

## Postkolonializm wschodnio- i zachodniosłowiański

### Slavic but not Russian: invisible and mute

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**Słowa kluczowe:** slawistyka amerykańska, studia postkolonialne, Studia środkowo-wschodnioeuropejskie, polityka marginalizowania, dominacja studiów rosyjskich i sowietologicznych w Ameryce

**Key words:** Slavic Studies in America, postcolonial studies, Central and Eastern European Studies, politics of invisibility, domination of Russian and Sovietology Studies

**Abstrakt:** Ewa M. Thompson. SŁOWIAŃSKI, ALE NIE ROSYJSKI: NIEWIDZIALNY I MILCZĄCY. „PORÓWNANIA” 16 (2015). T. XVI. S. 9–18. ISSN 1733-165X. Referat stawia tezę, że w slawistyce amerykańskiej (mowa nie tylko o filologii, ale również o historii, socjologii i politologii), nierosyjskie narody i państwa słowiańskie są jedynie śladowo obecne. Przejawia się to m.in. w nikłej ilości naukowców, zajmujących się niegermańską Europą Środkową i Wschodnią; administracyjnym faworyzowaniem tych naukowców, którzy zajmują się wyłącznie Rosją; ukierunkowaniem grantów i stypendiów głównie w stronę studiów rosyjskich i sowieckich; brakiem recenzji (w czołowych pismach slawistycznych) książek kluczowych dla wizerunku nierosyjskich słowiańskich narodów oraz powielaniem w dyskursie naukowym rosyjskich lub sowieckich interpretacji wydarzeń historycznych w Europie Wschodniej i Środkowej.

**Abstract:** Ewa M. Thompson. SLAVIC BUT NOT RUSSIAN: INVISIBLE AND MUTE. “PORÓWNANIA” 16 (2015). Vol. XVI. P. 9–18. ISSN 1733-165X. The paper argues that the non-Russian Slavic Studies at American universities exist only virtually. The number of non-Russian Slavic specialists is pitifully small and incommensurate with East Central Europe’s strategic location and cultural identity, while the generally accepted format of university hiring and firing perpetuates this state of affairs. Among characteristic instances is affirmative action concerning certain narrow areas of study, side by side with delayed action (or no action at all) in non-Germanic Central and Eastern European Studies; a pattern of not reviewing in professional journals books

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of key importance to non-Russian Slavic identity; and acceptance of erroneous presentation of facts in Russian sources concerning non-Russian Slavic history. The regularity with which these patterns of action or inaction occur calls for a review of relevant academic practices.

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In 1952 Ralph Ellison published a novel titled *Invisible Man*. Its first-person narrator records the attitudes of America's white citizens toward America's blacks before the 1960s civil rights movement. He suggests that blacks were invisible, in the sense that their emotional states, indeed their humanity, were hardly ever noticed by whites. Blacks were "over there" and "over there" was territory that fell beyond the perception range of the whites. Ellison sums it all up: "Behold! A walking zombie! Already he has learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity. He's invisible... The mechanical man!" (Ellison 92).

Few contemporary academics have read this book, yet I recommend it warmly not only for its artistic value (it is probably the best novel ever written on the fate of blacks in America before the civil rights movement), but also for its original and precise conveyance of what it means to be "invisible" – that is to say, to be excluded, to be treated as air, as a marginal aspect of society not worthy of serious attention. It is also one of the most persuasive and damning critiques of Marxism as practiced by the Left on the American blacks. However, my goal here is not to dwell on this, but rather to point out similarities between the notion of dispossession adumbrated by Ellison with regard to blacks and dispossession, political and scholarly, that non-Russian Slavs in America experience in circles that supposedly were created to facilitate their access to the scholarly world's attention. **In American academic scholarship non-Russian Slavic studies partake of the politics of invisibility.** This invisibility projects onto Slavic studies in other English-speaking countries. In so dealing with the non-Russian Slavic cultural space, we have also reinforced the invisibility of Slavic minorities in this country. These are two aspects of the same problem: a lack of coordinated presence of the various Slavic narratives in America's scholarly discourse, **and** the absence of Slavic minorities in American political life. To borrow from sociologist Tomasz Zarycki, "the cultural reductionism in the images of Central Europe... may be seen as a tool of ... symbolic domination" (Zarycki 44).

