

# IMAGE OF THE POST-SOVIET COUNTRIES IN THE POLISH TRAVEL WRITING (1989–2019). INTRODUCTION

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DARIUSZ ROTT

**ABSTRACT** *In his article the author reconstructs and analyzes how the image of the Post-Soviet countries has been shaped in Polish travel writing. He begins with the book “Imperium” by the renown Polish journalist, Ryszard Kapuściński (1932–2007). Published in 1993, it is the first and at the same time, the last non-fiction novel which – after 1989 – presented Polish readers with a holistic view on Russia. In the years that followed, some Polish writers like Jacek Hugo-Bader, Igor T. Miecik, Ziemowit Szczerek, among the others, took up an in-depth reflection on Russia which emerged from the Soviet Union's debris and the states which used to be part of it (in the recent years the most focus was on Ukraine). They also report their journeys to Russia and present common citizens with their problems.*

**KEY WORDS** Ryszard Kapuściński, “Imperium”, Polish travel writing, Soviet Union, Russia

**CONTACT** *Instytut Literaturoznawstwa, Wydział Humanistyczny, Uniwersytet Śląski w Katowicach; [dariusz.rott@us.edu.pl](mailto:dariusz.rott@us.edu.pl)*

In 2006, Professor Maria Janion published an important book titled *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna. Fantazmaty literatury* (*Amazing Slavic culture. The phantasms of literature*). In part two, in the essay titled *Granica i Ukraina* (*The Border and Ukraine*) she writes:

Oftentimes, location on the crossroads of East and West, the border between them, placed Poland in a dramatic situation [...] Literary texts [...] may be an invaluable aid in the reconstruction of this “East-West” Polish identity (Janion 2016: 168).

In his presentation, the author reconstructs and analyzes how the image of the Post-Soviet countries has been shaped in Polish literary reportage, starting from “Empire” by the renown Polish journalist, Ryszard Kapuściński (1932–2007). Published in 1993, it is the first and at the same time, the last non-fiction novel which – after 1989 – presented Polish readers with a holistic view on Russia. According to Kapuściński, “this book is neither a history of Russia and the former USSR nor a history of the birth and fall of communism in this state nor a handy compendium of knowledge about the Empire”.

Kapuściński successfully diagnosed the causes of the agony and the last phase of the rapid breakdown and fall of the Soviet Union where he got in the early spring of 1989. Till 1991, he traveled from Brest to Magadan and from the arctic circle to the border with Iran and Afghanistan. Doing this, he also broke the stereotype of looking at and describing the Soviet Union, or Russia, from the perspective of Moscow only.

It is also the first book with author’s reflections on finding an adequate language to describe the rapid and changing currents of history. As Kapuściński wrote, it was the pursuit of the history slipping away. Kapuściński’s book is rightly seen as a breakthrough book-universe – accurate name by Magdalena Horodecka (Horodecka 2010): “as for the manner of reporting writing about this part of the world which spreads east of the Bug river”, the last Polish attempt of the holistic and synthetic description, which is a milestone for many contemporary literary reportages about Russia and the former Soviet Union states.

One can, of course, doubt whether the optimistic conclusion with which Kapuściński closes his “Empire” was the accurate diagnosis, especially in the perspective of the recent years:

*AND YET this county’s future can be seen optimistically. Large societies have great internal strength. They have sufficient vital Energy and inexhaustible supplies of all kinds of power so as to be able to raise themselves up from the most grievous setbacks and emerge from the most serious crises [...] (Kapuściński 1995: 330).*

*And one more thing: the West, whom Russia fascinates but also fills with fear, is always ready to come to its aid, if only in the interest of its own peace. The West will refuse others, but it will always help Russia (Kapuściński 1995: 331).*

However, *Empire* by Ryszard Kapuściński remains the most important Polish report on the dissolution of the Soviet Union and is an obligatory read and the starting point for all the journalists writing about today’s Russia.

This is a paradox, but after Kapuściński’s excellent book, there was stagnation in the Polish narratives about the Post-Soviet countries. Only at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century and in the recent years, a number of reportages about Russia appeared in Poland, their authors trying to understand this country after the breakout of the empire. Recently, these texts of culture have been collected by Przemysław Czapliński who writes about the great, growing –

and constantly moving narrative mass of reportages, novels, movies, short movies, plays, TV news... (Czapliński 2016: 14–15). My interests focus only on some, selected contemporary literary reportages.

