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ASPIRATIONS OF IMPERIAL SPACE. THE COLONIAL PROJECT OF THE MARITIME
AND COLONIAL LEAGUE IN INTERWAR POLAND

by:
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Abstract

The paper discusses the case of an organization called Maritime and Colonial League, and its idea of colonial expansion that it attempted to promote in interwar Poland. It studies the colonial aspirations in two dimensions: the pragmatic and the symbolic. In the pragmatic dimension, acquiring colonies was supposed to remedy concrete economic and political problems. Overpopulation and resulting unemployment, as well as ethnic tensions, were to be alleviated by organized emigration of the surplus population; obstacles to the development of industries and international trade were to be removed thanks to direct access to raw resources and export markets overseas. In the symbolic dimension, strong Polish presence in Africa and South America was to guarantee Poland's standing in global hierarchies. Poland's participation in research and exploration was to secure its place as a modern, European nation, equal to its Western neighbors and higher than peoples who, and whose territories, were subjects of this research. Its transformation from a land to a seafaring nation was to make it a global player, and innovative and enterprising "conqueror of seas and oceans."

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1. Introduction

In 1930, during a general assembly in the Baltic port city of Gdynia, an organization called Maritime and River League was transformed into a Maritime and Colonial League (*Liga Morska i Kolonialna*, in short LMiK). The League's popular monthly, *Morze* (Sea), reported:

Unanimously and collectively, without any objections or reservations, in an extremely solemn atmosphere of enthusiasm and readiness for sacrifice, over one hundred delegates of the Maritime and River League, who came to Gdynia from all districts of the Polish Republic, accepted the new statute of the organization, changing its name to "Maritime and Colonial League," and in this way elevated to one of the priorities among this League's tasks the implementation of the colonial program, prepared by the Colonial Pioneers Association. This program was thus unanimously recognized as the Polish *raison d'état*, as one of the main mottos of the whole Nation, regardless of the disparities that exist in it (Tetzlaff 1930, 4).

Visions and aspirations expressed in these words were ambitious, they drew a picture of a future Polish colonial empire which could be – would be – attained thanks to the nation's steadfast will and unrelenting effort.

In his study of colonialism, Jürgen Osterhammel discusses various forms of colonialisms. Apart from the most common situation, when colonialism and colonies go together hand-in-hand, as parts of the same process, he also distinguishes colonies without colonialism (in which there was no local population to subdue), colonialism without colonies (in which colonial-like relations occurred between the center and periphery of the same state or empire) and subcolonial relations (between different colonies within an imperial hierarchy) (Osterhammel 1995, 20–21). This paper asks questions about a situation that goes beyond these types: how can we understand and conceptualize colonialism that existed only as a potentiality – colonialism as an aspiration?

For, despite the ambitious visions presented on the occasion of the 1930 assembly, Poland never acquired colonies in the sense of political and economic control over overseas territories.¹ This makes it easy to assume an "outsider status" (Vuorela 2009, 26) to the whole

¹ There exists extensive literature discussing *Kresy* (the Eastern Borderlands of the pre-partitions Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth) as remaining in colonial relations to the Polish Crown, much like Osterhammel's

colonial project and simply ignore it, as an issue that does not concern us. Responsibility for colonial oppression is thus put only on the Western European colonial powers, like Great Britain and France. However, seeing colonial expansion solely as securing political and economic control over a territory is a rather narrow understanding of the process. As has been argued by several scholars, for example Ann Stoler and Carole McGranahan, it should rather be seen as an active, dynamic process of imperial formations (Stoler and Granahan 2007, 8). The study of colonialism should, therefore, extend to, for example, the pursuit of trade, science, and missionary activities.² There is also what Mai Palmberg called the “colonial mind”: sharing the European discourses of hierarchies of the non-European world, present in the European science and culture, for example by means of literature (Palmberg 2009, 47). Part of this was the assumption inherent in LMiK’s vision: that it was “natural” for a European nation – such as Poles – to control overseas territories, as well as the reproduction of racial stereotypes in culture and research. The League sought to construct a Polish imperial space on the mental maps of the Polish society and its neighbors. This paper discusses the discourse that was produced as part of this construction, and the functions that it was supposed to fulfill.

2. The Maritime and Colonial League and its activities

The LMiK was interested in maritime propaganda and maritime policy, including the collection of funds for the building of the navy, but it was also responsible for an extensive propaganda program of overseas and colonial expansion. LMiK’s first predecessor came into being in 1918, during the last stages of the First World War and a week before proclaiming Poland’s independence. It was then that an organization called the Association of Workers for Development of Navigation “Polish Flag” was founded in Warsaw. In 1919 its name was changed to the Polish Navigation League, in 1924 to the Maritime and River League, and in 1930, finally, to the Maritime and Colonial League. These changes show the organization’s evolution and a broadening of its interests. In its very beginnings, it was an organization of people interested in questions of the navy and navigation, mainly inland (on rivers). With time, it broadened its interests to the Baltic Sea, and from there to the seas and oceans of the world, and colonial topics.

