Polish scientists in Siberia: from exiles to scholars

Poland has never been a colonial state. In the nineteenth century, the very era of colonialism, it was not even a state. Hardly surprising the most common narrative in the historiography of nineteenth century Poland is that of a divided nation, a non-existing state and of an oppressed society. Today this deficiency often is transformed into a benefit. Some Polish ethnographers consider the lack of a colonial or imperial tradition even as a virtue, providing a privileged position for ethnographic studies, especially in the East.¹

At first glance there is no need to put Polish history in a colonial or imperial context. On the other hand hundreds of members of the military and dozens of scientists originating from the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth lived and worked in tsarist Russia. Some of them were famous members of the Russian Geographical Society or the Russian Academy of Science or even members of both of them. A significant number of the future scientists were former political prisoners, sentenced to exile and penal labor by tsarist authorities after the Polish uprising of 1863 or in the 1880ies.²

In exile, Siberia, its lakes and mountains its flora and fauna but also its peoples and cultures became their special object of interest. So in the Polish historiography exiled Poles like Bronisław Piłsudski and Waclaw Sieroszewski are considered founders of ethnography as a scientific discipline.³

² My sample counts about forty men.
In the nineteenth century Russian Empire however, Siberia and Siberian peoples were not only objects of research. They were also targets of civilizing or modernizing efforts. In her book “Imperial knowledge” Ewa Thomson for the first time asked whether Said’s concept of orientalism could be transferred to the field of Russian literature of the 19th century. Similar attempts are being made today by Polish scholars of literature concerning Polish writing. The debate among the specialists of literature has just begun. For historians however, the question seems meaningless, or it simply does not exist. If they contribute to the discussion at all, the most frequently used argument against a postcolonial or imperial perspective on Polish history is: no colonies, no colonial or postcolonial attitude.

An attempt to analyze Polish science using the frame of power and subjection has not yet been made.

A feature that makes the group of Polish scientists worth taking a closer look at is their double character of victims of the regime, being persecuted because of their patriotic actions and being in the service of the Empire, albeit only in an indirect way. Commenting on the scientists’ activities the Polish historiography stresses their heroic actions, their civilizing impact in the sphere of education and their patriotic motives working abroad, but for their own country.

The Russian and Soviet scholars emphasize their contribution to the world’s space of knowledge and the support given to them by Imperial institutions, for example the Russian Geographical Society.

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7 Teksty drugie
I argue that looking at those scientists from a one-sided perspective, a Polish, an imperial Russian or a local one, ignores their multiple identities, roles and impacts on and their interactions with the particular societies. So the questions to be asked are: What was the exiles' position in the network of the (scientific) elites of the empire, in the local Polish diaspora-community in Siberia and in the public opinion at home?

The Russian government interpreted the Polish acts of resistance to the tsarist regime as an obstacle to the process of unification and modernization. The opponents themselves perceived their actions as a proof for modernity, progress and freedom. How did the experience of persecution influence their opinion on civilizing programs and modernizing missions in general? And what was their point of view in the debates on race and civilization that were part of the European discourse and the particular Russian debate on Siberia? Some of these questions have not yet been asked. Some have only partially been answered.

In my paper I am going to focus on the activities of Benedykt Dybowski (1833-1930), a scientist, known for his contribution to 19th century zoology and ethnography and a Siberian exile. Dozens of similar biographies though can be added.

The exiles

After the January Insurrection of 1863 about 20.000 ethnic Poles were deported to Siberia. Most of the convicts were young men sentenced to exile-to settlement (ssylka) and penal labour (katorga) for several years, only few of them followed by their wives and children. Many of them were of noble origin and belonged to the new emerging class of the intelligentsia.

Since the 16th century the tsarist regime used Siberia - a “prison without a tent” - for criminals and politically unreliable subjects. And for a long time the European part of Russia associated Siberia with a desolate desert of snow and ice, at best useful as a colonial reservoir of furs. Hardly surprizing the governor-general of Siberia Michail Speranski commented on his stay in the area in the beginning of the 19th century: “It

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9 Andrew Gentes, Siberian Exile “Siberian Exile and the 1863 Polish Insurrections according to Russian Sources”, Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas 51 (2003), Nr. 2, 197-217, 203. 1863-64: Gentes, Siberian Exile, 211.
is terrible to spend two years without meeting a single cultured person or hearing one intelligent word”

From the beginning of the 19th century though, especially after the Decembrist revolt of 1825 the images of Siberia began to change. They soon were characterized by a remarkable spectrum and a high diversity. As Marc Bassin has pointed out, Siberia shimmered between the traditional colonial image and phantasies of hope and inspiration. In the discourse of the exiled Russian opponents of the regime, it even reached the quality of a second New World, a new Utopia, a land without serfdom, nobility, corruption and autocracy.

