

Twisted Ways of Commodities in the Early Modern Era and the Positioning of Poland on the Map of Colonialism

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This article discusses the position of Poland on the global map by focusing on the routes and impact of three selected ‘commodities’ that were transported to and from Poland in the early modern era, namely slaves, tobacco and silver coin. If studied in isolation, each of these ‘commodities’ assigns Poland a different role in the geography of the global market, work and know-how distribution. Only when studied together do they reveal the complex character of the relations between Central-Eastern Europe and its western and south-eastern neighbours, reaching as far as the New World and the Middle East.

Two contradictory views shape our view of the place of Poland on the global map from the Middle Ages to the present day: a powerful vision developed by Marian Małowist and popularised in the West by Immanuel Wallerstein, has presented Poland and the whole of Eastern Europe as a semi-colony of Western Europe, a laboratory for Western capital and trade where tools for future global domination were developed.¹ Yet, on the other hand, Poland, inhabited by white Christians, benefited for centuries from its geographical placement within Europe. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Poland took its share of American silver while Polish missionaries contributed to the rise of ‘European colonial knowledge’ by travelling as far as Iran and China, although the missionary activity of the Polish Catholic Church was mainly focused on ‘home India’, as the Ukrainian Orthodox provinces were dubbed in the seventeenth century.² In the nineteenth century, Polish lands willingly or unwillingly benefited from Russian colonial expansion, advocated earlier in that century by the Polish aristocrat and writer Jan Potocki,³ before the outbreak of the First World War, textiles woven in Łódź were distributed throughout the Russian Empire while the metal industry in Warsaw produced thousands of Buddha statues for the Mongolian market. At the same time, the works by Henryk Sienkiewicz, the most popular Polish

novelist, were full of Orientalist and racial prejudice paired with praise for the British colonial enterprise.

This somewhat schizophrenic attitude towards the place of Poland on the world map is neatly visible if one compares the writings of two Polish twentieth-century intellectuals whose impact reached far beyond their native country: Oskar Halecki and Ignacy Sachs. In his highly idealised vision, Halecki regarded Poland as an integral part of the ‘freedom loving’ West, sharply contrasted with ‘despotic’ Russia, which, in his eyes, belonged to the world of the Orient.⁴ Needless to say, this view had more to do with Halecki’s political views than with any scholarly analysis. At the same time, Ignacy Sachs wrote fascinating essays on the mechanisms of backwardness, informed by his Polish–Jewish background, school-time Brazilian experience, and multiple travels to the Indian state of Kerala. For Sachs, who for some time worked as an assistant to the prominent economist Michał Kalecki, Poland was a typical member of the group of underdeveloped countries whose main task was to catch up with the West.⁵ These two contrasting views are still present in the Polish collective mind, and they also touch the possible question of whether the Poles should feel responsible and guilty for the present unequal global wealth distribution and for the racial prejudice still influential in the Western world, or, rather, should they expect apologies from their Western neighbours for the centuries of economic exploitation. Such a possibility to look at one’s own past as that of an exploiter, and at the same time as a victim, seems very stimulating. Unfortunately, sometimes it turns into a caricature: it is not hard to find around us Polish politicians who boast of racial and cultural superiority over the non-European world, while at the same time expecting apologies from the West.

In the current article, I intend to focus on Polish trade relations with its Muslim neighbours and on the routes of three selected ‘commodities’ that were extensively transported between Poland-Lithuania and the Ottoman Empire in the early modern era, namely slaves, tobacco and silver coin. If studied in isolation, each of these ‘commodities’ assigns Poland a different role in the geography of the global market, work and know-how distribution, and places it differently vis-à-vis its large Muslim neighbour. Only when studied together do they reveal the complex character of the relations between Central-Eastern Europe and its western and south-eastern neighbours, reaching as far as the New World and the Middle East.

A few years ago, while writing a book on the diplomatic relations between Poland–Lithuania and the Crimean Khanate, I noticed that Crimean documents sent by the Tatar khans to the Polish kings, were usually written on Italian paper imported to the Crimea through Istanbul and the Black Sea. On the other hand, the royal gifts to the khans, which the latter regarded as a yearly tribute, mainly consisted of English cloth.⁶ I found it then a telling proof of both countries’ peripheral status, as already at that time they were dependent on Western industry and know-how, Italian and English, respectively. In fact, there was one Polish ‘domestic commodity’ that found appraisal on the Muslim markets and was in constant demand in Istanbul and Cairo, but this issue brings even more confusion – the commodity was slaves. According to my own overall estimations, based on estimations and studies by Polish, Russian,

