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Reports from behind the "Red Curtain." Experiencing the Border in Soviet Russia: Antoni Słonimski, *Moja podróż do Rosji* (1932) and Ante Ciliga *U zemlji velike laži* (1938)

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This article presents a comparative analysis of the personal experiences and impressions of 1930s Russia, as recounted by two figures: A. Słonimski, the Polish poet, editor, and founder of the influential literary group "Skamander," and A. Ciliga, a Croatian writer and former communist. Ciliga, an unruly Istrian, arrives in the "paradise of socialist progress" as a privileged foreign communist intellectual and university lecturer, only to end up imprisoned in the infamous Gulag system. In contrast, Słonimski, a customer of the state-run tourism agency Intourist and a journalist, travels across the Soviet Union, observing the inner workings of the Stalinist state and the pervasive taboos that shaped its atmosphere. Both autobiographical accounts offer valuable insights into the broader European context of the time. The experience of crossing borders – whether between capitalist and socialist societies, Western and Eastern Europe, or Europe and Asia – shapes the landscape, cities, and mentalities of the inhabitants in profound ways.

Keywords: Soviet Union; border; Communism; *homo sovieticus*; autobiographism; geopoetics; travel writing

> Many women wear red headscarves tied in a thick knot at the nape of their necks, tightly wrapped around their hair. It is the only, yet quite practical garment of the revolution. A red headscarf rejuvenates older women and lends the younger ones bold, erotic vigour. Red banners flutter from some houses. The red Soviet star adorns the doors and signboards. (…) Despite this, a Russian street is grey for me. The mass inhabiting it is grey. Grey devours the redness of headscarves, banners, badges and the golden glow of domes of temples. All those people are dressed poorly and sloppily. There is a strong sense of gravity, overwhelming in its sobriety, pompous in its poverty. A Russian street resembles a setting of social drama.
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> J. Roth, *Journey to Russia*

1. Introduction

This article compares the personal experiences and impressions of two individuals who visited Russia in the 1920s and 1930s: Antoni Słonimski (1895–1976), a Polish poet, journalist, and publicist, and the founder of the Skamander literary group; and Ante Ciliga (1898–1992), a Croatian writer, former communist, and future dissident. Both shared a belief in the power of the October Revolution and the changes sweeping through Russia at the time. Słonimski's collection of reportages, *Moja podróż do Rosji* (*My Journey to Russia*), was published in 1932,[1] while Ciliga's memoir *U zemlji velike laži* (*In the Land of the Great Lie*) first appeared in France in 1938 as *Au Pays du Grand Mensonge*, with the Croatian edition not released until 2007. The two men's experiences reflect their initial enthusiasm for the Soviet Union's promise of socialist progress. Ciliga, a young Croatian political activist, arrived in what he believed was "the paradise of socialist advancement" as a privileged foreign

1 Quite quickly translated into Croatian by Julije Benešić: *Moj put u Rusiju: putopisne impresije iz sovjetskih krajeva*, Tiskara narodnih novina, Zagreb, 1933.

communist, holding a teaching position in Leningrad and one of the Yugoslav Communist Party's leaders. However, after being denounced and spied on, he found himself imprisoned in the Soviet Union's notorious gulag system, a turning point that led him to abandon his ideological faith. Słonimski, on the other hand, visited the Soviet Union as a journalist and a client of the Inturist travel agency, driven by a desire to witness firsthand the reality of the country behind the "red curtain,"[2] fifteen years after the revolution. As a left-leaning critic of capitalism, Słonimski was hopeful for similar radical social changes in Poland and other European countries. However, his stay was marked by surveillance and growing suspicion of the Stalinist regime, which quickly soured his initial enthusiasm. The autobiographical accounts of both authors intertwine significant historical moments with personal reflections. Central to their experiences is the constant crossing of boundaries – whether geographical, mental, cultural, or political. Their arrival in the Soviet Union, formed on December 30, 1922, reinforced their sense of entering a world entirely different from their own. It became clear that the political border they had crossed was not just a geographic boundary but a wall separating the Western and Eastern world orders, capitalism and socialism, Europe and Asia.