“colonialism without colonies” (e.g. Skórczewski 2008, Sowa 2011, Zarycki 2014 and others). Although the *Kresy* discourse is in some respects related to the one regarding overseas territories, it is not the focus of this paper.

² This has especially been underlined by scholars working with colonial ventures coming from other “noncolonial colonials”, such as the Nordic countries. See e.g.: Keskinen 2009, Kjerland and Bertelsen 2014, Naum and Nordin 2013, Loftsdóttir and Jensen 2016.

From quite modest beginnings (20,000 members in 1922), the League membership started to grow especially since 1932 (250 percent growth in membership in 1932–33), to reach 992,780 members on June 1, 1939 (Myszor 2012, 40). By that time, it was one of the largest mass organizations in Poland (Białas 1983, 45), with considerable influence on its political life and public discourse. However, these high membership numbers were only partly evidence of popular interest in the League's program. To a great extent, they can be explained by the fact that the authorities promoted the idea of membership in mass organizations in general, and lack of such membership could even be considered disloyal and unpatriotic (Myszor 2012, 40; Białas 1983, 42–43). The League's branches were created in state institutions and schools, which meant that for example all employees of a given institution or pupils of a school automatically became members. The organization also had considerable influence on the country's political life and public discourse. Although the Polish government was not enthusiastic about the colonial idea – at least not until the mid-1930s – many prominent members were officers in the army and members of both chambers of the Parliament. Thus, it was easy for LMiK's rhetoric to permeate into discussions at the society's highest levels, and it did, in fact, appear, for example in parliamentary discussions. The League's various journals, in particular *Morze* and *Sprawy morskie i kolonialne*, often quoted parliamentary speeches and discussions on the topics of colonial expansion and emigration, especially contributions of the League's members on these forums in the late 1930s.

The colonial question appeared among the League's interests in the late 1920s. In 1927, a League's branch called the Colonial Pioneers Association was established. Its aim, as described by its president, Kazimierz Głuchowski, was: “to acquire for the country and for the Polish nation as great as possible territories for expansion, territories on which we could, under the banner of a new or a ‘second’ Poland, create a new, colonial Polish society” (Głuchowski March 1928, 32). In October 1928, during a congress in Katowice, changes to the League's statute were made, to include the new aim of overseas expansion. The last change of the organization's name, expressing the colonial ambitions explicitly, followed from this broadening of interests. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, it took place at the League's general congress in Gdynia on October 25–27, 1930, when a new statute was also passed (Tetzlaff 1930; Liga Morska i Kolonialna 1931).

The LMiK's propaganda work was done in great part with the use of its publications. Most notably, since 1924, still as the Maritime and River League, it published a monthly called *Morze: organ Ligi Morskiej i Rzecznej* (Sea: The journal of the Maritime and River League). With the change of the League's name, the subtitle was changed to be more fitting: *Organ Ligi*

Morskiej i Kolonialnej (The journal of the Maritime and Colonial League), and at the beginning of 1939 the first part of the title was changed to *Morze i kolonie* (Sea and Colonies). Between March 1928 and May 1934, the journal contained a supplement called *Pionier kolonialny* (Colonial Pioneer). In the beginning, in 1924, 3,000 copies of *Morze* were printed, but the number increased to 31,000 in 1930, 120,000 in 1934, and 254,000 in the case of the last issue (Myszor 2012, 42–43). It also became thicker: from eight pages in 1924 to 44 in the late 1930s. Another monthly, *Polska na morzu* (Poland on the Sea), was published in two versions: version A directed to workers and farmers, and version B to school youth. Students also got their own monthly called *Szkwał* (Squall), published in the years 1935–37. Apart from these, the LMiK also published, since October 1934, a quarterly *Sprawy morskie i kolonialne* (Sea and Colonial Matters). It was a more ambitious publication, aiming to present scientific arguments, and it appeared in 12,000 copies (Kowalski 2010, 64). A similar publication was *Rocznik morski i kolonialny* (Sea and Colonial Yearbook), of which only one volume appeared, in 1938.

The LMiK's publications evolved around several sets of topics. One of them was maritime education and security, including exhortations for supporting the building of the navy by individual donations. As far as the colonial discourse is concerned, the texts can be divided into several themes: 1) appeals arguing that Poland needed colonies and why, including exhortations to various groups of the society: politicians to raise the issue on the international arena, trade institutions and organisations to develop overseas trade, regular citizens to become active members of the League and thus pressure the former two into action, and to spread knowledge about the issues of colonial expansion and maritime policy; 2) reports on the colonial policies of the European powers, including the fate of the former German colonies under international mandate; 3) reportage and travel reports from Africa and the Americas; 4) reports on the fate and activities of Polish emigrants outside of Europe.

