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Comparing colonial differences: Baltic literary cultures as agencies of Europe's internal others

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the Baltic colonial experience in historical and comparative perspective. It sketches the ways in which Baltic societies are best linked to theoretical discussions on postcolonial issues, and whether they might be looked upon in a more global context. The main question posed by the article is in what ways Baltic identity has been determined by processes of foreign settlement, occupation and colonization of the territory of each respective country and whether we can see Baltic societies as potential agencies of Europe's internal others.

KEYWORDS Postcolonial Europe; Baltic societies; Baltic history; colonialism; coloniality of power; world-systems theory; locus of enunciation; anti-colonialism; decoloniality

Introduction

Baltic societies, long neglected as a part of the postcolonial field, in the early twenty-first century seem, at last, linked to the current critical discourse. In this context, the article provides a version of the Baltic colonial experience in historical and comparative perspective. It attempts to sketch the ways in which Baltic societies and cultures are best linked to theoretical discussions on postcolonial issues, and whether they might be, indeed, looked upon in a more global context – both horizontally and vertically – or historically.

The main question posed by the article addresses the ways in which Baltic identity has been determined by historical processes of foreign settlement, occupation and colonization of the territory of each respective country and whether we can see Baltic societies as agencies of Europe's internal others. The article proposes that the modern self-conception of the Baltic peoples tends toward much greater readiness to accept European values, notwithstanding the fact that the historical relationships with the West are also quite problematic. The identity of Baltic peoples has been largely created in the process of manifestation of internal European colonialism and, therefore, the term "internal other" is applied to the members of these societies. The problem of Soviet colonialism, central for this special issue, is, on the contrary, contextualized here within the historical pattern of experience of the Baltic peoples constantly finding themselves on the crossroads between the West and the East. In this analysis, I am interested in both the Soviet period as well as in the more general

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matrix of power¹ in the Baltic area, including reasons why the Soviet colonial power has not succeeded in reaching its long-term goals of economic and cultural superiority there.

I, first, discuss the scholarly background of Baltic postcolonial studies and, then, move forward to research perspectives, paying special attention to world-systems theory and issues of coloniality and decoloniality.² The Baltic historical experience is then dealt with in terms of anti-colonialism and locus of enunciation. The article is completed with a discussion of Soviet colonialism and its aftermath in the context of East–Central European postcommunist and postcolonial studies.

Baltic societies in global context: Research background

In his groundbreaking article, “Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique,” first published 2001, David Chioni Moore identified the omission of the Soviet sphere as one of the principal deficiencies of postcolonial thought. According to Moore, the scope of the theory by the early twentieth century included almost the entire world except for the Soviet Union and its satellite countries. Thus, he argued that, in his article, he

Will propose that the term ‘postcolonial’ is a useful designation for yet another zone: the post-Soviet sphere – the Baltic states, Central and Eastern Europe (including both former Soviet republics and independent ‘East Bloc’ states), the Caucasus, and Central Asia. In my [Moore’s] view, at least two features of this giant area are significant for this paper and its readers: first, how extraordinarily postcolonial the societies of the former Soviet regions are; and, second, how extraordinarily little attention is paid to this fact, at least in these terms. (Moore 2006, 15)

Without making an attempt to unify social conditions of the historically quite different societies living in this vast area, Moore simultaneously stressed mutual parallels as well as general conditions of Soviet colonialism influential for the entire territory. Moore was quite right to point out the illogical nature of the ill-motivated omission of the Soviet sphere from the field of postcolonial studies, and he argued instead that the Soviet experience cannot be isolated as something ideologically neutral (which it definitely was not) or unique on the world scale.³ Even today “the grand Russian narrative of Russian history is being passed on in the educational system and distributing abroad in an unchanged form” (Thompson 2008, 417) while Western and East-European scholars working in the field at least partially tend to share the observation by Neil Lazarus that

[T]he significant role played by Russian colonialism in the history of eastern and central Europe as well as central Asia is a matter of record; and, though we might like to make any number of distinctions and qualifications, the identification of the Soviet Union – successor to the Russian imperium – as a specifically *colonial* power is also well attested. (2012, 118)

Understandably, there are historical and ideological reasons also for the continuing omission of the Soviet sphere. These motifs are also carefully addressed in the most elaborated and ambitious undertaking of Baltic postcolonial scholarship until now – the collection of articles “Baltic Postcolonialism,” inspired and edited by Violeta Kelertas and published in 2006 (Kelertas 2006b). In her introduction, Professor Kelertas clearly stated the reasons for reprinting the article by David Chioni Moore in the collection as a contribution of international importance and an effort which put the Baltic countries, along with the post-Soviet sphere in general, in the context of

contemporary debates. Recognizing a certain unwillingness of the Baltic societies to consider themselves a part of the postcolonial discourse at this point, Kelertas also identified other problematic aspects – crucial among those being the psychological unwillingness of the Baltic communities to identify themselves with problems seemingly relevant, in the still present rhetoric of the Cold-War period, mostly to the countries of the so-called Third World: “Preferring to think of themselves as superior to other colonized peoples [...], the Balts find being lumped together with the rest of colonized humanity unflattering, if not humiliating, and want to be with the ‘civilized’ part of the world” (Kelertas 2006a, 4).