Compared to the Russian spectrum the Polish images of Siberia were monochrome. Its impressions were unambiguous and dull. Represented in all kinds of media – in memoirs, paintings and poetry, since the end of the 18th century Siberia stood for tsarist despotism and Polish heroism, the yearning for freedom against the barbarian Russian rule. In the Romantic era of the 1830ies the real experience of exile and persecution mixed with the messianic creed of Poland being the Christ of nations who redeemed through her national Golgotha not only herself but all mankind. Therefore religious symbols, especially the cross, played a central role in the Polish Siberian iconography of the 19th century.

In the poems and novels Poles appeared as martyrs and civilizers, the vast Siberian territory was perceived as a space of misery and despair. So according to this mental map everyone leaving the Polish lands exactly knew what was going to come, before even touching the material space of Siberian territory.

Benedykt Dybowski reached Siberia in December 1864. His career that was interrupted by the January uprising, can be regarded as quite typical for the nobility of the former Polish borderlands, an area belonging to the Russian Empire since the end of the 18th century. Dybowski was born in 1833 in Adamaryn, a small noble estate in the Minsk gourbernia, in the Western part of the Empire. The Western or

13 Piotr Wandycz, Lands of partitioned Poland 1795-1918, Seattle 1996, 118.
“Polish” provinces had mainly been inhabited by Belorussians and Lithuanians but the Poles represented a significant group there. The classes that really mattered in the Russian Empire – the nobility and the bureaucracy – were Polish speaking till the November Uprising of 1830, until they became targets of a policy of Russification in the 1840s. The new policy towards the renamed Northwestern Land (severozapadnyj kraj) meant repressions against the Uniate church, the abolition of the University of Wilno/Vilnius, the elimination of the Polish language from offices and courts and drastic cuts of Polish schools. But Poles of the Borderlands still could attend Russian high schools and study at the universities of the Empire.

Despite the tendencies of unification and russification Poles could become high members of the military or officials - as long as they did not settle in the former Kingdom of Poland or support rebellions. So Dybowski’s academic career can be regarded as a typical one: After his high school finals in Minsk in 1853 he entered the medical faculty of the German speaking Dorpat University. He followed his academic mentor to Breslau and after attending expeditions to the Adriatic Sea he moved to Virchow’s Berlin. Here Dybowski immediately became a devoted supporter and true defender of Darwin’s evolutionary theory. In 1860 he presented his doctoral dissertation in Berlin\textsuperscript{15} and in the same year became an assistant professor of Zoology of the Warsaw Medical School (substitute for the closed university). As German academic grades were not acknowledged in Tsarist Russia Dybowski graduated once more at the Dorpat University with his second doctoral dissertation in 1862. Only one year later being a participant of the January uprising against the tsarist rule in Poland he was condemned to forced labour (katorga) and enforced residence (ssylka) in Siberia for the term of 12 years. He left Warsaw as a Polish patriot and as a European scientist. At the same time he was a member of the transnational Dorpat elite with best connections to the tsarist bureaucracy all over the Empire.

In Siberia, his new place of residence, he was a political prisoner, deprived of property and civil rights, condemned to penal labour. \textsuperscript{16} It must be emphasized though that the prisons of Irkutsk cannot be compared to the Stalinist GULAs of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Dybowski could continue his theoretical studies in prison and he was allowed to use the location for the taxidermy of birds. He was also permitted to leave

\textsuperscript{15} Commentationes de parthogenesi specimen. Berolini 1860.
\textsuperscript{16} Dybowski was imprisoned in the Kазіонная палата in Иркутск.
prison for paying visits to the members of the local elite. So an influential colleague, member of the Russian Geographical Society, Richard Maack became his mediator, providing him with books, helping to deliver his specimen to Warsaw and smoothing the way to the Russian Geographical Society. According to his advice Dybowski chose the place of exile according to his scientific interest and the potential Polish diaspora network. First it was Siwakowa in the Transbaikal region.17

The Russian Geographical Society, founded in 1848 brought together scientists, government officials, explorers and intellectuals to study social and economic questions. In their self-perception they were neither conquerors nor in the conquerors’ service. They considered themselves as prosvetitel’e (enlighteners), bringing light and truth to the mankind. The society’s founders though were navy men, general staff officers and explorers, its President was the Grand Duke Konstantin, and the Society was supported by a subsidy of ten thousand rubels per year. Connections between state and science could have hardly been closer.18 The society’s aim “to work to the benefit and glory of our precious Fahterland” 19, which meant Russia, might have been a problem for Polish insurgents, but it seems that in the remote places of the Empire the Russian patriotic mission was covered by another purpose: “to serve as a shelter for people who have been seeking in intellectual occupations a relief from provincial boredom and the false authority that reigns in the salons of Petersburg idlers”, as the exiled Russian explorer Gregorij Potanin (1835-1920) commented on the opening of the Society’s chapter for Eastern Siberia in Irkutsk in 1851.20