Turkish and Ukrainian scholars, as many as 2 million slaves may have crossed the Black Sea in the years 1500–1700, which is more than the number of black slaves that probably crossed the Atlantic in the same period.⁷ More than half of these slaves originated from Poland–Lithuania, the rest being composed of Muscovite subjects and inhabitants of the western Caucasus. In a way, the Black Sea slave trade was even more detrimental to the region concerned than the Atlantic slave trade was to West Africa as – unlike many an African ruler – the Polish–Lithuanian authorities did not derive any benefits from this export as the slave trade was conducted against their will and authorisation. Admittedly, the Polish authorities authorised the Tatars to leave the kingdom along with their captured human chattel at least three times, but they were forced to do so in order to evade even greater destruction and hence they bought peace rather than achieved a successful commercial transaction. The Tatars were thus allowed to leave Poland along with their captured slaves in the years 1649, 1653 and 1667; in the last case, it was none other than the future king and hero of the relief of Vienna, Hetman Jan Sobieski, who authorised the Tatars to leave with their prey unmolested (Ref. 6, pp. 177–178).

Looked at from this angle, the territories of early-modern Eastern Europe, especially present-day Ukraine, constituted the least developed and most exploited area in global exchange, providing an unskilled human workforce to the Ottoman market and getting nothing in return. There is certainly a grain of truth in the observation made by Paul Rycout, a seventeenth-century British diplomat and writer who spent many years in the Ottoman Empire:

were it not for the abundant supplies of slaves, which daily come from the Black Sea [...], considering the summer-slaughters of the plague and destructions of war, the Turk would have little cause to boast of the vast numbers of his people.⁸

Rycout is corroborated by a near contemporary Polish writer Piotr Grabowski, who in a pamphlet published in 1596 complained that, unlike the Russians who settled the northern lands and unlike the Spaniards and Englishmen who settled overseas colonies in the Indies, the Polish nation did not multiply enough and even its few sons who could be used for colonisation were lost to foreign nations as, kidnapped by the Tatars, they were transported and sold in pagan lands.⁹

Let us move to our second commodity, namely American tobacco. If we examine the traditional Polish vocabulary related to smoking tobacco, with such words as *lulka*, *cybuch*, *kapciuch*, *antypka* and finally *tytoń*, we will discover that they are mostly of Turkish origin. Only the terms *fajka* and *tabaka* reveal that Poland's western neighbours, the Germans and the Scots, had also some share in spreading the new fashion. In the seventeenth century, tobacco was called either *tabaka* or *tytoń* in Polish, yet with time the former term was retained merely to denote snuff, and the final victory belonged to the Turkish loanword – *tytoń*.¹⁰ An engraving contained in a pamphlet published in 1650 and devoted to the habit of smoking proves that already by that time smoking tobacco was associated in Poland with the Muslim Orient. We can see a Turk there, wearing a turban and smoking a long pipe, a German drinking a glass of wine or beer, and a poor Pole in the middle, apparently trying to make his choice.¹¹

The pace at which the new crops obtained through Columbian exchange in the Ottoman lands became accepted and ‘domesticated’ is still under-researched. These crops are not mentioned in the Koran, hence they were not subject to legal taxation and thus rarely appear in Ottoman sources, but for that very reason stimulated Ottoman peasants to adopt them quickly. We still have to wait for in-depth studies that would use palynological records to learn more about the dynamics of the adoption of such crops as tobacco, tomatoes, bell peppers and, especially, maize. Yet, today, thanks to the studies by Ivan Sakazov, Traian Stoianovich, Fehmi Yılmaz and other scholars, we know that maize and tobacco entered the Ottoman lands quite fast.¹²

In his highly applauded monograph *Maize and Grace*, James C. McCann addresses the confusing fact that in Europe maize took on names such as *Turcum frumentum* or *frumentum asiaticum*, which he regards as an indication of a general confusion about its origins in the New World.¹³ He might be right, although such an interpretation presents Europe as a continent of geographical idiots, with Frenchmen referring to maize as *bled turquet* or *blé de Turquie*, Italians as *granturco* and Germans as *türkisch Korn* or *türkisch Weizen*. Yet why not assume that people simply observed where maize was coming from? When the Poles, Czechs and Slovenians referred to maize as *pszenica turecka*, *turkyně* and *turščica*, respectively, the Hungarians as *törökbab* (‘Turkish broad bean’), Southern Slavs as *arapka* (‘an Arab’), and Turks as *misir buğdayı* (‘Egyptian wheat’) or simply *misir* (‘Egypt’), they all pointed in a southerly direction.¹⁴ Apparently, having crossed the Atlantic, maize and tobacco soon arrived from Spain to Egypt and from there entered the central Ottoman lands, from there travelling further on to Central and Eastern Europe. In spite of religious barriers and the ‘holy war’ fought between the Spanish and Ottoman empires, communication across the sixteenth-century Mediterranean seemed to be fast, be it for humans, crops, silver or venereal diseases. In his study devoted to the names of cereals in Turkic languages, Kamil Stachowski observes that, excepting Spain and Portugal, Europe, and especially Eastern and Central Europe, learned about corn from the Ottomans (Ref. 14, pp. 19 and 23).