During recent years, the situation has changed considerably, and the experience of Baltic peoples is now better appreciated in the context of a shared historical experience with other regions/nations.⁴ The necessity of engaging with postcolonial theory, in the context of the historical experience of the Baltic countries, can be seen as motivated by several factors.

First, the tendency to position themselves along with experiences of other oppressed (and colonized) nations was present in the political rhetoric of the 1950s and 1960s and in the efforts of the Baltic exile community when trying to attract international attention and to address the issues of Soviet colonial conditions even before the heyday of postcolonial studies (Annus 2012, 22–23).

Second, Baltic scholars themselves have further developed the discussion of the specific conditions of Soviet colonialism. The political and ideological undertones of the colonial situation in the Baltic countries have been thoroughly dealt with by Epp Annus, also reflecting upon the impact of the Soviet occupation, which gradually turned into colonial practices (Annus 2012, 37). Annus concludes that Soviet colonialism in the Baltic area formed a new layer upon the historical experience of the Baltic peoples and provides a valuable comment concerning the importance of the application of postcolonial theory to the Soviet period:

Its central thesis claims that the Soviet regime was, in non-Russian areas of the Soviet Union, imposed from the outside; it was oppression by a foreign invader and needs to be analyzed as such. This analyses would not only focus on the macro level of demands, laws, rules and regulations, but also on the micro level of the practices of domination in the everyday life of an ordinary colonial subject. (2012, 38)

In fact, from the very beginning, Soviet power established itself via brutal destruction of the indigenous cultural heritage (Hasselblatt 2006, 522) and forced imposition of ideological mechanisms originating from the imperial center. “Characteristic of the Soviet colonial empire was physical and spiritual violence against all nationalities, but especially against those that were further from the ruling nationality in terms of distance, character, and development”. (Strods 2010, 44)

The third motivation of application of postcolonial studies to the Baltic contexts is provided by growing importance of regional studies that, in the twenty-first century, also tend to discuss East–Central European experience not only in terms of postcommunist but also in terms of postcolonial criticism. One of the best examples that covers cultural history of the region is the four-volume publication of *Literary Histories of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (2004–2010), edited by John Neubauer and Marcel Cornis-Pope.⁵ The editors of this book find recognizable parallels within economic and cultural development within the region and propose a division of the development of all cultures of East–Central Europe

during the last two centuries into three basic periods: (1) 1800–1890, the national awakenings and the institutionalization of literature, (2) 1890–1945, the literary institutions of modernism and (3) 1945–1989, the radical reform of the existing institutions under the communist regimes. (Cornis-Pope and Neubauer 2007, 1) In a recent article, Marcel Cornis-Pope has elaborated the parallels among different East–Central European literatures and cultures pointing toward the fusion of discourses⁶ and setting these literatures in postcolonial contexts:

The postcolonial framework is relevant in another way: it can help a number of eastern European cultures, located at the intersection of three empires (Ottoman, Habsburg, and Tsarist/Soviet), to understand the postcommunist phase as a ‘decolonization,’ an attempt at liberating them not only from Soviet domination but also from older colonial vestiges. (2012, 146)

Scholars working from the perspective of different parts of the former Soviet empire are trying to establish the specific characteristics of each particular situation, and the policies of the Soviet regime, indeed, differed in, for example, the Asian and the Baltic territories of the empire.⁷ However, there was a certain pattern of mutual understanding among various parts of the Soviet Union that resembles attempts of cooperation among the oppressed peoples of other empires, as documented, for example, by Elleke Boehmer in the case of British Empire: “The other – here, the brother or sister nation elsewhere in the empire – is simultaneously recognized as being distant and unknowable, yet as an entity pre-eminently to be taken into account, to be signaled towards” (Boehmer 2005, 19).