Among the most powerful tools of propagating the colonial idea in interwar Poland were public holidays such as Colonial Days and Holidays of the Sea, both organized by LMiK. The Holiday of the Sea was first organized on July 31, 1932, in Gdynia (interwar Poland's only port city), and the Colonial Days were organized by LMiK's various local branches throughout the whole country, for the first time on November 21–23, 1936. In April 1938 the total number of participants was estimated at 10 million; however the number can be exaggerated by the League's enthusiastic propaganda, and some of the participants were obliged to come, for example, if they worked in state institutions (Kowalski 2010, 72–73). Celebrations throughout the country took place in workplaces, schools, public institutions, etc. They consisted of

lectures and panels, church services, processions, and marches (Białas 1983, 255–56). In 1939 both events were organized under a joint name Sea and Colonial Days. They were very solemn events, each of them starting with a Holy Mass and culminating in giving of an oath (Myszor 2012, 51; “Przebieg uroczystości” 1932).

It has to be clarified that when LMiK’s activists postulated acquiring colonies, they did not mean that Poland should endeavor a military conquest of an overseas territory. What they had in mind was instead gaining possibilities for Polish organized emigration and acquisition of raw resources and favorable access to export markets, which was to be achieved by cooperation with Western colonial powers or independent overseas countries, or by modification of the existing colonial system (e.g. the international mandates). These colonial aspirations can be interpreted in two dimensions: the pragmatic and the symbolic. In the pragmatic dimension, acquiring colonies was supposed to remedy concrete economic and political problems; in the symbolic – elevate Poland to the status of a modern, Western nation.

3. Colonialism as an answer to domestic and global problems

Interwar Poland struggled with many economic and social problems. After regaining independence in 1918, it had to start by unifying territories and societies which had during the previous 123 years developed under the rule of three different powers – Germany, Russia, and Austria – which resulted in considerable differences in virtually all spheres of life. Foreign domination also meant that there had been, until recently, no state to secure the nation’s economic and political interests. Local and global economic crises deepened existing problems such as overpopulation, unemployment, and ethnic tensions.

It was in this context that LMiK – or more precisely its predecessor, the Maritime and River League – took up the colonial question. At first, it appeared in direct relation to the problem of emigration. At the beginning of 1925 Julian Rummel, promotor of the Polish maritime policy and president of the League’s Warsaw division, described emigration as a necessary evil, which could not be stopped, but should be used in Poland’s interest; organized emigration should be directed to territories with which Poland had economic relations (Rummel 1925, 21). The necessity of the evil came from the massive overpopulation, especially in the Polish countryside, resulting in high numbers of landless peasants, who migrated to towns and cities. Additionally, Poland’s high population growth, comparable only to Italian and Russian in Europe at the time, was often given as one of the main reasons why Poland should acquire

colonies; they were considered necessary, “natural” outlets for the country’s surplus population. For example, one of LMiK’s activists, Wiktor Rosiński, wrote in September 1930:

Countries which, because of their population conditions, are forced to lead intensive colonial and colonizing policy cannot be accused of “imperialism,” “possessiveness” etc., because their policy follows from the peoples’ right to live, to develop physically and culturally. (...) Sparsely populated territories, not capable of independent economic and political existence, must necessarily be given to those whose economy is suffocating in the overpopulated countries of Europe (Rosiński 1930, 18).

Other solutions to the problem were not considered realistic. Industrialization and land reform took time and were both problematic: the latter because it undermined the position of landowners, a stratum that held considerable power in interwar Poland, the former because it was seriously hindered by lack of access to raw resources (gaining access to resources was, as will be discussed below, one of the other important arguments given to support the colonial aspirations). It was also not considered sufficient to start cultivating the hitherto non-arable land (J. L. 1938, 4). Emigration was the only remaining solution.

The questions of overpopulation and emigration prompted the founding of a LMiK branch called Colonial Pioneers Association. At its founding meeting, the organizers quoted the number of 200,000 as the number of Poles emigrating every year, and seven million Poles had already been living abroad (“Związek Pjonierów Kolonjalnych” 1928, 30). And, instead of using these masses for the benefit of Poland, they were working in the interests of other nations, contributing to their development and growth, *Morze* pointed out (“Związek Pjonierów Kolonjalnych” 1928, 30). The aim of the Association and one of the aims behind LMiK’s colonial plans was to remedy this to make the emigration work to Poland’s benefit. First, emigrants should not lose contact with the mother country, or assimilate in their new homelands, but they should nourish the Polish culture also abroad. The farmers-settlers, several authors admitted, were rather simple-minded people who, without proper guidance, would soon forget about their Polish roots – therefore, local leaders, teachers and other members of the intellectual classes should also be sent overseas (Jarosławski 1928, 28). Second, the Polish emigrants should act according to the rule of “economic patriotism,” which was supposedly natural to the British, the French, the Germans, the Czechs, and others. That is, the Polish emigrants should feel it their duty to buy Polish products and promote them in their new countries (e.g. Rosiński 1934, 8). In this way, they would foster Poland’s economic links with

overseas countries, and thus contribute to the development of Poland's overseas trade. The program aimed, therefore, to kill several birds with one stone: get rid of the surplus population, but still keep the fruit of their work, and develop export and import markets to help the Polish economy.

