

Escaping Kakania: Eastern European Travels in Colonial Southeast Asia. Edited by Jan Mrázek.

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Escaping Kakania: Eastern European Travels in Colonial Southeast Asia addresses a question that has long remained at the margins of both postcolonial and East European studies: how should the position of Eastern and Central Europe be understood within a colonial world order largely defined by the history of Western European empires? If “Kakania” evokes the particular historical world of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, then the book’s real concern is what happened when people from this semi-peripheral and internally stratified region encountered Asia under colonial rule. Rather than assigning Eastern Europeans a fixed position, the volume explores the more unstable and ambiguous place they occupied in colonial Southeast Asia. From the late eighteenth century to the second half of the twentieth century, the book traces a long continuum, moving from individual lives embedded in imperial colonial worlds to cultural practices and transformations, from interwar colonial imaginaries and “white but not ruling” Europeans to the post-war entanglement of decolonisation, Cold War, anti-colonial narratives, and lingering colonial imaginaries. In this sense, the volume makes an important contribution to current debates on Eastern Europe’s coloniality, while also showing that Orientalism was not a fixed discourse monopolised by imperial centres, but a way of seeing that shifted across different historical positions and contexts.

In the introductory piece, Mrázek discusses the general purpose of the book and argues that most previous studies have focused on the perception of the East within large colonial empires like Britain and France, but Eastern Europe occupies a much more complicated position in this respect. It is a part of Europe that has often been treated as “Eastern” itself, too, thus it was the object of colonialism as well. Because of this, when Eastern Europeans travelled to Southeast Asia, their identities were already layered and somewhat contradictory. Mrázek nevertheless stresses that

each place has its own historical perspective and context, so one cannot simply apply a single theory of Orientalism everywhere. As for this book, the Austro-Hungarian Empire (often called by its sobriquet “Kakania”) becomes an important backdrop for understanding these travellers, though the chapter suggests that the boundary between self and other is never fixed and keeps shifting and reflecting on itself.

The second chapter focuses on the Polish soldier Teodor Anzelm Dzwonkowski, who served in the Dutch navy and travelled to the East Indies. He was born Polish, took part in the 1794 Kościuszko Uprising, and eventually died an Austrian subject. The chapter also introduces the background of the VOC (Dutch East India Company), especially how international its army had become by the late eighteenth century, with around 80 percent of its soldiers being non-Dutch. This shows that the colonial system was not based on national consciousness, but part of a broader European network. While on the ship, Dzwonkowski faced anti-Polish prejudice from Germans and chose to pretend he was Hungarian, revealing national hierarchies and discrimination within Europe itself. Dzwonkowski’s relatively tolerant attitude toward different races and religions also suggests that travel writing is often a form of self-construction rather than neutral documentation. At the same time, his stay was short, he did not speak local languages, and he never fully understood local society, which makes his observations rather superficial. Overall, the chapter shows both how Eastern Europeans have participated in colonial structures and how their identity remained fluid and was the result of conscious construction.

The following chapter describes the experiences of the Czech military doctor Pavel Durdík in Sumatra, highlighting his inner tension between nationalism and colonial reality. As a young man, Durdík was deeply influenced by the Czech national revival and was driven by strong patriotic feelings. He once imagined the “East” as a place of freedom and self-fulfilment. As he travelled to Russia and was briefly attracted to Pan-Slavism, his enthusiasm became mixed with doubt and eventual disappointment, and as a doctor in Aceh, he was at once a physician devoted to healing, but also served in a violent colonial war marked by massacre and repression. Mrázek emphasizes here the tension between patriotism, scientific rationality, and colonial violence. It is characteristic of Durdík’s ambiguity that he remained loyal to local medical traditions and recorded local medical practices. Rather than simply claiming Western medicine as superior, he often compared local healing methods with European ones and spoke of a shared “human spirit”. Still, he remained committed to European scientific reasoning, but the chapter portrays an Eastern European intellectual caught up in a moral and psychological split, participating in the empire while constantly questioning the boundaries of nation, science, and humanity.

The study of Nada Savković centres on the Serbian writer Milan Jovanović

Morski and his writings from Singapore. Coming from a multiethnic background and with critical views of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, he began traveling to Asia in 1877 as a naval physician for an Austrian company. His travel writing combines romantic tones with realism and nationalist reflection, not avoiding the dark side of “civilization” but directly addressing the issues of colonial violence and economic exploitation. His attitude toward Asia is complex: while he appreciates its landscapes and cultural life, he maintains a critical distance. Nevertheless, his attitude to British expansion and the opium trade is even more critical, exposing what he sees as the hypocrisy of the “civilizing mission”. Overall, the chapter presents how a Balkan intellectual in imperial Austrian service did not fully embrace Western imperial narratives or simply romanticize the East, but instead occupied a thoughtful middle ground.