This observation leads us toward yet another feature of postcolonial criticism of the early twenty-first century that attempts an analysis of colonialism as a global issue. In his innovative historical account of the nineteenth century, Jürgen Osterhammel points to that fact that colonialism has been a principal factor, which not only determined life in the peripheries but also had a reverse impact upon the centers. The history of colonialism thus forms a substantial part of any attempt of understanding the global world order (Osterhammel 2009, 16). It is from this broad perspective that we now try to discuss research perspectives of postcolonial thinking.

Research perspectives: World-systems theory and decoloniality

The initial developments of postcolonial studies were mainly linked to the English and French colonial experience and its aftermath. The importance of English colonial models has been at the center of a number of investigations – a prominent place among those occupied by discussions of the English rule in India, among others, in the works of Homi Bhabha. The use of local English language dialects in colonial cultures⁸ has been another crucial aspect of discussion in the postcolonial field. However, in the aftermath of the World War II, there was also a massive body of anti-colonial writings in French; indeed, “many of the texts that have become central points of reference in postcolonial criticism – works by key anti-colonial authors such as Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and Albert Memmi – were originally published in France in the 1950s and 1960s” (Forsdick and Murphy 2009, 11). Research during this period was mostly focused upon certain geographical areas (e.g. India and the Caribbean), which were

producing the majority of early postcolonial thinkers and concentrated on a reduced number of specific colonial models.

Possibly one of the most characteristic features of postcolonial criticism in the early twenty-first century is the considerable widening of the field. In this process, among the most important contributions are those of Latin American scholars who pay attention to the processes of decolonization and decoloniality as opposed to the dominance of superimposed narratives of progress. At the basis of these investigations lies the idea of the construction of the modern/colonial world system from the sixteenth to the twentieth century that, together with technological advantages and religious and ideological designs, created the basis for European dominance on a global scale. In the words of the leading exponent of this trend of thought, Walter D. Mignolo, “the rhetoric of modernity is a rhetoric of salvation (by conversion yesterday, by development today), but in order to implement what the rhetoric preaches, it is necessary to marginalize or destroy whatever gets in the way of modernity” (Mignolo 2011, xxiv–xxv). Instead of the Euro-centric world order, contemporary scholarship tends toward a multicentric research perspective. The concept of decoloniality is introduced alongside that of postcoloniality, identifying different sources in each respective case (Mignolo 2011, xxiii–xxxi). Instead of relying on Western dominance, there is a proposal to rely on an individual locus of enunciation, the idea “that you constitute yourself (‘I am’) in the place you think” (Mignolo 2011, xvi). This approach takes into account the specificity of each particular historical experience not considered from a Euro-centric perspective and, thus, providing the possibility of a more diverse interpretation of the contemporary world.

The arguments advanced by Mignolo and other scholars with a Latin American background (Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Arturo Escobar, Enrique Dussel, etc) take, as their starting point, the importance of the geographical discoveries and political moves for the construction of European identity under the banner of the Christian mission from the early sixteenth century onwards (Mignolo 2011, 7). Following in the footsteps of well-established scholars (Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall, etc), the new dimension added by the Latin American contributors is the substantial enlargement of the understanding of the global character of colonial and anti-colonial moves. “[T]he solution is not to eliminate the difference but to decolonize the logic of coloniality that translated differences into values” (Mignolo 2011, xxii).

The theoretical background for the mentioned line of argument has, to a considerable extent, been provided by Immanuel Wallerstein’s investigations of the relationships among the so-called core, semi-periphery and periphery states, resulting in his world-systems theory (Wallerstein 2006, 28–30). Wallerstein’s idea is that, without taking into account the specific level of development in each particular country, in the capitalist economy, these countries still form a part of the global economic world-system that relies upon such inequalities in order for the whole mechanism to function. These considerations serve as a background for the development of the decolonial option and present a clear understanding of the role the colonial empires played and continue to play in the economic, political and cultural divisions within the colonial and postcolonial world.

This research also seems to provide the basis for positioning of the Baltic lands in the perspective of global changes originating in European expansion – the initial step being provided by the medieval Crusades. The cultural history of the Baltic area has been shaped by foreign invasions from early times on; and the period of the Crusades

in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries reveals a parallel to similar developments in other parts of Europe and the world. These parallels are especially relevant if seen in connection with the later colonial moves of the European empires from the Renaissance period onward.⁹ During this later period, the consequences of adapting to historical developments (improvements and changes simultaneous with the advance of European feudalism and later capitalist economies) created a system of serfdom characteristic for the Baltic provinces and comparable to the economic management of other colonized parts of the world.¹⁰