Unlike tobacco, maize stopped short of entering early modern Poland, making an impact only in the eastern Carpathians, which were inhabited by Wallachian and Ruthenian peasants. Polish peasants had to wait for the benefits of Columbian exchange until the arrival of the potato, two centuries later; therefore, I treat maize only marginally here.

The last commodity to be considered in the current article is silver coin. Owing to a limited local supply of silver, the early modern Ottoman Empire imported tons of silver, mostly of American origin, and one of the important trade routes led through Poland, from Amsterdam to Danzig and further on from Lwów to Constantinople.¹⁵ Silver was necessary to pay the sultan’s troops, oil the imperial economy, and pay for luxury products imported from Iran, India and China. In the seventeenth century, the Ottomans were so desperately cash hungry that they even accepted debased European coinage on their market, without even re-minting the imported foreign coins into Ottoman units, notwithstanding the fact that the right of mint was one of

the chief prerogatives of a sovereign Muslim ruler, so the circulation of foreign coins in his domains was detrimental to the prestige of an Ottoman sultan. Yet, as was aptly observed by Şevket Pamuk: ‘debased coinage was better than no coinage’.¹⁶

Apart from Dutch *leeuwendaalders*, or lion thalers, massively exported through Poland into the Ottoman lands and immortalised today in the names of the Bulgarian, Romanian and Moldavian currency – *lev* or *leu*, Poland also exported its own currency, especially silver *orts* or quarter-thalers, minted in Danzig and several other centres. In the period between 1616 and 1621 alone, the mint at Danzig produced over 13 million *orts*.¹⁷ Large numbers of seventeenth-century Polish *orts* have been identified in hoards discovered in present-day Bulgaria, Macedonia, Greece and Turkey, as well as in Iraq and Georgia.¹⁸ Yet by far the greatest career was made by a silver coin termed in Ottoman sources as the *zolota*. In his monograph of seventeenth-century Istanbul, Robert Mantran devoted special attention to this coin:

Il est encore une monnaie d’origine étrangère que l’on trouve à Constantinople: c’est le *zolota*, ou *iselotte*, pièce en principe polonaise, mais largement imitée, puisque Vénitiens, Anglais et Hollandais en frappent, qui d’ailleurs sont d’un aloi de plus en plus bas.

There is also another coin of foreign origin that can be found in Constantinople, namely *zolota*, or *iselotte*, a piece originally Polish yet largely imitated as it is [also] minted by Venetians, Englishmen and Dutchmen, with its fineness gradually decreasing. (Translation mine).¹⁹

The prototype of the *zolota* was indeed a Polish light thaler named *zloty*, which contained less silver than an ordinary thaler. Interestingly, it was struck in limited quantities in the Polish royal mints, but it was eagerly adopted as a model by counterfeiters, not just Venetians, Englishmen and Dutchmen, but also Ragusans and Germans.²⁰ The piece became so popular in the Ottoman lands that when, in 1690, the Ottoman government resolved to mint its own large silver coin, the coin obtained the name *zolota* or, to distinguish it from the Polish prototype, ‘the new *zolota*’, i.e. *cedid zolota*.²¹

Here we should draw some conclusions. If we focus on the slave trade, early modern Eastern Europe presents itself as the most desolate region of the globe, constantly raided and deprived of human and material capital. In the conclusion of his book devoted to Russia’s southern steppe frontier, Michael Khodarkovsky refers to ‘the numbers of towns and cities not built and fields not plowed’ and proposes that the shortage of urban centres in early modern Russia ‘may, in no small degree, be related to the nature of Russia’s southern frontier’.²² Analogous conclusions may be drawn in regard to ‘towns not built and fields not plowed’ in early modern Poland-Lithuania, especially its southern, Ukrainian, provinces.

If we focus on tobacco and maize, the region of Central-Eastern Europe presents itself somewhat better in the role of a conscious and choosy consumer who nonetheless adopts agricultural innovations not directly from the New World, not even through the mediation of Western Europe, but through the mediation of Egypt, Asia Minor and the Ottoman Balkans. Finally, if we focus on silver coin, the region

presents itself as a much more prosperous beneficiary of the ‘American windfall’, so aptly described by William McNeill and Kenneth Pomeranz, with the Polish *zolota* shaping the monetary system of the Middle East long before it was replaced by Austrian thalers with the busty Maria Theresa’s image on them, which even today form the most valued element of the dowry of Yemeni brides.

Which of the three above pictures was true? An impressionist historian like the current author can only wait for ‘hard data’ to be provided by real historians, namely economic historians. Yet my instinct says that none of the three alternative pictures is correct, or rather that they are all correct at the same time.

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