This analysis of juxtaposed literary texts is framed through the lens of geopoetics[3] and the phenomenon of auto/bio/geo/graphy, which raises key questions: "(...) about the meaning of experiencing places and

2 In one of the later columns from 1936, Słonimski uses the term black curtain: "Our country is separating from both neighbours by a high wall of censorship. On the west, this wall has downbridges and moats covered with fascine. But on the east, the windows are veiled with black curtains so that not even the slightest ray of sunshine can seep through" (Słonimski, 2004, 23). On many occasions, he claimed that Polish censors distort the "truth" about Russia. Słonimski was said to sympathise with the communist. However, he regarded communism as a degenerated form of socialism. He declared himself a critic of capitalism, a socialist, not an "orthodox Marxist" (Kuciel-Frydryszak, 2012, 137). His standpoint had been changing over the years.

3 The spatial turn in humanities research initiated by, among others, Henri Lefebrve; reseraching interations between a literary text and geographical space, e.g. emotive topographies and places of memory (P. Nora); the mapping of space, literary text as geographical perception and experience, the literary imagined

space for self-discovery, the tension between location and dislocation on life's trajectory, about the role of autobiographical places as sites of individual and cultural memory, and about creating and understanding oneself in interaction with geographical space" (Rybicka, 2014, 284). Additionally, the post-modern concepts of identity presented by Zygmunt Bauman (Bauman, 1994, 21–33) offer a way to understand the subject in relation to a specific space – one that both influences them and where they seek to exist. This space is inhabited by both the stroller and tourist (the safely traveling Słonimski) as well as the vagabond and gambler (the rebellious Ciliga).[4] Both texts are shaped by subjective perspectives, driven by the evaluative gaze of a visitor from the West, from "proper" and "old" Europe. Although Słonimski's accounts were primarily written in a journalistic style (reportage, columns), they take on the characteristics of a travel journal – a personal itinerary following the classical structure of departure, journey, and return. In this structure, "the traveller assumes the role of the subject, and space (topos) takes on the role of the object" (Dean Duda, cited in Peruško Vindakijević, 2018, 56). "The journey and the subjectivity, as well as the intimacy of the experience it encompasses, facilitate constructing the perception of a given space. Peregrinations, sightseeing, and describing places appear to be 'culture-making missions' (…), resulting in both a portrait of the Other and a self-portrait" (Pieniążek-Marković, 2023, 17, 20). Over time, both Słonimski and Ciliga reveal themselves as enthusiasts of communism, yet they project onto the spaces they observe the cultural frameworks of the countries and regions they come from and to which they mentally belong.

geography (lieux d'imagination, represented by theorists such as: G. Bachelard, M. Foucault, M. Augé, E. Rewers, and others).

4 Although Bauman's patterns of personality refer to the context of postmodern societies, it is easy to assume that when discussing the issue from a contemporary perspective, peregrinations of both authors/protagonists aptly represent the attitudes mentioned above.

2. The Myth of Soviet Russia

After the First World War, which claimed millions of lives, countries that had just regained their independence after the fall of great empires were organising their living spaces; however, Europeans were simultaneously facing economic and spiritual crises (the time of post-war collective trauma). At the time, the Croatian territory emerged from the shadow of the Habsburg Monarchy, while Poland regained its independence after the partitions, and there were varying ideas on how to establish its statehood.[5] The events of the October Revolution and its subsequent propagandist portrayal fascinated not only the worker-peasant masses but also intellectual circles worldwide[6]. Even in the heart of the capitalist West, the communist ideal was seen as offering a vision of a better future and promising deliverance from social poverty and class exploitation: "The speed with which the country was changing in the early 1930s was dizzying. One could see progress all around – or at least that was what the soviet press and other propaganda outlets maintained – which led people to believe in the myth that they were witnessing the creation of a new world" (Figes, 2023, 212). For the supporters of the October Revolution worldwide, the USSR became the second "chosen" homeland. Particularly in the 1920s and 1930s, many Yugoslavs admired the economic and social transformations in the land of Big Brother.[7] In Soviet-Polish relations, the early 1930s was a period

5 Poland under Marshal Józef Piłsudski, authoritarian rule of the Sanation period 1926–1935; Croats in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, then in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia under the rule of the Karađorđevićs.

6 "Against the backdrop of the economic crisis into which the captalist world was sinking, those indisputable proofs of progress led many to believe unconditionally in Soviet system. But would they have thought the same if they had known that the White Sea-Baltic Canal was built on human bones?" (Figes, 2023, 212).

