the entire country which, though continuously devastated by invaders, would persistently rebuild itself. In Kolbuszewski's view, the peasant's tenacity – just as Gothic architecture for Latin civilization – has been for the Baltic nations the source and model of national perseverance. The Daugava has been, since times immemorial, the silent witness to their past glories and modern ordeals and transformations. This brings to mind the countless historical novels and poems in postwar Polish literature in which old castles and churches on the banks of the rivers Odra, Warta or Lyna provide ample settings for the narratives glorifying the patriotism of the simple folk of Western and Northern Territories who, unlike the local elites, did not yield to the pressures of Germanization and persevered until the arrival of the Polish People's Republic with its "Piast" ethos. The three stars in the coat of arms of resurrected Latvia, Kolbuszewski tells us, emblematize the "unification of three ancient Latvian provinces" (1939:19). In a similar manner, the Polish-Silesian eagle featured in Wroclaw's postwar emblem stood for the union of the "ancient Polish" land and its capital with the Motherland. Riga's Freedom Monument, in turn, especially the medieval warriors and the monumental sculpture featuring a mother-figure dressed in the national costume, displays clear stylistic affinities with Xawery Dunikowski's Silesian Insurgence Monument on St. Anne Mountain in Poland with its grandiose mixture of socialist realism and the Piast motifs.

To repeat: the similarities between Kolbuszewski's essays and the Regained Territories narrative are clear and numerous. The allegorical image of aesthetically incongruous Orthodox churches compared by Kolbuszewski to a typical Russian

family brings to mind the Polish caricatures of Prussian landowners sporting the characteristic spiked military helmets or fat German bankers and industrialists smoking oversized cigars, popular in Silesia and Pomerania after both world wars. Next to the fast-growing modern Riga there are ugly Russian tenements and garishly-colored Russian orthodox churches that the essayist describes as follows:

There are six or seven of them [church domes]. They look like a Russian family dressed in their Sunday best, donning red shirts, sporting navy blue astrakhan hats and headscarves. A few steps ahead of the rest walks the tall and lean Daddy with a green scarf around his neck (that's the color of the tower's roof coating under the cupola), closely followed by a heavy-set, stocky lady, clearly pleased with herself, casting curious glances in all directions and gathering around her a little flock of smaller cupolas, chubby-cheeked, curious, evidently taking after their mother. (1939: 24)

The caricatures of German refugees from Poznań or Katowice after World War One or of those fleeing the Western and Northern Territories after 1945 featured a similar aesthetic bias accompanied by a "delight" taken in symbolic revenge on the previously prevailing but now utterly defeated and humiliated enemy.

All things considered, the "imagined" geography and collective cultural memory constitute a spatiotemporal foundation of the Regained Territories narrative in both versions of the propagandistic story. In one version, the "imagined" geography is circumscribed by the borders of nation-states, with the past formatted in such a way as to exclude from history all the groups outside the mainstream majority. In the other version, the ideological homeland yields in the geopoetic imagination to a chosen region or even city, while history is viewed as a cluster of diverse (and sometimes alternative) narratives that acknowledge not only the political or economic history of different groups but also their mental and civilizational transformations. What are the consequences of choosing either version? Whenever Stanisław Kolbuszewski reaches for the first one, the Baltic states' capitals become pillars of national sovereignty and ethnic "purity" heroically defended against foreign intrusions. However, when he employs the second perspective, it turns out that there has never been a time in which the Baltic states were fully autarkic or completely isolated from their neighbors, the most impressive contributions to their national legacies having actually resulted from colonization and cultural exchange. The capitals presented by Kolbuszewski as "sites" of that kind of interaction are both real cities and cognitive models, enabling the essayist to test the various ways of telling a complex story of national identity and international relations in East-Central Europe. The traces of the latter interactions can be interpreted either as slowly-healing wounds on the nation's body or as places of particular interest wherein the nation's local cultural capital is enriched by the legacy of immigrants and minorities.

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