The projects of the organized settlement of Polish emigrants were mainly developed with South America in mind. That was mainly because emigration there, especially to Paraná in Brazil, had continued in great numbers since the nineteenth century. Kazimierz Głuchowski, who became the president of the Colonial Pioneers Association, had previously served as Consul in Curitiba, the capital of Paraná, and therefore was familiar with the situation there. He described his impressions from the time spent in Brazil in a series of articles in *Morze*. In these articles, he established a pattern along which numerous later texts about Polish settlers in the Americas and Africa would be written. The settlers were most often described as extremely hard working and persistent, transforming the "virgin jungle," the uncivilized wilderness, into a fertile and civilized land, sometimes quite literally flowing with milk and honey – like when a farmer's wife in Brazil described her and her family's life there: "And do you think that we want for milk or cheese or butter? And honey we also have enough of, more than we can eat. (...) A different life, sir, than in the old country" (Lepecki 1932, 25). Apart from Brazil, the countries which were considered suitable for Polish settlement were Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay. In Africa, Angola, Liberia, Cameroon and Madagascar were also in various periods of the interwar period objects of interest. Among the important arguments why these territories were chosen were good conditions for agriculture and climate, deemed suitable for Europeans.

Because of the qualities of being hard-working and persistent, the Polish emigrants were often referred to as "first-rate settler material" (e.g. Pankiewicz 1934, 5), which benefitted any overseas country in which they settled. This first-rate settle material was given as an argument why existing colonial powers, as well as independent overseas countries (e.g. the USA), which often were not themselves populous enough to colonize and cultivate territories under their control, should open their borders to Polish immigrants. Their reluctance to do so was, for example according to Wiktor Rosiński, one of the main reasons for the global economic crisis of the 1930s. According to him, the Western countries' "egoistic economic policy" led to the situation in which they had to deal with overproduction and lacked sufficient numbers of consumers, while they also possessed vast uncultivated territories, while other nations suffered from exactly the opposite problems: overpopulation and lack of territories (Rosiński 1932). The "population problem," understood as disproportion in people's distribution in the world,

was seen as a global problem, one of the global inequalities and disproportions, which resulted in economic and political crises.

A subset of the population problem was the question of ethnic minorities, in particular the “Jewish question.” Around one-third of the population of interwar Poland were minorities: mainly Ukrainians, Jews, Belarussians, and Germans. The LMiK started to be interested in the so-called “Jewish question” quite late, in the second half of the 1930s. Articles in *Morze* and *Sprawy morskie i kolonialne* discussed such questions as the size of the Jewish population in Poland, especially in relation to their size in other European and non-European countries, its occupational structure, its ability to colonize non-European territories. The conclusions usually drawn were that the proportion of the Jewish population in Poland was exceptionally high in relation to the ethnic Polish population (around 10 percent, in comparison to for example Germany’s 1 percent), which meant that Poland was “the only country on Earth from which the necessity of Jewish emigration [was] obvious,” as the eminent geographer Stanisław Pawłowski put it in an article in *Sprawy morskie i kolonialne* (Pawłowski 1937, 58). What made the necessity of this emigration even more urgent, in LMiK’s view, was the fact that Jews tended to dominate in occupations traditionally connected with town and city, especially trade. This was a problem since more and more landless Poles emigrated from the countryside to the cities and these types of occupations were in high demand: Jews were in a way expected to make way and enable the Polish nation’s transformation from an agricultural into an urban and industrialized nation (Lemanus 1939, 3). It was understood that Jews’ emigration had to happen to rural or uncultivated territories, as highly urbanized countries closed their borders on them. This raised doubts, expressed both by Jewish and non-Jewish actors, whether they were capable of becoming settlers and farmers, against which LMiK quoted examples of successful Jewish settlement on previously uncultivated land: in Palestine, but also other territories, including Canada, USA, Brazil, Argentina, Africa and Birobidzhan in Siberia (Pawłowski 1937, 31–31). Therefore, Jewish emigration – to Palestine, the Americas and French African colonies, mostly Madagascar – was perceived as a solution to what was called the “Jewish question,” and actions to enable such emigration were undertaken by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the late 1930s (Drymmer 1968, 66–70). The success of these actions was, however, limited, among other reasons due to the potential receiving countries’ strict immigration quotas and their reluctance to receive Jewish immigrants.

Although the colonial question, as mentioned, first appeared as an emigration question in Poland, with time the focus of arguments shifted from purely demographic to economic. As the consequences of the global economic crisis became more acute, and Poland was, in

particular, hit hard, overseas expansion was given as a remedy. Poland's economic growth, it was argued, was severely hampered, because it did not have access to raw materials and export markets, and such access was jealously guarded by the Western powers. Senator Jan Dębski, one of the leaders of the LMiK, asked in an article in *Morze* in 1937:

Should the world, which is full of natural resources, remain stuck in the situation in which some countries, "satiated" with resources, destroy their supplies to prevent price decrease, while other nations, "hungry" and overpopulated, lacking space and natural resources, cannot provide their growing young generations with work and humane living conditions, they cannot direct their surplus population to cities, to industry and trade, because of lack of resources, capitals and sales markets, because these nations have been deprived of the possibility to send their surplus population to free, almost uninhabited lands in other parts of the world (Dębski 1937, 1).