Locus of enunciation: The Baltic experience

The textually documented history of the Baltic lands originates in the medieval chronicle of Henry of Livonia. Clearly, the perspective represented in this text belongs to the Crusaders from the German territories acting in unison with the representatives of the Catholic Church including the legate of the Pope, who repeatedly visited the distant shores. Simultaneously, the chronicle mentioned provides a text typical for the rhetoric of the Middle Ages, displaying at once the logic of church language (Undusk 2011, 45–76) and showing the impact of the foreign discourse in the Baltic lands. Joep Leerssen has described medieval relationships while acquiring new territories in terms of the opposition of civilization versus wilderness, and demonstrated in detail how this applies to the English conquest of Ireland (Leerssen 2006, 28–35). In comparison, the author adds that “[o]ne early case within European history involves the expansion of the Teutonic Order into the non-Christian, heathen areas of the Baltic, where native tribes like the Old Prussians were either enslaved and forcibly converted to Christianity, or else exterminated” (Leerssen 2006, 28).

The role of Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the impact of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century missionaries as well as the efforts of the educated social class to provide the local people with religious and (from the late eighteenth century onwards) secular texts can also be interpreted in the context of the global Christian mission (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2007, 188) – first, interpreting Christianity as *the* religion that fulfills the humanitarian mission of mankind and, later, providing a secular discourse of economic emancipation that not only tried to educate people but was also intended to bring their self-assessment in accordance with the prescriptions of the ruling class. On the other hand, in the very process of their being delivered the colonial aspirations “are diluted and hybridized, so that the fixed identities that the colonialism seeks to impose upon both the masters and the slaves are in fact rendered unstable” (Loomba 2005, 232).

The period of the Enlightenment and *Volksaufklärung*, on the one hand, provided theories which constructed the superiority of the European nations on the global scale but, on the other, kept expectations addressed toward peripheral European territories and especially internal colonial subjects at a much more modest level. The processes of *Volksaufklärung* were specific instances echoed in early literary texts published in Estonian and Latvian, mostly in order to provide the possibility of mimicking the lifestyles of the upper classes of colonial masters, attempting in this process to construct the identity of an ideal peasant aspiring toward economic prosperity but never challenging the societal order and colonial nature of the relationships between the western European settlers and the local population. It was a world of stereotypes created by the German-speaking creators of the eighteenth-century literature in

Estonian and Latvian, even if the importance of these texts cannot be underestimated along with the impact of direct contacts of the German pastors with the predominantly rural native people. In a number of cases, these pastors were living among the local population since their childhood and, therefore, mastered the indigenous languages reasonably well.¹¹ Moreover, the development of secular texts considerably widened the horizon of the world reception of the local people; on the other hand, there was a clearly observable trend of not letting the indigenous population acquire too much knowledge, but rather, to educate them to a certain extent in order to improve their life conditions and, especially, their productivity. The masses of people, however, should never be made self-conscious enough to challenge the basic premises of the existing political and economic order. The unwillingness of the landlords to provide reasonable living conditions for the peasants becomes especially striking if these processes in the Baltic countries are compared to similar reforms in Germany (Lust 2013, 13–15).

The efforts of the early nineteenth-century Baltic ethnic authors such as Neredzīgais Indriķis and Kristian Jaak Peterson might, in this context, be interpreted as a submission to the hegemony of the colonial power in terms of representation (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2007, 106–107). The national awakening movement in the Baltic countries undertook ideas of European Enlightenment, and the nineteenth-century rhetoric resembled the views expressed by German humanists, the most prominent among them being Johann Gottfried Herder, approximately a century earlier (Bula 2005, 14). During the late nineteenth century, the poetics of individualism and change gradually entered the literary scene. The turn of the century period can be considered one of the most fruitful in the history of Baltic literatures, one of the reasons being the diversity of creative impulses important for the cultural development at this point. The opening up toward the variety of experience provided by different European literatures was not imposed politically (or otherwise) as the move was not instrumented by (Russian) imperial state policies.¹² The political dependency of the area, however, remained in place as was clearly demonstrated by the violent suppression of several uprisings within the Russian Empire (notably that of 1905).

The cultural life of the three post-1918 independent Baltic states endorsed the possibility of engaging with every kind of cultural practice and produced some of the most remarkable works of Baltic literatures, like the numerous novels by an Estonian author Anton Hansen Tammsaare or Lithuanian writer Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas, modernist poetry by Aleksandrs Čaks in Latvia, while to a certain extent (and especially under the autocratic regimes of the 1930s) the Baltic cultural space of this era also resonated the tendency toward self-isolation relevant for the policies of most nation states around Europe during this historical period. The possibilities of regional cooperation again increased during the late 1930s (Undusk 2007, 17), but shortly afterwards, the three states became the victims of Soviet military, political and ideological invasion.