7 As early as in the 17th century and for various reasons, Russia became a destination of prominent fucures of South Slavic science and culture, for example Jurij Križanić, Stanislav Vinaver, left-leaning intellectuals like the enthusiasts of post-revolutionary changes: August Cesarec (*Današnja Rusija*, 1937; *Putovanje po Sovjetskom Savezu*, 1940) and Miroslav Krleža (*Izlet u Rusiju*, 1925), and later more influential members of the Yugoslav communist movement (Josip Broz Tito, Milovan Đilas, Aleksandar Ranković, and others).

of relative openness; hence, tours for "political tourists" (thoroughly supervised by party agents and officially assigned guides became popular.[8] Moscow became a communist Mecca for foreigners, not only for the travelling pilgrims of socialism but also for tourists driven by sheer curiosity. Visitors' impressions were deeply divided. For example, Joseph Roth (who spent nine weeks in Moscow, Leningrad and Siberia in 1926) wrote for *Frankfurter Zeitung*:

> The food is terrible – this abundance and cheapness, everything mixed up with fat – meat, cabbage, beetroot, potatoes. Hotels are horrible and people are greedy, dirty, and cringing; there are lots of beggars (…). I would rather spend Christmas in a civilised place. I finally parted with the East. We cannot expect anything from it (…). The light, perhaps, is coming from the East, but the day is only in the West (Roth, 2019, 186).

In turn, George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) was enthusiastically about the ideals of the USSR and, in his high-profile article *Touring in Russia* (published in a monthly "Nash's Pall Mall Magazine'), "(…) before departing, he said he was leaving the country of hope to return to the countries of despair. On the other hand, a Frenchman [Schreiber] claims that on seeing the Polish border, all travellers congratulated each other. Even Germans said 'Long live Poland'!" (Nowakowski 1938). Stanisław Cat-Mackiewicz gave a depressing and frightening picture of post-revolutionary Russia in his piece *Czy można się odżywiać morfiną? / Can You Feed on Morphine?* According to the author, malaise and lethargy – compared to a narcotic state – describe the Soviet man who is desensitised and indifferent to reality.[9]

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8 Apart from A. Słonimski, also others travelled to the USSR, for instance: Stanisław Cat-Mackiewicz, as the editor of Vilnius "Słowo", Wanda Kragen, the journalist for "Gazeta Polska" and the author of *Dymy nad Azją* (1934), Mieczysław Lepecki (*Sybir bez przekleństw*, 1934), Aleksander Janta-Połczyński (*Patrzę na Moskwę*, 1933 and *W głąb ZSRR*, 1933), Zygmunt Nowakowski (*W pogoni za formą*, 1934), Melchior Wańkowicz (*Opierzona rewolucja*, 1934).

9 "Russia, great, fertile, and productive Russia is starving like a stray dog (…). Foreigners are easily recognised in Russia as they are the only ones wearing hats

Soviet Russia remains an inexhaustible theme, a frequent topos, and the object of academic reflection. Its literary portrayal usually reveals an ambivalent attitude in the narrators, fluctuating between admiration and fear, fascination and phobia. This country emerges as a phantasm, imaginarium, ephemera, capturing the imagination of visitors, but also as "the border between worlds," a utopia, a promised land or a living hell. Accounts of journeys to Russia have a long-standing tradition, forming a particular sub-genre. Narratives of both enthusiasts and critics of the Soviet state have always ignited the imagination and curiosity of readers. They bring to mind an exotic culture and values distinct from the European ones and serve as a warning against an oppressive rule over (Tsarist) subjects and citizens (in the postrevolutionary classless state) in the country where the entire present generation is sacrificed in the name of the future utopian prosperity. In literary tradition, Polish travels to Russia expose a rather gloomy image since Siberia became a place of exile for thousands of Polish insurrectionists, conspirators, and confederates. In popular perception, Russia is associated with mystery and it became known as: a separate planet, a different continent (Milan Kundera)[10], non-Europe, an upside-down world, non-place, a country that does not exist (Leo Lipski)[11], a land of lie, a mock state, etc.

3. The arrival: familiarising with the space

As Anna Wieczorkiewicz notes: "The term tourist often denotes simply a cognitively limited and passive intruder" (Wieczorkiewicz, 2008, 6). At first, observing the world takes place primarily through visual

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and stiffly starched collars (...). Food shortages, hunger, queues for provisions, and unbearable stench – «the restaurant»" (Cat-Mackiewicz, 2012, 21, 24, 75).