So in every day practice in Siberia different spaces could be created at one place. The government and its police officials constructed a space of penalty, and persecution. In some cases this space overlapped with the space of science, produced by the exchange of ideas and objects. Under the special circumstances in

17 Benedykt Dybowski, Pamiętnik dra Benedykta Dybowskiego od roku 1862 zaczęwszy do roku 1878, Lwów 1930, 64.
19 Bradley 2009, 97.
tsarist Russia, political persecution did not do any harm to a person’s social or professional honour. The same man could be handcuffed in Warsaw and warmly welcomed in Irkutsk, and it could be a government-sponsored institution, like the Russian Geographical Society that appreciated and honoured his scientific work. In this context questions of nationality were of no importance.

Doing forced labour in the woods Dybowski collected plants, insects, shot and dissected birds. Due to this situation after three years of katorga and scientific practice he was able to publish his first results in *the Journal für Ornithologie* (Berlin)\(^{21}\) and gain some of his co-convicts for further scientific projects. Some of them only in Siberia learned how to identify plants and insects or examine rock layers and fossils. Four years after arriving in Siberia the former Polish insurgent took part in the Amur expedition (1869), one of the Empire’s most important projects following the Russian expansion in the Far East.\(^ {22}\) In 1870 Dybowski was decorated with a Golden Medal of the Russian Geographical Society for his research on the fauna of Lake Baikal.

Up to this point the scientist’s biography could serve as an example for the complex reality in the Russian Empire, that cannot be described in binary categories of repression and rule on one hand and suffering and heroism on the other. The story could end with the scientist’s return to Poland in 1877 and his further career at the university. But the Polish patriot went back to Siberia, he even moved further to the East. After having won the support of Siberia’s governor, members of the public health service and influential members of the military he voluntarily started for his scientific expedition. Enjoying the privileges of a doctor in charge for the inhabitants of Kamchatka and the Bering islands, he was enthusiastic about the possibility of taking anthropologic measurements and completing his zoological collections. The objects to be found in Kamchatka were supposed to be sent to Paris, Warsaw and Moscow.\(^ {23}\)


\(^{22}\) In his memoirs Dybowski explained his participation with medical needs. As a physician he was obliged to treat general Skalkov’s partly amputated hand and as a botanist he gathered plants for the herbarium of the tsar’s wife.

Dybowski’s greatest hope was to get a complete skeleton of Stellers Sea Cow (Rhytina Stelleri), a large marine mammal, hunted to extinction in the 18th century. Taking into account that Kamchatka belonged to the area of commercial interests of the Russian-American Company, followed by the San Francisco Hutchison Kohl and Company, Dybowski’s actions were situated in a transnational context and in a global space.

What the scientist found in Russia and what he could not find in Poland was a potent institution that would back his project. And what probably was not unimportant, the Russian public seemed to be more interested in this remote and cold place than the Warsaw elites, which preferred the exotic trophies from the so called “warm countries” - Africa and South America - exhibited in the private cabinets of Warsaw.

Since the Great Nordic Expedition of the 18th century Kamchatka has been an object of scientific research in the Russian Empire, serving as the incorporation of the uncivilized other, the counterpart of European Russia. Travelogues by Gmelin, Krašeninnikov and Pallas informed the European public about the history and the manners of its peoples, satisfying Europe’s special interest in shamanism. In the nineteenth century however, the peninsula became part of an empire-wide naturalistic and ethnographic research program. Dybowski spent three years (1879-1882) as a doctor in Petropavlovsk and he used his stay for tours all over Kamchatka and on the Bering Islands. The first reports sent to Warsaw newspapers were full of enthusiasm about his experiments and underlined his Polish patriotic feelings.

Organizing the transfer of reindeers from Kamchatka to the Bering-island in collaboration with the Alaska Corporation he felt more than fulfilling a civilizing mission. Reporting on the action to the Polish public he presented himself not only in the frame of a prosvetitel’ or as a scientist but as new and perfect creator:

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25 The most important place was the Branicki cabinet which gathered objects from Abyssinia and South America.
“Be fruitful and multiply like the sand in the sea to the benefit of the friendly Aleuts, he wrote, „and praise the one who brought you to this Promised Land, without gad-flies, mosquitos, wolves or bears. “ 28

The natives’ complaints about the damage caused by the animals did not fit to this omnipotent and inerrant image. 29

In the lecture given to the Russian Geographical Society in Petersburg Dybowski followed the Russian tradition of criticizing the local authorities and formulating civilizing programs for the people, which meant Siberians of all but not noble origin. 30