Soviet colonialism as mimicry of global coloniality

The dynamics of the political and ideological developments from the late sixteenth century onward provides a structure that has been, to a great extent, repeated after the Soviet occupation and colonization of the Baltic countries in the mid-twentieth

century, undertaken in the context of the global power race between two mutually conflicting economic systems – capitalism and socialism.

In the context of interrelatedness of post-Communist and postcolonial issues, it is first important to position Soviet colonialism within global coloniality. Madina Tlostanova provides an apt formulation here:

[W]e should remember that modernity in the 20th century was implemented in two forms – the liberal/capitalist and the socialist/statist one. Each of them had a sunny side and a darker side, each of them had its own form of coloniality. In the darker colonial side of Soviet modernity a second-rate type of Soviet citizen was constructed in spite of the proclaimed internationalist slogans and the overt goal of racial mixing in order to create a future Soviet Mestizo/a with an erased ethnic element brought up on Russian culture and on Soviet ideology. (2012, 137)

Participating in the formation of global coloniality of power, “the communist imposition in east-central Europe [w]as a particular historical embodiment of a persistent and widespread imperial drive which has characterized the behavior of stronger states towards territories perceived as providing opportunities for economic, political or ideological expansion” (Kołodziejczyk and Şandru 2012, 115).

In the history of colonial moves, similar trends have often taken place at different times but with seemingly unexpected overlaps. Dealing with the history of the Russian empire, we note that the first application of imperial power – which indicated a change of policy and direct occupation of another territory – was provided by the annexation of the Kazan and Astrakhan lands in the sixteenth century (Thompson 2008, 412). This undertaking was then followed by further eastward expansion of the Russian empire, reaching the Pacific within a relatively short period of time; and then turning southwards in search for the possibilities to acquire territories adjacent to important water ways (at that point – the Black and Caspian Sea). On a historical timeline, these moves overlap with the expansion of western European empires in the American continent. To a certain extent, here, we notice the birth of two competing (even if, at times, seemingly acting in mutual isolation) global dominators – Western and eastern European powers – that have been instrumental in a number of inter-European conflicts and became juxtaposed as major political forces during the Cold War era.

The scramble for the Baltic lands thus resembles more global moves in miniature. Initially, these territories became the object of interest for Western (maritime) settlers, whose presence in the area was arguably different in scale in the case of present-day Estonia and Latvia, on the one hand, and Lithuania, on the other; however, by the end of the eighteenth century, all of the respective lands fell prey to the westward expansion of the Russian empire. The Baltic countries shared the fate of other colonized territories and also participated in anti-colonial struggles, which, for example, in the Caribbean had already originated in the early nineteenth century. Political independence became a reality for the Baltic countries by the end of the World War I; and the same fate was experienced by the colonies of Western empires at the end of World War II, at which time the colonial clock in the Baltic area was already turning backwards again. The decolonization of the Soviet sphere at the end of the twentieth century occurred at a time when many other former colonies were already undergoing a period of neocolonial crisis.

This rough sketch of an asymmetrical historical timeline seems important in order to grasp the extent to which Soviet occupational and colonial policies followed the

path earlier established by other imperial powers (including the Russian empire), despite the claims of political uniqueness posed by the ideology of the Soviet empire.

Furthermore, the similarities can be extended toward cultural response to Soviet conditions. We can distinguish among several different forms here – those of mimicking, critical appropriation, deconstruction and inversion – each of those mentioned being more present at specific historical periods, but, at times, also overlapping with others.

Already from the sixteenth century onwards, the development of vernacular written culture in the Baltic lands was linked with mimicry of foreign examples. Nevertheless, at that time and until the rise of national movement inspired by intellectual leaders of the previously non-dominant ethnic groups, this process provided a timely procedure of cultural transfer which filled gaps in the cultural development of emerging nations. In the observation of Marko Juvan,

[w]hen the comparison with the potential source shows a lack, then the need for importation arises, and strategies of transfer take shape – from dealing with the defense mechanisms of the receiving environment through processes of appropriation, creative transformation and the adaptation of the imported models to new functions and meanings to explicit commentary and evaluation of the foreign element in the target society. The process of cultural transfer frequently leads to the naturalization of the foreign element, which then becomes perceived as autochthonous structure. (Juvan 2012, 36)