10 "It charms and attracts us when it is far away, and it reveals all its terrible oddness when it surrounds us closely: it has a different (greater) dimension of despair, a different image of space (so vast that whole nations perish in it)" (Kundera, 1984, 19).

11 In the words of L. Lipski: "The changes in Russia cannot take place since this country does not exist, (...) it is a made-up country, and it is impossible to change it... as in Kafka" (Sariusz-Skąpska, 2012, 363).

perception (*sightseeing*), but over time, it transforms into a multisensory exploration, a tangible quest for native authenticity. Ante Ciliga arrived in the USSR in 1926 as a young Croatian communist. From the very beginning, his story revolves around various interpretations of boundaries. One of them is a reflection on the post that separated Europe and Asia:

> Having crossed the Volga, we began to climb the slopes of the Ural. (…) At some point, we passed the border post between Europe and Asia. For a European, those two words denote completely different, contrasting worlds. However, no fundamental changes in people or animals could be noticed. There was neither Asia nor Europe, only Russia. People were so conscious of this that it did not occur to anyone to identify Siberia as Asia. For the inhabitants of Siberia, Asia began in Turkestan, China and Japan (Ciliga 2007, 222).

Fig. 1. Aleksander Sochaczewski (died in 1923), *On the Border of Siberia* (or *Farewell Europe!*), 1890–1894. Muzeum Niepodległości w Warszawie (Museum of Independence in Warsaw), M.680

At first, he regarded this vast country through the eyes of a somewhat bewildered observer who is confronting his perceptions with the immediate experience. Over time, Ciliga grew critical of the political regime, eventually of Leon Trotsky and even Lenin, whom he previously admired. After joining the Communist Party of Russia, he could enjoy greater freedom and favour, which allowed him to comment on the current situation from a much closer (than Słonimski) perspective.

As a member of the Comintern, he spoke openly about the changes that, in his opinion, headed in the wrong direction and turned into distortions of the principles of revolution: "In real life in the Soviet Union, the prevailing social conditions proved that a reverse revolution triumphed there; it aimed to consolidate the society and it rested on foundations of a new oppression in the form of modernised exploitation" (Ciliga 2007, 19). It was not easy for Ciliga to lecture at the Communist University due to the all-pervasive falsification of the history presented to students. Academic falsifications were imposed at all levels of education and training, as well as systematic distortions of historical facts, political economy and other disciplines, all of which had to align with the party message. The Croatian dissident notes that only rhetorically did the authority and new ideology favour the peasantry and the working class who, in reality, were still exploited and degraded like slaves. The moral decay permeated social life and a privileged "new class" emerged in the classless society[12]. Although the bourgeois order was shattered, the bureaucrats seized power. Słonimski left for Russia incredibly excited about the journey, from which he had high expectations, intending to confront his perceptions of his eastern neighbour's dynamic progress with the actual state.

> When, after the last-minute rush, the time of the train departure came, and I was alone in the compartment, a wave of deep emotion washed over me. Will this journey take us to the land most different from the rest of the foreign world, to the promised land, the homeland of all working people, creativity and justice? What will people's faces on the other side of the border look like? What will their eyes be like? (...) Am I going to the country of red terror or to the state of living socialism, of which everyone has dreamt since childhood? (Słonimski, 2018, 5).

The founder of Skamander arrived in Russia in 1932 from rather poor Poland, which had only begun to reconstruct its independence after

12 Milovan Đilas, a famous Montenegrin dissident, similarly assessed the situation in his critical reflections on communism, *Nova klasa*, Londyn, 1957.

over a century of partitions and the suffering caused by the First World War, in which Poles often had to fight on opposite sides of the barricade.

Both authors devoted a lot of attention to descriptions of Soviet "ideal cities," which were often compared to agglomerations of Western Europe. Also, urban planning played an educational and propagandist role. The theatre, rallies, public gatherings, as well as the architecture of socialist realism – monumental brutalism present, for instance, in building construction and design of monuments – were to emphasise the power of the state to "facilitate the development of new type of the society and popularisation of *Homo sovieticus*" (Applebaum, 2018, 417). Moscow, aspiring to become the centre of the world like once was Jerusalem, was the symbol of proud achievements:

> Within a few years, it has transformed from a neglected, almost provincial tserkov city into an imperial capital with monumental architecture full of new townhouses, department stores, palaces of culture, parks and sports arenas. (…) The Moscow underground was a harbinger of a better future. (…) the splendour of these public spaces – contrasting with citizens' shabby "living spaces" (…) confirmed the widespread belief in the social aims and values of the Soviet order (Figes, 2023, 212–213).