Dybowski claimed better social conditions for the natives and the right of the Aleuts to be called by their own name. He also denied a connection between race and social problems. And as he refused the possibility to identify pure races in mixed societies, he disapproved the use of the category of race for administrative purpose. 31

As Susi Frank has pointed out, the Russian discourse on race polarized the supporters and opponents of hybridity. But all participants shared the aim of integrating Siberia into the Empire, either by stressing the necessity of Russian migration to the East or by praising Siberia’s special qualities. 32 Dybowski joined the discussion from the geographical margins of the Empire but he did it as a member of the scientific community in the capital. He supported the imperial program of integration and the Russian patriotism by warning of a possible loss of the island to the American Company, which was not very unlikely after the disposal of Alaska in 1867. In this context his Polish origin seems to have been of no importance.

The Polish historiography stresses Dybowski’s humanitarian advocacy for the Empire’s supressed peoples and for their right of self-destination. Thus it follows the

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28 Wyjątek z listu D-ra Dybowskiego (do Wł. Taczanowskiego 19.8.1882), in: Wszechświat 1 (1882), Nr. 36, S. 561-563, 563. „Żyjcie i rozmarnajcie się jak piasek w morzu na pożytek poczciwych Aleutów i sławcie tego, który was tu przywiódł do tej ziemi obiecanej, gdzie niema ani bąków, ani komarów, ani wilka, ani niedźwiedzia.”
29 Stejneger, Leonard: Contributions to the History oft he Commander Islands, in: Proceedings tot he United States National Museum 6 (1882), 5, p. 58-89: „The natives complain that they have eaten all the cloud berries (Rubits chamccmonts) and crake berries (Empetrum nigrum) in the neighborhood of the Southern Rookery, a trifle, however, compared with the self-evident utility of the animal.”
30 This tradition was founded by the Decembrists and continued by Jadrincev.
31 Benedykt Dybowski, Wyspy komandorskie, Kosmos 10 (1885), 442-450.
scientist’s own presentation. In his statements that were directed to the Polish public Dybowski underlined the parallelism between the piteous lot of the “friendly Kamchadals” and the situation of Poles under Russian rule, implicitly postulating the secession.33

In his scientific practice, however, he did not show the same respect to the natives’ rights and taboos. Digging out and buying skulls of the Ainu for his own and his friend’s collection in Cracow, he rejected the advice, the Japanese perceived these illegal actions as profanation. His skulls were treated with the required reverence, he assured. Not to be compared with those found by simple Russian soldiers.34 So Dybowski did not infer the legitimation for this practice from a Russian civilizing mission, but from his position as a scientist, working for the alleged benefit of mankind.

Preliminary conclusions

What can this account of the exile experience tell us about Polish scientists in the Russian Empire?
First, the frames of the penal system were wide enough to allow scientific work during katorga.
Second, the Russian Geographical society – a semi-government institution – honoured the work of exiles without respect to their political sympathies or their national background. Doing so the Empire could benefit from their skills and knowledge and keep them out of the capital.
Third, for Poles, Russia was not only a space of repression. It also offered opportunities that could not easily be found “at home”. Privately sponsored expeditions proved less attractive than projects planned with the backing of an imperial institution.35

33 „Losy Kamczadalów i losy Polaków są tak podobne, że ludność ich budzi we mnie głębokie współczucie (...) odebrano im mowę, samorządz, zrobiono ich niewolnikami. (...) Otóż i w Kamczatce rząd niema żadnych korzyści z tego kraju, przeciwne ma same straty, więc po co go trzyma. “: Benedykt Dybowski, O Syberii i Kamczatce. Lwów 1912, 52.
34 Dybowski, O Syberii i Kamczatce, Lwów 1912, 545-552. Ignacy Kopernicki, an assistant-professor at the anthropology institute in Cracow, was the addressee.
35 Dybowski is not the only example. The biography of Julian Talko-Hrynczewicz, the leading Polish anthropologist in the interwar-period allows the same conclusions.
Forth, the complex situation of being the regime’s victim, working for the Russian Empire and belonging to an imagined Polish community and a real Polish diaspora was reflected in a special way. In the Russian context Dybowski participated in the imperial discourse on Siberia, which allowed critical remarks, as long as imperial loyalty was assured. In his statements for Poland he stressed the patriotic and humanitarian character of his actions:

“I have the honourable permission to restore the colossus to health, so I start with the most remotest members”, he commented on his Kamchatka expedition.\textsuperscript{36}

A closer look at the group of Polish scientists working in Siberia will certainly give a more complex vision of their practices. This is only one piece of a mosaic that still has to be reconstructed.

\textsuperscript{36} Dybowski, O Syberii 37.