Polish narratives about Russia often focus on its two capitals (official and cultural): Moscow and Petersburg. Moscow is sometimes called “Russia in a nutshell” but there are also voices admitting that Moscow is not Russia. One of the examples of such view is the latest book by the Polish Radio journalist, Maciej Jastrzębski, titled *Kremlin's ruby eyes. Secrets of underground Moscow* (Jastrzębski 2017). It is one of the many recently published narratives about Russia and its capital. The analysis covers the fragments about the mysteries and mysticism of Kremlin (especially its undergrounds and the so called library of Ivan the Terrible), secrets of the legendary Moscow subway as well as popular and numerous urban legends. Much of the focus is on seekers-troublemakers, called the diggers, who explored the Moscow underground. The analyses prove that Jastrzębski is a good storyteller. He uses different conventions of documentary and investigative journalism, knows how to build up tension and attract readers by presenting Russia's capital city in a non-traditional way – it is Moscow that is picaresque, mystical and mysterious.

The author, Maciej Jastrzębski, has been the foreign correspondent of the Polish Radio Information Agency for many years. In 2018 he celebrated 30 years of his radio career. He began early, in the Program 3 of the Polish Radio, then he worked as a reporter in the regional studio in Bydgoszcz, and later as the foreign correspondent in Baghdad, Brussels, Yerevan, Kabul, Minsk, Paris and Madrid. He was also the Polish Radio correspondent in Caucasus. Since 2010, he is the correspondent of the Polish Radio in Moscow. Published in 2017, *Kremlin's ruby eyes...* is his fourth book. It followed three other collections of reportages: *Matrioszka Rosja i Jastrząb* (*Matryoshka Russia and the Hawk*); *Klątwa gruzińskiego tortu* (*The Curse of the Georgian Cake*); *Krym. Miłość i nienawiść* (*Kremlin. Love and Hate*).

Jastrzębski announces a book dedicated entirely the mysteries and mystics of the underground Moscow in his earlier publication titled *Matrioszka Rosja i Jastrząb* (*Matryoshka Russia and the Hawk*) (Jastrzębski 2013). In the second part of it, he included four chapters: *The City of the Ruby Stars*, *The Kremlin Labyrinth*, *The Underground City* and *Two worlds – Two Russias*. He completes the information about the city legend of the underground Moscow with the motives of wandering spirits (one of them is a long dead railway watchman who still does his work underground and a white-faced monk whose showing up heralds a disaster, for example, a terrorist attack). He often mentions the presumed door of time existing in the underground tunnels, a place of the time-space warp. Jastrzębski recalls the story told by the metro passengers who in 1999 were to witness a battle between the White Guard Army and the Red Army near Izmaylovskaya station; the battle that took place about 80 years earlier. The entrance to hell is said to be found at Krasnye Vorota station.

Jastrzębski begins his report with recalling the ancient story about the murder of the last priest of the pagan god of the sun, Jarilo who cursed his murderers, the first Christians reaching Moscow and their ancestors. One of the first victims of the curse was the founder of Moscow himself, prince Yuri Dolgorukiy, poisoned by the Kievan noblemen two years after capturing Kiev. The pagan curse were to activate also in modern times when the Soviet Union was falling apart.

During one of the meetings with his readers, Jastrzębski presented the idea of the book:

“Russians are very attached to, let’s call them, paranatural events. That is why the book about monsters, legends, mysteries and secrets, about all this what the red stars, the title ruby eyes, on Kremlin towers could see and tell. Though, paradoxically, they are not so old as they were placed there only by the end of the 1920s” (Płosa 2017: 25).

Jastrzębski also recalls one of the most popular urban legends about the library of Ivan the Terrible, called Liberia:

According to the legend, the nephew of Constantine XI, the last emperor of Byzantium, married the Moscow prince Ivan the Terrible to save the ancient library in Constantinople. Sophia Palaiologina brought 70 carts with books to Moscow. According to some it was 800 volumes. And because most of the Moscow buildings were wooden, she hid the library underground to protect them from a fire.