Among these non-Russian Slavs in America, Poles are by far the largest group numbering 10 million. The 2010 Federal Census places them as number eight on the list of the largest ancestries in the United States (the English are number five)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race\\_and\\_ethnicity\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States#Analysis\\_by\\_2010\\_Federal\\_Population\\_Census](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race_and_ethnicity_in_the_United_States#Analysis_by_2010_Federal_Population_Census)>

Ukrainians are second-largest, with under one million Ukrainian-Americans listed. Yet Americans of Polish ancestry are hardly ever mentioned as a group in the media. Newspapers do not publish articles about Polish customs, historical celebrations, festivals, or achieving families and individuals, as is the case with virtually all other recognizable ethnic groups in America. The difficulties of adjustment that are so often foregrounded with regard to immigrants coming from diverse corners of the world are hardly ever discussed when it comes to Poles. The big Solidarity immigration in the 1980s and '90s that brought to America thousands of engineers and scholars (Poland was under martial law then and educated people were leaving en masse) has hardly been noticed by the major media. These Poles and their descendants partake of the condition of invisibility together with the descendants of other Polish migratory waves in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

As one surveys Slavic Departments at American universities, or conferences and journals dedicated to European affairs, it becomes clear that Slavic studies in America mean Russian studies. The number of doctoral dissertations on non-Russian literary subjects leans toward a single digit – and that comprises not only Polish studies but also Ukrainian, Czech, Bulgarian, Croatian, Belarusian, Serbian literatures and cultures. The most common explanation is Russia's importance and its cultural and historical achievements: the richness of the Moscow and St. Petersburg museums, the Bolshoi Theater, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, not to speak of some 1000+ nuclear warheads reminding us that might usually makes right. But concentration on Russian studies inevitably means favoring the Russian point of view on nations bordering on Russia. Many persons teaching Russian subjects at American universities are Russian, and if you think this fact does not influence the angle of vision on things Eastern European, I have a Brooklyn Bridge to sell... The numerous fellowships and grants for the study and travel in Russia offered by various governmental and non-governmental institutions complete the picture. These fellowships have comfortably accommodated themselves within the industry of welcoming foreigners that existed in the Soviet Union and has been taken over by the post-communist establishment in Russia. In this way, American perception of the history of Eastern and Central Europe is inevitably slanted to reflect Russian interests.

Such instruments and pathways are hard to find as concerns other Slavic nations. At first, this statement may seem contestable: numerically speaking, there is an approximate parity between FLAS fellowship<sup>3</sup> given to Russian and non-Russian Slavic majors. But let us not forget that the non-Russian pool has to be further split into at least seven languages – more if we include non-Slavic Eastern European languages such as Hungarian or Estonian.

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<sup>3</sup> Foreign Language and Area Studies Program maintained by the U.S. Department of Education (<<http://www2.ed.gov/program/iegpsflasf/ondex.html>>).

As sociologists point out, **frequent appearances of an issue in the public space legitimizes it** (Zarycki 44). The legitimization of gay and lesbian lifestyles has largely occurred because of their presence in university scholarship and later in popular press. The opposite is also true: the absence of a certain topic in academic discourse delegitimizes it. And there are few narratives that are less frequently articulated in academia than say Ukrainian or Polish literature and identity, Belarusian history or, to quote a recent Oxford conference, “defining the contours of political legitimacy in Central Europe”<sup>4</sup>. The fact that non-Russian Slavic narratives are so seldom mentioned in the public square with a measure of respect makes them appear insignificant, minor, marginal, low prestige, invisible to the naked eye. Such giants of nineteenth-century novel as Henryk Sienkiewicz, Władysław Reymont, Bolesław Prus, or Eliza Orzeszkowa might as well be aliens, so far as mainstream professors of literature in this country are concerned. Or compare Pushkin to Taras Shevchenko. While books on the trivial aspects of Pushkin’s poetry and life can be counted by the dozen, a silently accepted opinion about Shevchenko is that, well, he has little to say to contemporary readers, because he represents “local color” of interest to no one but ethnic Ukrainians. Over the years the major media have tried to build up ethnic pride in African Americans by presenting attractive aspects of the African heritage, but Polish or Ukrainian children can only count on their ethnic ghettos. Needless to say, ghetto conditions are not the most propitious tool to build up such pride.

Few educated people know much about the European state that existed for four centuries and was the largest in Europe (excluding Muscovy): the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1386–1795) that comprised not only Poland and Lithuania, but also Ukraine and Belarus. Owing to the existence of this state Ukrainians and Belarusians today differ significantly from Russians in their political ambitions. This huge state was defeated and partitioned by its expansive neighbors just a few years before the nineteenth century began. A secret clause to the final partition (1795) stated that “it is necessary” to remove from European discourse all words and phrases reminding the world that the Polish Kingdom has ever existed (Zamoyski 5). Aren’t we by any chance still paying homage to this clause?

