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Review: Colonial Fantasies, Imperial Realities: Race Science and the Making of Polishness on the Fringes of the German Empire, 1840–1920 -- by Lenny A. Ureña Valerio

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2021.456>

Source: Global Histories, Vol. 7, No. 2 (January 2022), pp. 143-147.
ISSN: 2366-780X

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Publisher information:

'Global Histories: A Student Journal' is an open-access bi-annual journal founded in 2015 by students of the M.A. program Global History at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. 'Global Histories' is published by an editorial board of Global History students in association with the Freie Universität Berlin.

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***Colonial Fantasies, Imperial Realities:
Race Science and the Making of
Polishness on the Fringes of the
German Empire, 1840-1920.*** By Lenny
A. Ureña Valerio. Athens, OH: Ohio
University Press, 2019. Hardcover:
\$34.95. Pp. 320. ISBN:
978-0-8214-2453-7.

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In recent years the application of post-colonial perspectives has facilitated new analytical opportunities within the history of Central-Eastern Europe. By implication, scholars have increasingly turned their attention towards aspects such as space, race, social engineering, and public health, which shaped the societal arrangements and national identities in the region. The case of partitioned Poland is one notable example. The existing literature emphasized the fact that the attitudes of the partitioning powers (especially the German Empire and Russian Empire/Soviet Union) towards the Polish population (i.e. systemic Germanization or Russification) displayed strong resemblance to the coercive means embraced in overseas colonies.¹ Against this background, the work of Lenny A. Ureña Valerio, titled *Colonial Fantasies, Imperial Realities: Race Science and the Making of Polishness on the Fringes of the German Empire, 1840-1920*, makes a noteworthy contribution to the blossoming subject of colonial imaginaries within the field of Polish Studies.

Right from the outset, the work strives to considerably rearrange the academic debate by pointing towards the gap in the historical literature: “If the colonial question is ever addressed in historiography, especially in the context of the German Empire, it is mostly done to show how Poles were being colonized in Europe, without questioning how invested they were in colonial projects”.² What the author intends to stress is the fact that the subjugation to the increasingly racialized German and Russian discourses tells only a part of the story, as Poles also developed their own vision of colonial ideas and practices. In this sense, they were “both *objects* and *subjects* of colonial agendas”.³ In order to gain a more accurate grasp of the Polish responses to the proliferated colonial discourse, Valerio investigates the way in which Poles positioned themselves in relation to Germans and local populations in Africa and Brazil. To that end, Valerio explores the transfer of scientific ideas, narratives, and the evolution of identities which occurred in the process of migration or colonization. Informed by cultural and post-structural studies, the analysis intends to capture the dynamics behind the constant making of the self in relation to symbolic and imaginary orders.⁴ *Colonial Fantasies, Imperial Realities* combines the primary evidence containing the direct and intimate experience of historical actors (scientists, explorers, politicians) with notable pieces of popular culture, such as travel novels, that exercised a profound influence over the development of colonial imaginaries.

The analysis begins with an extensive scrutiny of the political and public health conditions of the Prussian part of Poland. Chapters One and Two uncover the German intellectual and scientific languages which were utilised to construct “Polish otherness”. Most notably, the reoccurring instances of typhus during the 1850s encouraged the assumptions that eastern provinces “were the natural, endemic places of the illness”.⁵ “Germ theory”, which was formulated by German scientists, was a significant tool for relating disease and race even before Germany became an overseas colonial power. What these two chapters effectively demonstrate is the shift from considering the Polish population from the perspective of “cultural otherness” (formulated already in the late

Enlightenment) into a “biopolitical threat” which was facilitated by the scientific language of the mid-nineteenth century.

The third chapter primarily addresses the implications of the German colonial expansion for German-Polish relations by investigating how the German East and overseas colonies became embedded in the same political imaginary. Essentially, this part of the analysis seeks to present the critical Polish opinion of the means and strategies employed by the German colonial authorities. Moreover, the editors of such journals as *Dziennik Poznański* strove to emotionally relate to the situation of the native populations by stressing the longevity of the German oppression in Eastern Europe. However, as the author indicates in Chapter Four, the lack of political and cultural sovereignty as well as the vocal criticism of German imperialism did not make Poles immune to the lust for expansion or the exclusionary elements embedded in the colonial discourse. Accordingly, the Polish subjectivity was shaped by the undertaken exploratory expeditions (the most significant one was organized by Stefan Szolc-Rogoziński to Cameroon in 1884) and the set of discursive tools such as travel novels, which resonated with the public opinion. Most importantly, Valerio devotes significant attention to the work of a renowned Polish nineteenth century writer, Henryk Sienkiewicz, in his work entitled *In Desert and Wilderness*. In her view, the popular story about the adventures of Polish teenagers in Africa during the Mahdi uprising shows how Poles were approaching African otherness from their own colonial and national anxieties.⁶ The last chapter touches upon the Polish migration to Brazil and the establishment of Polish settlements starting from the 1870s. Valerio approaches this phenomenon as the nexus of policies instigated by the Brazilian government and the Polish colonial imaginary that emerged in the German part of Poland. Essentially, the change of a geographical destination resulted in a considerable shift in the position of Poles within the societal hierarchy: “after being treated as ‘inferior’ citizens of the German Empire they settled in a place which praised them for their European industriousness and racial worthiness”.⁷