The author of *Kremlin’s ruby eyes* recalls the stories about ghosts, wraiths and demons in the Moscow subway tunnels. There are also narratives about the inhabitants of the underground world: mutated animals and humans – the homeless who, due to their long living underground, have become like animals. Some even say that the representatives of the extinct *homo erectus* survived in the tunnels.

Polish descriptions of Russia focus mainly on the big cities, Moscow in particular but also Petersburg (the most interesting collection of reportages is the one by Joanna Woźniczko-Czeczott *Petersburg. Miasto snu (Petersburg, The city of a dream)* (Woźniczko-Czeczott 2017). In the recent years, however, writers more and more often look to the more remote parts of Russia and Postsovetia (a very accurate name given by Ziemowit Szczerek), that is, the countries which emerged from the former republics of the Soviet Union. Here, it is worth to mention two names, Wojciech Jagielski and Wojciech Górecki, whose reportages about Caucasus are very often the stories about the complicated relationships between Russia, Asia and Europe, about Islam and the meeting point of cultures.

In the years that followed, some Polish writers like Jacek Hugo-Bader (the author of *Biała gorączka (The White Fever)* – a report from his lonely journey to Moscow and Vladivostok and *Dzienniki kołymskie (The Kolyma Journals)* – a report from the journey from Magadan to Yakutsk), Igor T. Miecik, Ziemowit Szczerek and Mariusz Wilk, among the others, took up an in-depth reflection on Russia which emerged from the Soviet Union’s debris and the states which used to be part of it (in the recent years the most focus was on Ukraine). They also report their journeys to Russia and present its citizens and their problems.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, many different texts about Ukraine were (and still are) being published in Poland, including books by Igor T. Miecik, Paweł Smoleński and Ziemowit Szczerek. These analyses could involve, among others, the following questions: What is Ukraine today? To what extent can we talk about decolonization of these territories? What was this decolonization and what are its, sometimes hardly reversible, consequences?

Igor Miecik (1971–2018) was an award-winning journalist of “Gazeta Wyborcza”, the author of reportages about contemporary Russia and unknown episodes in the Soviet history, titled *14.57 do Czyty (14.57 to Czyta)*. He wrote a series of reportages about Ukraine, called *Sezon na słoneczniki (The Season for Sunflowers)*. It is a story about contemporary Ukraine where he got by the end of March 2014 when the country began to plunge into war. The narrative about the

latest Ukrainian history is accompanied by the intriguing story about the reporter's relatives It as a very good pretext for, as Monika Wiszniowska wrote: "showing the reality of Ukraine *in statu nascendi*, the country which remains in the unbreakable relationship of Ukrainian and Soviet nature, but tries to find its own identity in this melting pot" (Wiszniowska 2017: 152).

In his first book titled *Przyjdzie Mordor i nas zje, czyli tajna historia Słowian (Mordor will come and eat us. The secret history of the Slavs)*, Ziemowit Szczerek, writer, journalist and translator recalls in a thrilling way his youthful trips to Ukraine. The book was recognised as the first example of Polish "gonzo" reporting style – subjective, often very colloquial and uncompromising style of recording events, which combines presentation of facts with personal impressions. The biography of the main character-narrator, Łukasz Ponczyński, has many obvious common elements with the biography of Szczerek and the book reminds a reporting novel which presents the Ukrainian reality in a very deformed way, focusing on the Western part of the country<sup>1</sup>. Prof. Przemysław Czapliński was right when he wrote about Szczerek's debut:

"The actual world presented in his reportage [...] was Polish colonial mentality brought to Ukraine as part of the nostalgic tourism<sup>2</sup>. This mentality manifests itself in words, behaviours, routes and patterns of experiencing. It is rooted in resentment, which helps to transform the awareness of the unformed modernity into the pride in the borderland achievements. Turning away from today's Poland and looking towards the South-East, we can claim that it is Poles who have created the real culture in Ukraine and the post-Soviet ruins, chaos and poverty is the evidence that Ukrainians are not civilised and will never build a stable state" (Czapliński 2016: 158–159).

In his second book titled *Tattoo with the Trident*, which in 2016 was nominated to the prestigious Nike Literary Award, Ziemowit Szczerek presents the process of forming the Ukrainian state on the debris of the Soviet civilization.