It could be argued that an adequate number of articles and books have been written that deal with the narratives of nations between Germany and Russia. But I am not interested in how many *lines* of text should be assigned to such and such history and culture. It is not a question of numbers but rather of pushing these ethnicities and cultures into a ghetto frequented mostly by heritage speakers

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<sup>4</sup> The title of an Oxford conference held in 2002 (<<http://users.ox.ac.uk/~oaces/conference/programme.html>>).

somewhat ashamed of their hyphenated identity. The lack of a holistic picture, an inability of the average educated person to connect the dots between the various elements of non-Russian Slavic histories, is what I am trying to foreground. One observes, for instance, that editors of Slavic journals send books about Czech culture to persons of Czech background; this is also true of Polish or Ukrainian books: let them stew in their nationalistic sauce! Add to this the fact that the key books concerning these cultures, literatures, and histories often go unreviewed<sup>5</sup>, and you get a caricature of a culture rather than its outline. Professor Mieczysław Biskupski's book on Hollywood's treatment of Poles in World War II for instance, is characterized by a remarkably objective tone and excellent documentation, and it should have initiated a discussion that should have spilled into the major media; nothing of that kind has happened, largely because Slavic scholarship chose to ignore this book.

Next to ignoring books that are of crucial importance to the emergence of a conversation about non-Russian Slavs is viewing them as disconnected fractions. The cultural narrative of any community has to have coherence in order to become a narrative and not a collection of disjointed vignettes. Historical continuity has consequences, and an assertion of these consequences is crucial if a coherent image of a culture is to emerge among scholars and, later, in society. Having been part of the American community of Slavists for several decades, I know that it treats these non-Russian Slavs as annoying additions to doctoral studies in Russian. American Slavists remember the names of some writers or events related to these non-Russian nations, but are not able to accommodate this knowledge in a deeper channel of interpretation and reflection. They preserve some names in memory as remnants of courses in Eastern European cultures they had to take as graduate students. With relatively few exceptions, a typical American Slavist (i.e., a professor who teaches Russian subjects at a university) has not deepened his/her post-graduate knowledge in this field or indeed reflected on it in any way. For instance, who has heard of, or studied, the remarkable group of people associated with the portal <Rebelya.pl> or the quarterly *Pressje* in contemporary Poland? We are so used to the suggestion that ideas worth learning about do not come from non-Germanic Central Europe that we routinely dismiss information about creative doings in that part of the world.

The situation being so, books about Eastern and Central Europe that tend to be reviewed in Slavic scholarly journals likewise tend to be fragmentary and marginal, such as the recently reviewed in *Slavic Review* *Starring Madame Modjeska: On Tour in Poland and America*. To review such a book virtually no knowledge of Central

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<sup>5</sup> E.g., neither the FIRST edition of Jan Tomasz Gross's *Revolution from Abroad* nor Mieczysław Biskupski's *Hollywood's War with Poland* have been reviewed in *Slavic Review*, the foremost Slavic journal in this country. Similarly, Kirstin Kopp's *Germany's Wild East* has passed almost unnoticed.

Europe is required, yet the review counts as “pertaining to Central Europe” and part of the “quota” for Central Europe. Or consider *Between the Devil and the Host: Imagining Witchcraft in Early Modern Poland*, also recently reviewed in the same journal (*Slavic Review* 142). In the absence of a wholistic image of Polish culture among American Slavists, foregrounding such books amounts to a distortion of that culture. If a book about witchcraft in early modern England were written and reviewed, it would be interpreted in the light of the thousands of books on English culture that an educated person absorbs by social osmosis without even reading them all. Therefore, the addition of the witchcraft element would be of feather-weight importance. In the case of a culture that is virtually unknown, such a book weighs a ton and leads to an impression that in Poland witchcraft must have played a n unusually important role, perhaps all the way into the twentieth century. Especially that, as I said earlier, books crucial to the cultural history of Poland often pass unreviewed. A picture thereby created is that of the bits and pieces of cloth incoherently thrown onto a heap, without any organizing principle, thus suggesting that the nation in question has never created a sensible pattern, the pattern that “may contain some lessons of universal portent”, as Czeslaw Milosz once remarked with regard to Polish literature (Milosz XV). Upon reading such books and reviews one feels reinforced in one’s belief that the world they deal with is likewise marginal, that they are small voices in the sea of European trends that originated in the European empires.