The crucial difference with the period of the 1940s and early 1950s was marked by the fact that, if in earlier cases the outcome of the cultural transfer involved the appearance of more complex cultural forms, then the Soviet policies worked in the opposite direction. The ideology of so-called socialist realism – exemplified by the works of Rudolf Sirge in Estonia or Andrejs Upīts and Vilis Lācis in Latvia – led to an extreme oversimplification of creative practices and excluded almost any possibility of self-expression. At least the early careers of those young Baltic authors, who entered the literary scene after the war and made their first steps in the climate of Stalin's and Zhdanov's cultural dictate, were effectively destroyed by the imposed necessity to follow patterns of Soviet literature of the 1930s and 1940s.¹³

Critical appropriation, as the first attempt of aesthetic recovery, was closely linked with the impact of realism marking a return to more concrete description of the daily lives of the Baltic communities; that is, poetic strategy which, while formally coinciding with the official ideological and aesthetic demands of the Soviet state, gradually acquired the potential of, in Immanuel Wallerstein's terms, an anti-systemic movement. The even more crucial move toward deconstruction and inversion of the existing patterns was provided by attempts at modernist poetics, which became present toward the late 1960s (poetry by Artur Alliksaar, Paul-Eerik Rummo and Imants Ziedonis, plays by Juozas Grušas), as well as by the turn toward history and mythology as sources of different, pre-Soviet or non-Soviet experience, simultaneously providing continuation of the tradition of the nineteenth century's anti-colonial and nation-building processes, supported in literary works by Jaan Kross and Justinas Marcinkevičius. Even the realist mode changed considerably during the late 1960s and 1970s, and the scrupulous depiction of day-to-day reality, which in the late 1950s formed an initial challenge to socialist realism, provided the basis for reintroduction of modernist poetic devices such as irony, the grotesque, ambiguity and subjectivity nearly a decade later, and produced complex literary works such as short stories by Arvo Valton, novels by Enn Vetemaa and Alberts Bels and plays by Kazys Saja (Kalnačs 2011, 26). In addition, historical and mythological plots were often used involving

potentially symbolic stories and images, which formed a hidden layer of communication with the perceptive audiences.

The neocolonial aftermath

Each major historical period also creates a new political configuration and a new world order. The current political rhetoric is characterized by the constant discussion of global security issues, often associated with the rise of twenty-first-century terrorism as well as presumable confrontation, or even, in Samuel Huntington's phrase (Huntington 1996), clash of different civilizations – the confrontational strategies thus providing a persistent component of the political discourse. *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*, edited by Graham Huggan and published in 2013 (Huggan 2013), provides a good survey of recent trends in postcolonial scholarship as well as an insight into the current restructuring of the political and economic power balance. Reasonably enough, this investigation devotes its opening part to the retrospection of "the imperial past"; this part is, however, immediately followed by an even more burning discussion of "the colonial present" – a phrase coined by the human geographer Derek Gregory and also used in the title of one of his most important contributions to the field (Gregory 2004). The authors of the respective chapters on 'the colonial present' in the *Oxford Handbook* mostly expose the political ambitions of the USA to become a new global superpower and, in this context, they also discuss the systematic abuse of human rights on a global scale, linked to, among other modalities, the concept of "bare life," as proposed by the philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1998) and referring to those people who are limited in their access to even the most basic needs of human existence. Characteristically, in this passionate discussion of the abuses against the humanity in the contemporary world there is no place for the colonial present of the Russian empire, that, as recent events clearly demonstrate, also has great aspirations to reconfigure and revitalize itself as a global player.¹⁴ The discussion of postcolonial Europe, "an awkward term," as stated in the volume (Schulze-Engler 2013, 669–70), is reserved to the very last pages of the book where East–Central European contexts with their history of internal colonialism are mentioned as in the passing, even if they are principally linked to the common prospects of Europeanization.

The place of Baltic societies and cultures and their future in this positive framework of potentially rising new regionalism (Huggan 2013, 549) is, however, far from being established and safe. The inhabitants of the respective countries are again confronted with their already familiar experience of being situated in the sphere of tension in between major powers, as Baltic societies still find themselves in a place – both physically and mentally – between "civilizations." Herein also lies the paradox of their "colonial present," as this specific situation seems still to be ignored even by postcolonial studies which has, generally speaking, dislocated Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to the sidelines of history – this time as "internal others" of the Western civilization.

Current attempts of Baltic scholars to integrate their efforts in the field of postcolonial studies can be seen as an attempt to contribute to this painful identity search. A telling example is provided by recent article co-authored by Dace Dzenovska and Iván Arenas, who pay attention to the similarities in post-colonial border experiences linked to the social protests expressed by building barricades in Latvia and Mexico, the

events taking place in 1991 and 2006, respectively. We might also notice, in their discussion, the important link between East–Central European and Latin American experience, as suggested by the present article. In the case of Dzenovska and Arenas’s contribution, they also connect their analysis to the discussion of protest movement in Egypt in 2011 during the so-called Arab spring, thus making their perspective even broader and more complicated as well as avoiding the stereotyping descriptions of the events in terms of “teleological narrative leading from oppression to liberation” (Dzenovska and Arenas 2012, 645). The value of such comparisons is, indeed, best demonstrated not by forcing the point of their sameness, but rather, by carefully scrutinizing the commensurability of such events that point toward shared colonial difference.