For example, the Author analyses a short but very interesting reportage about Odessa titled *The South (Południe)*. Szczerek's narrative is very impressionistic and the author – the subject exploring the city – does not hide his emotions and uses very specific emotional code. Only marginally does he refer to the typical Polish mythical topography which, in its modern variant, consists of the three elements: stairs, sea and harbor.

Asked what is the title *Tattoo with the Trident*, the author said:

It is one of the national emblems Ukrainians sealed themselves and their country with. Because everything there is painted yellow and blue, decorated with flags. This is tagging the reality. Tattoos, embroidered t-shirts are the explosion of the Ukrainian patriotism. They will get bored with it with time, when the situation becomes more stable and Ukraine will become something normal.

In his next book *Międzymorze. Podróż przez prawdziwą i wyobrażoną Europę (Intermarum. The journey through the real and imagined Europe)* Szczerek expands the motives known from his previous two publications. But this time, he is interested in much wider territory than Poland and Ukraine. The geography of his imagination covers the lands between the Baltic Sea, the Adriatic and the Black Sea.

1 Ludwika Włodek, journalist and publicist, rightly describes this text as a mockery of orientalization of the East (Włodek, 2017).

2 For more about different narratives about the niche and nostalgia tourism see Horolets, 2013.

Piotr Milewski (born in 1975 in Chełm) is a writer, journalist, photographer and traveler, the bestselling author of: *Transsyberyjska. Drogą żelazną przez Rosję i dalej* (*Trans-Siberian. The Iron Way through Russia and Further*, 2014), *Dzienniki japońskie. Zapiski z roku Królika i roku Konia* (*The Japanese Journals. Notes from the Year of the Rabbit and the Horse*, 2015) and *Islandia albo najzimniejsze lato od pięćdziesięciu lat* (*Iceland or the Coldest Summer in the Last Fifty Years*, 2018). He received many awards, for example, the Magellan Award of the literary magazine “Książki” for the best reporting book of 2014, 2015 and 2019. His *Trans-Siberian* is the fascinating story of the Trans-Siberian railway, and travel with it is the starting point of the story about the modern Russia (Milewski 2014).

Of course, one cannot know modern Russia during one lifetime and by reading several Polish reportages briefly presented herein.

How to talk about Russia today, at the end of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Should we keep on presenting and describing its citizens as *homo (post)sovieticus*? In the information chaos, in the world of media convergence and narrative helplessness, the traditional narratives about Russia and its people are impossible. I prefer the perspective discussed by Jędrzej Morawiecki, the author of the book *Łuskanie światła. Reportaże rosyjskie* (*Husking the Light. Russian reportages*):

“I do not believe a single story, I believe in the polyphony, the multitude of voices... There is no clear synthesis which would complete this description of Russia” (Brysacz, 2013: 126).

Mariusz Wilk in his book *Wilczy notes* (*The Wolf Notebook*) writes:

“I drew from both Russias (imperial and contemporary – D. R.). But I was not able to create the whole picture. Maybe, there were too many motives, the area explored was too wide? The more I learned the more doubts arose if I ever be able to capture the whole picture” (Wilk, 2007: 16).

Save for the growing number and popularity of reportages about Russia, Ukraine and other post-Soviet states, only briefly presented herein, the recent years have also brought about some very interesting studies and reflections on the Polish reportage, its transformations within the genre and poetics of the non-fiction books about the East (Frukacz, 2019, Wiszniowska, 2017, Włodek, 2017). The researchers notice that these reporting stories are not just simple realizations of the literary reportage but they transform into genre hybrids, transmedia and polymorphic projects – the phenomenon which itself is very interesting. This opens up some interesting research perspectives, also in the area of literary comparative studies (Morawiecki, 2010) and didactics (Frukacz, 2019: 319–321).

Let us wait patiently and see what form of narratives about Russia will appear within the next years.

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**SUMMARY** In his article the author reconstructs and analyzes how the image of the Post-Soviet countries has been shaped in Polish travel writing. He begins with the book “Imperium” by the renowned Polish journalist, Ryszard Kapuściński (1932–2007). Published in 1993, it is the first and at the same time, the last non-

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