In Chapter 5, Grzegorz Moroz examines the Polish painter Julian Fałat’s travel writing on Southeast Asia and highlights his layered and unstable identity. Fałat observed Asia through a painter’s eye, but as a tourist, he followed established European travel patterns and imitated British colonial elites, such as by stressing that he belonged to “first-class society”. Unlike in the previously mentioned writings of travellers who served a country or a company, the element of self-representation and self-fashioning is much stronger here, with a condescending tone toward Asia. Moroz admires British order and “civilization”, but his own marginal position makes that identification unstable, which he supplants through continuous self-representation. The chapter ultimately shows how Fałat constantly moved back and forth between various personal strategies: imitating the imperial mind, identifying himself with it, and distancing himself from it.

The next chapter examines the ambiguous position of Poland in the colonial world through the entangled histories of two prominent Poles: Joseph Conrad and Bronisław Piłsudski. In 1887, two young Polish nobles shaped by nineteenth-century Romantic nationalism found themselves in Singapore on different ships. Conrad was a merchant officer serving within the British maritime system, while Piłsudski was a political prisoner exiled by the Russian Empire. Then, their lives crossed again in London in 1910. This chapter makes it clear that although Poland is often seen as a victim of neighbouring empires, many Poles also participated in imperial structures abroad. Conrad’s life embodies this ambiguity. Born in the eastern borderlands of Poland, he rose to the rank of captain and became a British citizen. His novels, set in the Malay Archipelago, depict colonial realities while expressing nostalgia and a deep concern with mixed identities and belonging, yet he never fully assimilated into British society. Piłsudski, exiled to the Russian Far East, later lived in Japan, married an Ainu woman, and made significant contributions to ethnography. This ambiguity challenges simple binaries between coloniser and colonised and reveals the fluid, contradictory nature of identity in the imperial world.

Iveta Nakládalová's chapter focuses on the Czech explorer, writer, and photographer Enrique Stanko Vráz and examines the ambiguous position of Central European travel writing within the colonial world. Vráz travelled extensively to Africa, Latin America, and Asia, and in 1896, he visited Siam and New Guinea. His travel accounts describe botany, zoology, local customs, and collective symbols, portraying the encounter between Western civilisation and distant, "unknown" regions, in which the fate of the birds of paradise symbolises the nature of colonisation. At first, the latter represent childhood imagination and the fascination with *terra incognita*, but gradually, they become a metaphor for colonial exploitation and modern consumerism. Initially hunted for scientific collections and later for European fashion, "scientific curiosity" destroys the balance of local nature: thus, these birds symbolise the destructive logic embedded in imperial expansion.

In the following chapter, Tomasz Ewertowski presents the Polish and the Serbian travellers Sapieha and Lanckoroński from the Austro-Hungarian Empire and discusses how they constructed images of Southeast Asia through ethnic comparisons between 1869 and 1914. In their works, comparison is presented not simply as description, but as a key to shaping identity and hierarchy, and the authors' identities were layered: they were Poles or Serbs, imperial subjects, Europeans, Christians, and members of particular social classes. They interpreted the Eastern Asian environment through analogies with European historical models, and such contrasts often reproduced colonial stereotypes; exaggeration reinforced simplified ethnic traits. By comparing Chinese to Jews or Javanese to Polish peasants, the travellers projected European social tensions onto colonial settings.

Marianna Lis discusses the Polish botanist Marian Raciborski and his 1901 *wayang kulit* performance in Dublany, examining how "Java" was constructed and represented within a Polish cultural context. Although Raciborski travelled to Java primarily for botanical research, he also became engaged with local culture and collected numerous ethnographic objects. These items later entered Polish museum collections, becoming a material form of Javanese memory. Through a close reading of Wysocki's account of the 1901 performance, Lis raises doubts about its authenticity, as inconsistencies in details suggest that the event may not have been a faithful reproduction of Javanese theatre, but rather a reconstruction shaped by Raciborski's narration, photographs, and the audience's imagination. Travel writing and cultural display thus emerge as forms of "performance", mediating and reshaping the foreign culture they present.

The chapter by Gábor Pusztai demonstrates how social barriers remained insurmountable even within the white elite in a colonial setting, through the example of the Hungarian traveller, painter, and writer László Székely in Sumatra. In Hungary, he came from the fringes of society, from a poor family of Jewish background, and

changed his name in order to assimilate. When he arrived in the colony in 1914 with dreams of making a fortune, he remained an outsider to the Dutch white elite. Instead, he quickly encountered disease, violence, and a plantation system built on the systematic exploitation of contract labour. Székely taught himself visual arts and used watercolours and caricatures to depict colonial hierarchies and power relations. Rather than producing exotic or eroticised images of the tropics, he focused on overlooked and marginal figures such as coolies, recruiters, moneylenders, and overseers, presenting the darker side of everyday colonial life. At the same time, he and his wife Madelon Lulofs wrote, published, and translated many stories about the colony, some of which achieved considerable success. However, the same story often changed across languages: sharper criticism was sometimes softened or cut, while the English versions spread the widest and had the greatest impact. In a direct and unembellished way, his paintings and writings record the structure of colonial society through the eyes of a marginal observer.