Furthermore, there is a growing solidarity among scholars working within the field of post-Soviet studies, even if this trend is complemented by an anxiety concerning the fact that these studies are not well recognized by Western practitioners of postcolonial studies.¹⁵ The discussions of Russian/Soviet colonial legacies – in whatever contexts they might be undertaken¹⁶ – mostly remain on the research sidelines, not encountering real interest of postcolonial studies more generally. The larger aim of the rising efforts of Baltic postcolonial scholarly community is, thus, to gain better integration in Europe as well as to discuss the colonial difference of these countries in more complex historical and global discourses.

What historically happened to the population of the Baltic and Finno-Ugric (Estonian and Livonian) tribes in the north of Europe was, as it has already been argued, relevant to the events in other parts of the world. The racial component was here in place in another form, orchestrated as a contrast between the social classes, with the dominant position acquired by the community of colonial settlers. At the same time, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we may also notice a dawn of liberal democratic trends in the Baltic area to an extent even comparable to the historical construction of Western society characteristic for the period of the advance of liberal democracy. It was a stage, especially in the history of British and French empires, where “the colonial encounter also structured the notion and practice of liberal democracy itself” (Stovall 2013, 69); and, thus, the changes in the metropolises might, in this time period, also promote new trends in the colonial administration. These liberal advances were consciously rationalized during the Enlightenment; at that time European (and Baltic) societies became part of the processes dictated by the new “biopolitics,” characterized by Michael Foucault as replacing regulative orders of power structures by consensual ones – thus, also internalizing state control (Foucault 2008; Rangan and Chow 2013, 400–403).¹⁷

It is important to involve the discussion of the historical experience of the Baltic peoples in those broad contexts, because these considerations provide one of the explanations for the appreciation of the so-called Western values in this region. As privileged provinces of the Russian empire, initially a political entity that did not challenge the deep-seated European cultural dominance in the area, the Baltic lands were subjected to the rationalization process initiated by the Western Enlightenment, which – in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – allowed for gradual internalization of the consensual power models (especially in Estonian and Latvian territories). Therefore, even if – for a brief spell in the second half of the nineteenth century – the Russian empire was looked upon as a potential provider of an alternative path of development, this orientation generally came to be considered unacceptable,

especially when followed by the Soviet-style colonial measures of the so-called planned economy of the second half of the twentieth century. Even if there exist examples of deep distrust in regard to Western policies in postcommunist scholarship,¹⁸ the main trend has remained that of the de-mystification of the Soviet developmental model, which tried to implement modernity in its “statist form” (Tlostanova 2012, 137).

However, the present stakes are indeed higher. Even if proud of their role in the late demise of the Soviet regime (in a recent article, the historian Rein Taagepera argues that the lethal outcome for the Soviet empire was, to a considerable extent, determined by the impossibility “to swallow the Balts” [Taagepera 2013, 19]), the Baltic peoples link future prospects to the recognition of their colonial difference as a necessary step in the more global process of decolonization. Careful discussion of their historical and present experience is vital for Baltic societies in order to exit the shadow of internal otherness and enter into a dialog with the European community, itself on its way toward refiguring the European self-consciousness of the twenty-first century (Schulze-Engler 2013, 684–86), on equal terms. This process can only be made inclusive through the contextualization of the present and past experience of the Baltic nations.

Conclusion

During both the Soviet colonial period and its aftermath, Baltic societies have remembered nostalgically the earlier periods of European colonial dominance, overlooking the colonial matrix of power inscribed into these layers of memory. A critical reaction to this European matrix was necessarily postponed because there was an immediate threat of Soviet colonialism. The situation has been reshaped after the reestablishment of the independent states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the 1990s. Now, in the overall context of decolonization, these countries are, on the one hand, a part of global processes, but, on the other, they are trying to ground their identities in the perspective originating from the discourse of European modernity (one historical model alongside potential others) – a part of which these populations feel themselves even if they still experience a certain lack of recognition in wider European contexts. This is a situation that helps to explain the often contradictory self-positioning of the population of Baltic area in recent times; however, it shows the way toward future integration in the European and world community that might finally lead to the overcoming of the constant feeling of being “internal others” of the West.