Such is my interpretation of what has been transpiring in American Slavic Studies and the general media over the last several decades. I realize that the invisibility which I have postulated may not be easily noticeable if one has had little to do with Eastern/Central Europe and is not of the non-Russian Slavic background (as I am). Indeed, I can think of many that would charge me with confabulation. Yet the issue exists and I strongly feel that I am articulating uncomfortable truths. It would take a book to fully document what I am trying to adumbrate in this brief essay. The situation is indeed similar to the one Ellison describes. Any kind of discrimination usually passes unnoticed except for some accidental slippage that brings it unexpectedly into the public’s attention. Here is one case of such slippage that I witnessed personally as a participant in the promotion process.

Some time ago a certain American university was engaged in an evaluation of a faculty member specializing in Polish literature. The evaluation was a routine procedure before promotion, but it ended in firing the said faculty member in spite of half a dozen positive letters the university solicited and obtained from scholars across the United States and Canada including myself. The individual in question decided to challenge the promotion committee. As a result of legal proceedings, the following “confidential” statement penned by one of this person’s senior colleagues came to light:

The field of Polish language and literature studies in the U.S. is a small, intimate field with only a handful of faculty, mostly of Polish origin, representing it. Everyone knows everyone else, and all are hesitant to “hurt” each other lest they hurt the field itself. *Polish culture is a high context, patronage culture*, so this is a natural response [italics are mine – E.T.]<sup>6</sup>.

The swirl of prejudice, cynicism, and attempt at denigration present in this statement may fall below the radar screens of those uninterested in the issue, but upon attentive reading the author’s bigoted intentions leave no doubt. If you are not convinced, please replace the word “Polish” by “African American”. The author sought justification for ignoring the positive letters solicited and obtained by the promotion committee in a normal academic process. He/she wrapped his prejudice in academic jargon, so that legally speaking, he/she would not be charged with bigotry but appear merely to dryly state the facts. But such a presentation of “facts” would not be tolerated with regard to blacks today; why should it pass for a convincing argument with regard to another minority?

Such cases suggest that the invisibility may have its source in discrimination. With regard to non-Russian Slavic Studies, the scholarly community of American Slavists resembles American society before the civil rights movement, when an average white suburbanite did not really see what blacks were complaining about. After all, they had their own ghettos where they were perfectly free to sing their spirituals and eat their soul food. And these were very similar to the ghettos in which Slavic minorities in this country have functioned to this day. But blacks had powerful sponsors, whereas no similar force has risen to point out bigotry in the scholarly world with regard to the Slavs. For about thirty years now, Harvard University has allegedly been unable to find an appropriate *tenured* occupier of the Jurzykowski Chair in Polish Literature. We are told that neither in the United States where Polish PhDs have difficulties finding jobs in their specialty, nor in Poland that has dozens of outstanding and exciting scholars in Polish literature, is there a person capable and worthy of occupying the Jurzykowski chair at Harvard. The subtext to this is that Poles are simply incapable of producing first-rate scholars, and perhaps this Chair should be scrapped to begin with, leaving the Polish minority in this country celebrating their *kielbasa-and-cabbage* feasts in a ghetto-like atmosphere. It appears that with regard to Polish studies, the Harvard administration has not displayed the sense of social responsibility of the kind that made Harvard recruiters search for and employ a number of black professors, to the advantage of the black minority in this country. Multiply it by several dozen universities that should have developed strong Central European Studies programs, and you will realize that the policy with regard to Central and Eastern Eu-

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<sup>6</sup> This written opinion was included in the promotion materials, part of which I was able to peruse.

ropean Studies has been directly the opposite of the policy toward black studies. The legitimization of black history and literature occurred because universities took it upon themselves to recruit, train, and employ individuals charged with foregrounding the black narrative in the prestige-generating university milieu. The opposite movement can be observed with regard to Polish and other Central and Eastern European literatures and histories<sup>7</sup>.

The condition of invisibility of the non-Russian Slavic minorities in this country and of their heritage is reinforced by the fragmented and often inaccurate information about Central Europe that reaches American Slavists via Russian sources. Here are a few examples of this process. They come from Nikolai Riasanovsky's *History of Russia* that is now in its eighth edition. While the editorial pages of consecutive editions say that the volume has been revised, the erroneous information about Central and Eastern Europe remains intact. From Riasanovsky's volume we learn that Russia's chronological history consists of "apanage, Kievan, Muscovite, Imperial, and Soviet". Three generations of American Slavists learned the history of Russia from Riasanovsky, and this kind of taxonomy domesticated itself in the Slavists' minds and has been projected onto Eastern and Central European history, elbowing out anything that does not fit the pattern, most of all Ukraine. Ukraine is thus perceived as an ancient province of Russia which, under the influence of its western neighbor, began to pretend that it is a separate nationality. In historical discussions inside Russia Poland is frequently blamed for dividing the allegedly Russian lands by disseminating in them the poison of Western epistemology. Reading Riasanovsky, you would never guess that Ukrainians question this kind of taxonomy, pointing out that western Ukraine got under Moscow's tutelage only after World War II. Before that, it had never been ruled by Moscow.