Satiated nations were first and foremost the colonial empires of Western Europe: Great Britain and France, but also the United States. They had unrestrained access to both resources and export markets, enough territory for their populations – in some cases, like the USA, more territory than they could themselves make use of. Therefore, they had no problem with developing their industries, selling the goods they produced, and no problem of overpopulation, which was one of the most pressing problems for the hungry nations, such as Poland. In the rhetoric of "hungry" and "satiated" nations, the earlier discussed problem of overpopulation combines with the issues of access to resources and export markets, to further drive home the argument of global inequalities that were identified as sources of the world's economic and political crises. Poland's industrialization, for example, could not proceed at full speed because of this inequality: "Many of our industries today work at the level of 40, or even 30 percent of their capacity," an author in *Morze* pointed out, "and this is because these industries, for example textiles, haberdashery, ceramics, iron, and enamel production (not to mention mining and metallurgy), have no sufficient sales markets. (...) Europe is overcrowded. We should, therefore, go beyond" (R. 1933, 38).

This going beyond Europe could take several forms. One was the already discussed organized settlement in South America. Another was renegotiation of the mandate system, to the effect that Poland should acquire around 10 percent of the former German colonies – based on an argument that the Polish state was the German Empire's successor state, and as such had the right not only to its territories in Europe, but also to an equal proportion of its overseas

territories (Głuchowski December 1928, 27). Furthermore, the LMiK postulated that the Polish government should negotiate with colonial powers, such as Portugal and France, to acquire rights for Poles to settle in their colonies, Angola and Madagascar. Finally, another project pursued by the League in the 1930s was cooperation with the government of Liberia, an independent state in Africa. In April 1934, a representative of the League, Janusz Makarczyk, signed an economic agreement with the Liberian government.³

None of these projects, however, brought much success. The reasons were mainly lack of capital and know-how regarding conditions on the ground, and unsuitability – despite praises sung by Głuchowski and others – of the “settler material”: emigrants often turned out to be adventurers and economic migrants rather than hard-working pioneers. There was also the hostility of the existing colonial powers, not willing to allow newcomers to diminish what they considered their spheres of influence (e.g. the USA and Great Britain in Liberia) or sensitive about their position in the colonies (e.g. Portugal in Angola). This was exacerbated by the Polish settlers’ and colonial activists’ insensitivity to local sensibilities, for example growing national sentiments (e.g. in Brazil).

4. Catching up and escaping

The quest for colonies can also be understood in terms of a modernizing project, catching up with the rest of the Western world. It was often pointed out that, because of the foreign domination over Poland in the nineteenth century, the country lagged in the scramble for colonies, but that was all the greater reason to pursue the subject. In Tadeusz Białas’s interpretation, the colonial slogans “were an expression of certain political concepts of the ruling camp, which were to determine Poland’s place in post-Locarno Europe, and following first of all from the growing conviction of Poland’s power position, a conviction that Poland was already an equal subject in the European relations” (Białas 1983, 268). In the realities of the 1930s, it was considered “natural” that a European nation had colonies – therefore, a country striving to join this prestigious club, to advance from the margins of Europe to its core, should acquire colonies too.

The position occupied by countries of the European margin in the colonial system is an interesting one. By “margin” I understand, in this instance, European countries which not only

³ For more detailed accounts of Polish actions in South America and Africa see Jarnecki 2006, 2010, 2014; Puchalski 2017, 2019.

did not acquire overseas colonies in the nineteenth century but were themselves dominated by more powerful countries. To this group belong most Eastern European countries, but also, for example, some Nordic ones, like Finland and Iceland, as well as Ireland. Characteristic of this margin is the eagerness to be accepted as equal to Western European powers, and, at the same time, to not to be grouped together with the non-European – the “eternal imprisonment in the logic of catching up and escaping,” to use Jan Sowa’s phrase (Sowa 2011, 18).⁴ Interwar Poland, therefore, was to be placed on the map of colonial endeavors as a modern country, part of the European core, by virtue of its policies and economic connections, exploration, and research. The quest for colonies was often phrased by the LMiK as a step on the way towards *Polska mocarstwowa* – Poland as a power, the next one after regaining independence and access to the sea (e.g. Głuchowski March 1928, 32).