Notes

1. The concept of the colonial matrix of power has been elaborated by Walter D. Mignolo, for example, in *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (2000) and *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (2011).
2. In this article, colonialism is understood in the traditional sense as the extension of nation's power over territory beyond its borders either by settler colonies or administrative control. By coloniality, I understand the impact of conceptual and ideological matrix or power which arises from the totality of such sociohistorical configurations whereas decoloniality is

interpreted as an opposition to all kinds of political and mental restrictions imposed by the complexity of colonial strategies.

3. The problem of omission is discussed in detail in an article by Epp Annus, "The Problem of Soviet Colonialism in the Baltics." (Annus 2012, 23–25)
4. Among the possible explanations we find both the more global reach of the postcolonial thought in the twenty-first century as well as the impact of economic crisis, which allows for better understanding of the interrelatedness of economic and political processes also on the level of everyday experience.
5. Interestingly enough, another volume in the same series has been devoted to literary cultures of Latin America (Valdés and Kadir 2004) – an area subjected to intense postcolonial readings in recent years.
6. Karl Jirgens points toward a similar fusion of postmodern and postcolonial discourses in the Baltic context (Jirgens 2006).
7. Areas where substantial research has already been carried out are especially former Soviet Asian territories and the Ukraine. Of special importance are the works of Madina Tlostanova and Vitaly Chernetsky, among others. The research on the former Soviet-bloc countries, dealt with later in the article, belongs to a similar category.
8. These dialects are called different Englishes by Bill Ashcroft et al. as opposed to the dominating power of the English language (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002, 38).
9. Edward Said also argues that "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (Said 1978, 3).
10. Parallels between slavery and serfdom as a form of enforced labor become obvious, for example, in the pattern of economic and social development as both forms of exploitation were gradually abandoned during the nineteenth century.
11. One good example here is the work of Gotthard Friedrich Stender (1714–1796), who worked as a pastor in Courland and became the creator of Latvian secular poetry and early scientific literature.
12. On the other hand, the counterbalance for the presumable processes of self-Europeanization as self-colonization, which at times (then and later) has been raised as an issue (Hennoste 2006), was provided by a vital dialog with the Russian cultural sphere important for many early twentieth-century modernist writers in the Baltic area.
13. Among those authors were Juhan Smuul in Estonia, Ojārs Vāciētiis and Vizma Belševica in Latvia. Latvian literary historian Raimonds Briedis writes that "[t]he task of socialist realism was of ideological nature – the authors had to legitimize the new reality with the potentially limited means at their disposal" (Briedis 2008, 38).
14. We might want to see a continuation of the Soviet colonial practices here. As Carlos Fuentes has put it, "[c]apitalism has flourished on relentless self-criticism. Soviet socialism fossilized because it suppressed such criticism" (Fuentes 1991, 27).
15. A good example of such reservations is provided by the insightful investigation of the Romanian scholar Bogdan Stefanescu, *Postcommunism/Postcolonialism: Siblings of Subalternity*. (Stefanescu 2013) On the other hand, there are also examples of excellent scholarly cooperation, such as the volume co-authored by Madina Tlostanova and Walter Mignolo, *Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and the Americas* (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2012), which pays attention to the decolonial moves in Latin America and former Soviet Asian republics. An issue of *The Journal of Postcolonial Writing* in 2012, edited by Cristina Șandru and Dorota Kołodziejczyk, was devoted to post-socialist cultures. Two recent scholarly meetings on East-Central European postcolonialism, organized by Dorota Kołodziejczyk at the University of Wrocław in 2013, and by Dobrota Pucherova and Robert Gafrik at the Institute of World Literature in Bratislava in 2014, respectively, also deserve to be mentioned. However, these are still rather isolated instances looking for the possibilities to develop a more fruitful cooperation on wider international scale.
16. See, for example, the contribution by Gerhard Simon (2009), included in the series of investigations on the history of Eastern Europe published by the Institute of Eastern European Studies at the Free University in Berlin.

17. Characteristically, Foucault was not addressing colonial aspects, which, in these contexts, have been further elaborated by other scholars, among them the anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler (1995).
18. The confrontation of contemporary East–Central Europe with the West is the focus of, among other scholarly efforts, investigation by Nataša Kovačević, *Narrating Post/Communism: Colonial Discourse and Europe's Borderline Civilization*. Perhaps the most challenging argument of this line of thought is to be found in the internal critique addressed toward East–Central Europeans themselves, especially as “reflected in the attempts of various Eastern European peoples to market themselves as civilized, developed, tolerant, or multicultural enough to be geo-graphed as European” (Kovačević 2008, 3).

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