In the following chapter, Vera Brittig discusses the travels and writings of a female traveller, the Hungarian Ilona Zboray, in Java and Bali. She first went to Java to visit her brother Ernő Zboray, who was working there at the time. Ilona was not the first Hungarian woman to travel to Southeast Asia, but her perspective was distinctive. In her writings on Java, she paid little attention to famous landmarks or typical tourist attractions; instead, she focused more on aspects of everyday social life, such as vaccination campaigns, women's lives, and various local customs. Although her understanding was partly influenced by her brother's experience, her articles show both a certain distance typical of a European traveller and a genuine attempt to understand local culture and ways of thinking. Later, she travelled to Bali, and her descriptions of that environment are closer to a tourist's perspective. However, her writing did not remain limited to exotic descriptions; it shows us how Bali's image was constructed as the "Island of Paradise" as early as the second half of the twentieth century.

In Chapter 12, Marta Grzechnik examines how Southeast Asia was described in the publications of the Polish Maritime and Colonial League (LMiK) during the interwar period, and how these texts contributed to the Polish colonial imagination. She points out that although Poland did not possess actual colonies, these writings largely adopted European colonial discourse and repeated Western European stereotypes about the non-European world. At the same time, European colonial rule was often portrayed as a force that brought order, development, and modernisation. Similarly, the following chapter, written by Jan Beránek, again does not focus on the story of a single individual but examines the lives of Czechoslovaks living in Singapore and British Malaya during the 1930s and the Second World War, particularly the experiences of employees of the Baťa company. Within the colonial society

of Southeast Asia, they were generally classified as part of the “white European” group, which gave them certain advantages in wages, social status, and lifestyle, and their business activities also relied on colonial economic and trade networks. However, compared with the British colonial rulers, they were often regarded as “foreigners” and occupied a more marginal position within the colonial power structure. Their experiences in Southeast Asia, therefore, reflect a complex identity: they both participated in, influenced, and benefited from the colonial system, yet they were not actual colonial rulers.

The Polish writer Gustaw Herling-Grudziński’s account of Burmese society in the early 1950s is the subject of Michał Lubina’s next study. Herling arrived in Burma shortly after the end of British colonial rule, when the country was still strongly shaped by colonial structures. Herling’s perspective is therefore ambivalent. On the one hand, his descriptions still transmit elements of European Orientalism and colonial discourse, but on the other hand, he shows understanding and empathy toward the problems produced by colonial history. This attitude is partly connected to his personal background: as a Polish-Jewish writer and political exile, he long occupied a marginal position between different communities, which made him more sensitive to experiences of exclusion and oppression. For this reason, his travel writing combines a European perspective with critical reflection on the complexities of colonial society.

In quite similar terms, the final chapter by Nemanja Radonjić argues that Yugoslav observers of Southeast Asia developed a “double vision”: they were influenced by European colonial imagination while also attempting to reinterpret Asia from an anti-imperialist and anti-colonial perspective. After World War II, with the process of decolonisation and the emergence of the Cold War, Yugoslav journalists, diplomats, and travel writers travelled to the region and introduced it to their readers at home, often linking the national liberation movements in Vietnam and Indonesia with Yugoslavia’s own anti-fascist struggle and emphasizing socialist internationalism and anti-colonial solidarity.

In sum, the attitudes of Eastern and Central European travellers show a typical pattern that can be divided into two major trends: on the one hand, many of them accommodate themselves to the colonial discourse of the ruling European powers. Some of them become successful entrepreneurs or well-known travellers, while many remain in a marginal position within colonial society but still side with the latter. On the other hand, a few examples highlighted in this very important volume demonstrate that there were some Eastern and Central European intellectuals—and not a few—who took notice of their ambivalent position in the colonial society, and—while reiterating the colonial discourse—criticised the power relations and European hegemony in colonial Asia. The importance of this volume lies in the fact

that it sheds new light not only on how Eastern Europeans viewed Asia in colonial times, but also on whether Eastern Europe itself can be considered a colonial subject. In recent years, this idea has become a subject of debate in scholarship (one could mention here Piotr Puchalski's *Poland in a Colonial World Order: Adjustments and Aspirations, 1918–1939*, Marta Grzechnik's *The Missing Second World: On Poland and Postcolonial Studies*, and *The World beyond the West: Perspectives from Eastern Europe*, ed. by Mariusz Kałczewiak and Magdalena Kozłowska). Through the diverse trajectories of Central and Eastern European travellers in Southeast Asia, this book demonstrates that Orientalism is not a single path belonging only to colonial empires, but rather a way of seeing that continually shifts and reshapes itself across different historical positions and contexts. What runs through the book is not the question of “who was a colonizer”, but how identities are compelled to become layered. Some individuals passed as another nationality to evade Europe's internal ethnic ranking; others exposed the moral fracture between scientific rationality and colonial violence; some stabilised their standing by mimicking imperial elites and claiming membership in “first-class society”; others, from a marginal point of view, portrayed even more marginal labourers in the everyday colonial order.