One of the recurring themes in LMiK’s publications on colonial topics were reports about the existing colonial powers and their colonial policies. Among these powers, Germany occupied a special place (e.g. Łyp 1934; Jeziorański 1937). As already mentioned, a claim was made that Poland was owed parts of former German colonies placed under the international mandate after the First World War. This claim was backed by arguments of compensation for war losses, and especially the fact that Poland was German Empire’s successor state, and Polish citizens had contributed to acquiring and keeping these colonies while Poland was still (partially) under the German rule: by paying taxes, service in police and military forces, etc. (Kowalski 2010, 99–100). Kazimierz Głuchowski calculated that Poland should be given around 300,000 km² of the former German colonies because the Polish territory and population had formed around 1/10 of the territory and population of the former German Empire (e.g. Głuchowski December 1928, 27). Germany was, in fact, the main reference point of the interwar Polish maritime and colonial discourse, and it can be argued that the colonial ambitions expressed in Poland at that time were directed first and foremost against Germany. Tadeusz Białas, for example, quotes the President of LMiK, General Orlicz-Dreszler, explaining that the change of the League’s name to include the adjective “colonial” was, first of all, a political gesture in this context:

It is a political issue of great importance. Poland would not be practicing colonialism; however, it cannot agree with Germany receiving its territories from before the First World War, which it lost according to the Versailles Treaty. The colonial name and various

⁴ See also Grzechnik 2019.

connected declarations are a political maneuver, allowing the proper agents to torpedo the expansive claims of the growing Nazism. By laying Polish claims to the former German colonies, LMiK vastly hinders the German Colonial Association's work on the international arena (Białas 1983, 28).

With this in mind, the League closely observed the German colonial policies and propaganda, in particular those which they thought were aiming at recovering former colonies. A recurring theme in the time leading up to 1931 was, for example, that the mandate system would be renegotiated that year, therefore Poland should observe the international discussions closely and present its claim when the time comes (Rozwadowski 1929, 22 as well as numerous other articles in *Morze* in the late 1920s and early 1930s). It is hard to say where the conviction about the importance of this particular year came from – in fact, no revision of the mandate system ever took place, either in 1931 or at any other time until the outbreak of the Second World War. Consequently, Poland did not officially take up the matter of mandate revision on the international forum. Although a claim to a share of the overseas colonies was put before the League of Nations by Polish representatives in 1936, it was framed in the context of overpopulation and access to resources.

The process of mentally mapping Poland as equal to Western Europeans also had its other side: it meant positioning oneself in relation to the colonized peoples. An interesting feature of the Polish colonial program was that many of its propagators had never been overseas. Rather than from first-hand knowledge of the economic or political conditions in the potential colonies, or interest or fascination with the extra-European cultures in themselves, the colonial program was one based on the local, European context. To an average citizen, and even to an average member of LMiK, African and American cultures among which the territories for colonization were supposed to be acquired, were not only geographically distant but also completely unknown. It is no wonder, then, that one of the tasks of the LMiK and its publications, especially the popular ones like *Morze* and *Szkwał*, as well as lectures, holidays and other forms of propaganda, was to familiarize readers with extra-European cultures. As art historian Małgorzata Omilanowska pointed out, the LMiK's articles, reportage and photographs, for all their Euro-centric bias, had at least some educational dimension: for many in their audiences, it was the first time they learned anything about the wider world at all (Omilanowska 2012, 10).

Although Poland had some experienced and popular travel writers, such as Arkady Fiedler, Jerzy Giżycki and Mieczysław Lepecki, and the LMiK sometimes cooperated with them

(especially Lepecki), it was always eager to publish texts by any Poles who had travelled overseas (and occasionally also translations of texts by foreigners): former diplomats, sailors, settlers. These took different forms: memoirs, shorter and longer reports, letters, photographs. They displayed various levels of understanding of foreign cultures: from patronizingly, and even aggressively, reproducing common stereotypes of, for example, Africans as lazy and simple-minded, to a genuine interest in foreign peoples and their culture. In general, however, having had limited experience of the non-European, Poles who went overseas took over many of the stereotypes and ways of thinking from their Western neighbors – ways which had already permeated the European culture for some time. They could easily be downloaded, to use Christoph Kamissek's and Jonas Kreienbaum's term, from the "imperial cloud" (Kamissek and Kreienbaum 2016). Travel accounts, as discussed for example by Mary Louise Pratt, help construct and maintain colonial orders, they "encode and legitimate the aspirations of economic expansion and empire" (Pratt 1995, 5). The popular Polish publications about Africa, America and (to a lesser extent) Asia were not only meant to educate and inform, but they also constructed certain hierarchies, in which their authors and readers, and their culture, were placed in relation to those that were the object of description in these publications.