While bringing different strains of analysis together in the conclusion, Valerio asserts strong parallels to the ways in which German scientific and political discourses perceived eastern borderlands and African colonies. The necessity of preventing contagious diseases served as justification for establishing segregationist methods on the institutional level (health stations in Prussian Poland, sleeping-sickness camps in German Africa). At the same time, she stresses the fact that Poles were not “passive receptors” of colonial ideas by pointing to the engagement of Polish physicians and nationalists in competing colonial projects.

There are several aspects in *Colonial Fantasies, Imperial Realities* which constitute valuable contributions to postcolonial inquiries into the nineteenth century history of Poland and Germany. Firstly, the lack of sovereign state did not prevent Poles from participating in the broader discussion about European expansion, as there were still ideas which effectively shaped the public discourse and individuals who actively pursued a colonial agenda. Secondly, by connecting the perspectives of the Poznań province, German

Africa, and Polish colonies in Brazil, the author manages to sketch the history of globalized German-Polish relations which were not solely limited to the borders of the partitioned Poland. The mutual scientific interactions as well as political animosities between the two nations played out in varying geographical and cultural contexts. By implication, this research should be considered as an example of an “entangled history” which moves beyond the fixed borders of nation-states and focuses not only on the transnational mobility of individuals and groups, but also ideas.

Finally, Valerio introduces an interesting perspective of a subaltern group which effectively overcame its “inferiority” by becoming a part of different colonial projects. While discussing the increasing presence of Polish peasants in Brazil, the author strives to portray the “migration process as an example and product of global colonialism in the second half of the nineteenth century”.⁸ To prove this statement the author focuses on the discourse that transformed Polish peasants into “colonial pioneers”. However, one should not also ignore the economic motivations that stood behind the migration of the lower social classes which have been stressed by Polish historiography.⁹ More attention could have been ascribed by Valerio to the extent to which historical actors felt empowered by the colonial ideas to go overseas by exploring the sources corroborated by the Polish peasants. Similarly, the image of Brazil in the writings and plans of Polish nationalists is acknowledged but not extensively elaborated.¹⁰ Finally, Polish emigrants in Brazil came not only from the German partition, but also from the Russian and Austro-Hungarian parts of Poland. By implication, there is a clear limitation to the claim about the overarching transfer of ideas between German and Polish discourses, as the Polish imaginary was scattered and subjugated to multiple intellectual and political influences.

Colonial Fantasies, Imperial Realities deserves academic recognition for capturing the connection between science and race in the Central-Eastern European contexts. This certainly contributes to the overarching discussion about the origin and transfer of colonial practices from Europe to the rest of the world. When it comes to the Polish colonial imaginaries, it is praiseworthy that the author referred to a large number of Polish sources, even if the perspective of some historical actors requires further elaboration. In essence, this study effectively uncovers a novel analytical avenue which will be hopefully pursued by scholars in the upcoming years.

NOTES

¹ For instance see Ewa Thompson, “It is Colonialism After All: Epistemological Remarks”, *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2014), 67-81, https://rcin.org.pl/Content/51834/WA248_71045_P-I-2524_thompson-it-is.pdf.

² Lenny A. Ureña Valerio, *Colonial Fantasies, Imperial Realities: Race Science and the Making of Polishness on the Fringes of the German Empire, 1840-1920* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2019), 117.

³ Valerio, *Colonial Fantasies, Imperial Realities*, 6.

⁴ Ibid, 7.

⁵ Valerio, *Colonial Fantasies, Imperial Realities*, 27.

⁶ Ibid, 136.

⁷ Ibid, 171.

⁸ Valerio, *Colonial Fantasies, Imperial Realities*, 149.

⁹ Henryk Siewierski, "Emigracja, kolonizacja, antropofagia w kontekście 'gorączki brazylijskiej'", *Konteksty Kultury* 16, no. 2 (2019): 389, https://www.ejournals.eu/Konteksty_Kultury/2019/Tom-16-zeszyt-3/art/16208.

¹⁰ This topic is scrutinized by Michał Starczewski, "Mrzonki racjonalnej kolonizacji w duchu narodowym. Roman Dmowski i polska emigracja do Brazylii," *Przegląd Humanistyczny* 449, no. 2 (2015): 63-74, <https://depot.ceon.pl/handle/123456789/8181>.