Another example. In 1831, the Stefan Batory University in Russian-occupied Vilnius was closed and replaced by a Russian institution – in another city. Before the retaliatory closing the Batory University – called *Akademia Wileńska*, or *Szkoła Główna*, by its students and professoriate – was the largest university in the Russian empire, far surpassing the universities in Moscow or St. Petersburg in the quality of its faculty, the vigor of its intellectual life, and number students. In 1830 the university had 1,322 students, or more than Oxford University at that time and many times more than the universities in Moscow and Petersburg. From Riasanovsky's *History of Russia* however one learns that Alexander I "transformed the *Szkoła Główna* in Vilna into a university". Riasanovsky does not disclose that it had already been a university since King Stefan Batory founded it in 1579. We are also told that "following a traditional European pattern, Russian universities enjoyed

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<sup>7</sup> The 2015 search resulted in the hiring of another untenured assistant professor. The previous untenured assistant professor, Joanna Niżyńska, was let go several years ago.

a broad measure of autonomy". This likewise is incorrect: one year after the re-naming mentioned by Riasanovsky, "following the Polish rebellion, the Polish University of Vilna [Vilnius] was closed, and in 1833 a Russian university was opened in Kiev instead". Riasanovsky does not inform the reader that this Russian university had only 62 students, as opposed to Vilnius's 1,322; the number increased to 267 in 1838, to be halved a year later when all persons of Polish background were expelled (Thompson 189-190).

Such inaccuracies, when proffered in large numbers, distort our vision of what actually happened in Eastern Europe, and make it impossible to correctly assess the present. They spill over into the popular media and secondary education.

Let me mention some reasons why repositioning of our attention to Central and Eastern Europe should even be considered. First, as St. Augustine said, "Justice being taken away, then, what are kingdoms but great robberies? For what are robberies themselves, but little kingdoms?" (St. Augustine 112) Dismissing fairness in areas for which we are partly responsible is not a good idea.

But quite apart from a sense of proportion and justice, the understanding of Central and Eastern Europe may be essential to understanding Europe and what is likely to happen there. Disagreements between nations often arise because their visions of what happened in the past and what is likely to happen in the future are different. Fragmentary and disjointed visions of Central and Eastern Europe influence foreign policy in a negative way. Perhaps if we understood why it is so important to keep the belt of nations between Germany and Russia independent rather than subjugated, we would have a better grasp on what works and what does not work in Europe. It is worth remembering that two world wars started in Central Europe, and to some extent these wars were due to the accumulation of superficial knowledge about what was going on there. As Krzysztof Rak recently wrote in the Polish daily *Rzeczpospolita*:

Russia's apparent desire to partition Ukraine (I am referring here to the proposals that Putin has diplomatically unfolded in informal conversations with Polish officials, among others), if put to practice, would become Russia's greatest political success since the fall of the USSR. Then Poland would have to become a neutral country whose neutrality would be guaranteed by Moscow and Berlin. The post-Soviet countries such as Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, would forever lose the possibility of joining the Euro-Atlantic institutions. The main geopolitical barrier between Germany and Russia would disappear; their "friendship" would be cemented. Washington would have to withdraw from Europe, because it would lose its influence in Central Europe, which means the ability to create in that region a geopolitical dam separating Germany from Russia. NATO would die a natural death. The European Union would be reshaped into a Euro-Asiatic Union that would combine Western Europe's economic power with the military power of Russia. This kind of alliance would allow Moscow, Berlin, and Paris to shape global politics as a partner equal to the United States and China (Rak).

If the process described by Rak were to take place, unrest in the belt of nations separating Germany from Russia would be guaranteed, and efforts to liberate Europe from authoritarian regimes would have to begin all over again. There is nothing amiss with paying a great deal of attention to Russia's political dimension, as well as to the truly great writers and artists Russia has produced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At the same time, we should not be living in a time warp when the USSR, commandeering its vast colonies in Asia and Central Europe, was indeed the second strongest empire on earth. These colonies are now independent or semi-independent, and oriented toward their own goals. These goals should be studied; they are diverse. The scarcity of information in the major media about the Ukrainian-Russian confrontation (in my opinion, this confrontation is crucial to the future of Europe) indicates that a good number of American Slavists and political commentators continue to look at Eastern and Central Europe through an ancient telescope and refuse to change their position in spite of the evidence that waits to be noticed and analyzed.

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