The same went for production of research: the European colonial endeavor was based not only on military and economic power but also it was supported by discursive practices and European science. By describing and ordering the world in the name of science, European botanists, geographers, and ethnographers, at the same time ascribed it with hierarchies and center-periphery relations (Pratt 1995, 15–37; Vuorela 2009, 26–28; Said 1979, 31 ff). Also in this respect, the LMiK strove to leave a distinctively Polish mark. As pointed out by Anna Nadolska-Styczyńska, the beginning of the twentieth century was not a good time for Polish anthropological research: Polish institutions lacked funds, and scholars who did decide to conduct such research, often chose better funded and better-connected institutions abroad (Nadolska-Styczyńska 2005, 16–17). One of the results was the aforementioned lack of knowledge about the non-European world. The LMiK, understanding the importance of research conducted in designated institutions, did not limit itself to popular, mobilizing, and propaganda activities. Still as the Maritime and River League, it inspired the creation of an Institute for Emigration and Colonization Research in November 1926, formally on behalf of an organization called the Polish Emigration Association. In 1927, the institute was renamed the Emigration and Colonial Research Institute. In 1931, it was closed down, its functions were taken over by LMiK's Migration and Colonial Study Centre, and later (in 1937) by its Research Institute, established at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow (Kowalski 2010, 50; Borkowska

2007, 22). On several Polish universities (Cracow, Lviv, Poznań, Warsaw) studies in ethnology, ethnography and anthropology were introduced, and chairs of tropical agriculture and medicine set up (Kowalski 2010, 48–49). Furthermore, an Institute of Maritime and Tropical Hygiene was founded on June 28, 1939, in Gdynia (functioning until today, as the Interdepartmental Institute of Maritime and Tropical Medicine, part of Medical University of Gdańsk).

Among the LMiK's publications addressed to different types of audiences, there were those for the scientific community – among them the quarterly *Sprawy morskie i kolonialne* (Maritime and colonial matters), published between 1934 and 1939. In its first volume, the editors outlined its tasks: to be a forum for activists for rebuilding Poland as a maritime country; to describe Poland's maritime past, the work of maritime and colonial activists, explorers, researchers, travelers etc.; to propagate the knowledge about tasks and challenges for Poland to become a truly maritime country; to analyze and describe other countries' maritime and colonial policies (“Od Redakcji” 1934, 5–6). In 1938, furthermore, one volume of *Rocznik Morski i Kolonialny* (Sea and Colonial Yearbook) was published, which mostly contained statistics. The Emigration and Colonial Research Institute also had its publication, *Kwartalnik Naukowego Instytutu Emigracyjnego i Kolonialnego* (Quarterly of the Emigration and Colonial Research Institute).

Despite the Polish relative scarcity of traditions of exploration and research, and perhaps exactly because of that, the LMiK and other institutions made a point of educating the public about past Polish explorers. Stanisław Zieliński compiled an encyclopedia of Polish “travelers, discoverers, conquerors, explorers, emigrants – diarists, activists and writers” (Zieliński 1933), which, by including not only actual explorers and researchers, but also virtually every somewhat known Pole who had travelled overseas and written about it, since the Middle Ages until the time of the publication, was to convey an idea of Poles as a nation with considerable traditions to fall back on. Lengthy excerpts from the encyclopedia were printed in *Morze* throughout 1931 and 1932.

Perhaps the most celebrated of these past travelers was Stefan Szolc-Rogoziński (1861–96), the explorer of Cameroon. He was a member of the Royal Geographical Society in London and the founder of the National Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw. Therefore, he had opportunities both to follow developments in European science and to disseminate his research (Rhode 2013, 29–34). LMiK celebrated his achievements in the context of the colonial project, and especially his nationality was underlined as evidence of the nation's previous efforts. This is how Zieliński phrased it in his encyclopedia:

Rogoziński did not care only for the honor of enriching scientific output, but for this output to be named as Polish, and last for posterity as an achievement of a Polish scientific expedition. The guiding principle in this endeavor was independent Poland, discovering and acquiring a piece of African land for an own, independent [of other powers] colony. Rogoziński's expedition was the only one led by the Polish national thought. That is its paramount importance. At the time when the nation was deprived of the sea, deprived of its own state and government, Rogoziński attempted to – despite this severe lack – acquire a colony for Poland (Zieliński 1933, 417).

Because of his main area of interest being Cameroon, Rogoziński was mostly mentioned when discussing the revising of the mandate system and the postulates of demanding former German colonies. The 300,000 km² of former German overseas empire that the LMiK postulated should be Poland's share, were to be found exactly in Cameroon, and Rogoziński's exploration there was given as one of the main reasons. In 1932, LMiK organized celebrations on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Rogoziński's expedition (launched on December 13, 1882), in which its only surviving member, Leopold Janikowski (1855–1942), participated. *Morze* featured a series of articles about the expedition, a biographical note about Janikowski (Zieliński 1932), and an article about the contemporary political situation in the area (presented as a Polish-English war against Germany) (Doliwa 1932). In 1931, it also published Janikowski's account of the expedition.

Recalling the past Polish – or associated with Poland, as the concept of nationality was rather vague for pre-modern times, and to a certain extent in the period of partitions in the nineteenth century – travelers, adventurers and explorers, such as Rogoziński, served not only to bring the extra-European world closer to the Polish readers and familiarise them with it. Similarly as in the case of the popular travel reports, it was also a legitimizing tool for justifying present colonial aspirations by pointing out the Polish presence overseas in the previous centuries, and at the onset of the time of high colonialism. This can be concluded, for example from an article in a daily *Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny* about “Poles on the world's trails”:

It should be reminded that Poles were among the first on the wide and far ocean waters, on the vast colonial lands. (...) Let the long list of Polish names, which are listed below, give testimony to the fact that Poland has the rightful claim to its share in the colonies,

because it put so much into their attainment and development – much effort, blood and service (*Ilustrowany Kuryer Codzienny* 1938, 4).

Another example of the instrumental use of a “big” name in LMiK’s arguments was the writer Joseph Conrad – Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski (1857–1924). It has to be said, however, that only a handful of mentions about him appeared in the LMiK’s publications throughout its existence, and they never cited his critique of the colonial system. Works such as *Heart of Darkness* were never mentioned, Conrad was celebrated as “the world’s most recognized writer of the sea” (Stecki 1926, 8) and an author who “not only felt but also thought in Polish” (Ares 1928, 6). These two facts – Conrad being Polish and an acclaimed maritime writer – were to prove something that the LMiK was especially keen to prove: that the Polish nation had maritime traditions. This was by no means an obvious thing. Poles had historically been a nation of landlubbers, to the extent that the Polish language lacked maritime vocabulary, posing a serious problem to Polish translators of Conrad’s work (Adamowicz-Pośpiech 2013, 124–32). As much as his writings remained foreign on the level of language – maritime terminology and jargon which translations attempted to render for the Polish readers did not resonate with their culture in the way that the original English ones did for the British – they were supposed to become close to the Polish heart on the level of the underlining ideas:

Conrad’s individuality could not be other than it was, it could not be non-Polish. He does not manifest it. But his treatment of types, their psychological depth, their philosophy, the way of presenting phenomena of life – this is all Polish – thoroughly Polish. And the fact that his people – they are people without Motherland – they wander around the world like ships on the sea (Ares 1928, 6).

The League had been Maritime before it was Colonial, the latter was to be the natural extension of the former. According to its vision, Poland was to be transformed from a nation of peasants and farmers into the nation of seafarers. This was not merely a question of changing the occupational structure, but a major shift in the national psyche. It followed from the idea of land and sea cultures, as developed for example by a research institution contemporary to the LMiK called the Baltic Institute.⁵ Land cultures, historian Franciszek Bujak, argued in one of the Institute’s lectures, were “cultural cripples,” whose “inescapable fate was dependence and

⁵ On the Baltic Institute’s history and research see Grzechnik 2012, 31–75.

poverty.” Sea cultures, by contrast, were cultures of movement: dynamic, innovative, enterprising, confident, and patriotic (Bujak 1934). The effort to develop such maritime attitude in interwar Poland was huge, on the part of institutions such as the Baltic Institute, the LMiK, and others, including state-led propaganda of the costly investment into building of the seaport in Gdynia. The sea and Gdynia on its coast were to become Poland’s window to the world – according to a popular metaphor – through which Poles were to become neighbors with the whole world. Colonial expansion overseas was to enable Poland’s participation in global trade, gaining access to natural resources and export markets, which would be an engine for the development of industries at home and evolution of the national character. As Michał Pankiewicz wrote in *Morze* after the death of LMiK’s director General Orlicz-Dreszer, in his obituary that was also to serve as his ideological testament, overseas expansion was

to serve not only to destroy proverbial Polish poverty, to build general welfare, but most of all to fight Polish dawdling, and to reforge the Polish psyche in the fire of competition with the world’s most powerful nations. General Orlicz-Dreszer dreamt about a new, pioneering type of Pole, conqueror of seas and oceans, mosquitos and malaria, dreamt about Pole building bridges, taming waterfalls and carrying high the banner in the name of Poland (Pankiewicz 1936, 17).

5. Conclusions

Lack of an actual colonial empire is not enough to assume an “outsider status”: as the example of LMiK and its actions shows, European colonialism had wider implications than just relations between colonial powers and their colonies. LMiK’s colonialism as an aspiration emerged as a space of expectations based on the circulation of ideas. These were, first, ideas about the Polish nation itself, its civilizational advancement from a passive people on Europe’s margin to “conquerors of seas and oceans” who were ready to take their rightful place under the sun. Second, they were ideas which aimed to produce, using grand rhetoric, an equal place for Poland among the European states, especially in relation to Germany. Third, they were racial and social ideas reinforcing the European colonial expansion, which were adopted and reproduced in Poland’s own popular and research literature, and by means of which Poland’s place not only in relation to European neighbors but also to the non-European world was to be secured.

The LMiK could thus offer if not actual remedies to the numerous economic and social problems that interwar Poland faced, at least useful narratives to help alleviate them. This colonialism as aspiration was made possible by the fact that European colonialism was a system in which all European nations and actors, not only colonial powers, were implicated and could attempt to use as a means to change their position in global hierarchies, and as an instrument of their transformation.

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