However, listed by A. Wieczorkiewicz, modes of tourist experience (introduced by Erik Cohen: pilgrimage, cognitive journey or drifting) have a common element, namely comparing "own world" with the explored native reality (Wieczorkiewicz, 2008, 81–83). A. Ciliga, accustomed to Renaissance and Western European aesthetics and a Southerner who belongs to Mediterranean culture, notices the contrast between the European and, in his view, the oriental, poor and backward:

> The city looks quite different to what I had expected. Houses do not stand out. They seem old and poorly adapted to modern needs. This is the East, the "Holy Russia". Streets are covered with enormous slabs as in medieval Europe. Most passers-by wear shabby clothes, even rags. And soon, in the great light of autumn dust, the impression of backward poverty, of this Orient mixed with medieval Europe will become even gloomier. (…)

> Life in Russia (...), even from a distance, is not as beautiful nor happy as the foreign communist press claims, which I had also believed. Russia is the most "backward" country in Europe, but I had no idea of the extent of this backwardness (Ciliga, 2007, 25).

His accounts are ultimately dominated by the perspective of a European who is familiar with Occidental thinking of Russia as eternally lagging behind Europe. With time, the enthusiastic and curious perception of the country of his youthful ideals fades away.

> After three years in Moscow, I could barely believe that it had once been the capital of Russian tsars and not Tatar Khans. Every crookedly built-in stone, every lopsidedly carved inscription, and all those bizarre lines of buildings, roofs, windows and fences resembled the worn-out and old East. The new architecture was overshadowed by the mass of this living museum. Yet, one could notice the birth of the new world was present everywhere – a lot of old temples, bell towers, and old houses were demolished, the streets were being widened. A new style was emerging (Ciliga, 2007, 93).

Also Leningrad, where he lived for a few months before being arrested in May 1930, became the object of Ciliga's observations. According to him, a man travelling in Russia eventually forgets he is in Europe, whereas Leningrad retains European spirit and is a synthesis of everything that European metropolises have: "Leningrad is a piece of Europe in the boundlessness of Russia. (...) an enormous crossroad of streets drawn with precision as if done with a ruler, grand buildings, and palaces leave an unforgettable impression" (Ciliga, 2007, 95). He is similarly impressed with Sankt Petersburg, which was built in the style of Dutch cities, as well as with the famous Winter Palace, which was supposed to be the second Versailles. From Ciliga's accounts, it seems that he feels more comfortable in cities and surrounded by architecture resembling the western part of Europe. It is demonstrated by frequent, evaluative comparisons: like, similar to, modelled on, etc. Experiencing the urban space takes the form of existential experience; there is a formation of "self-consciousness and identity through territory" (Rybicka,

2014, 174). Similarly in Słonimski's works, the overall comparison favours the "proper" Europe and understanding of Europeanness.

4. *Homo sovieticus* and postrevolutionary everyday life

The contrast between red and grey seems to be the most apparent in the portrait of postrevolutionary Russia[13]. The energetic colour red became, among other things, the colour of the revolution, ideological agitation, anger (of masses), war, and bloodshed. The headscarves on women's heads are red, as are banners and the Soviet star that J. Roth wrote about. The "gate" on the Polish-Soviet border that Słonimski went through by train is red, too. However, in many accounts, the propagandist red seems obscured by the ubiquitous grey of concrete, gloomy landscape, everyday poverty, malaise, as well as intimidated and hungry people. The grey symbolises blandness, modesty, suppression, servitude, a mass instead of an individual, etc. Słonimski's account of a street parade reads: "The human material is wretched. Men have sunken chests and women have short legs and prominent busts. There are hardly any pretty legs, arms, and faces. (…) In the lines, you see people in their underpants and at least half of the paraders are barefoot" (Słonimski, 2018, 128). The October Revolution led to widespread societal changes, penetrating even the most intimate and private spheres of citizens' lives. It was also reflected in the new mentality of a Soviet man. A. Słonimski was mainly interested in ordinary people's everyday life. At first, his journalistic account is full of humorous descriptions and witty comments, revealing that the author of the text is enjoying himself. In the passages that follow, there is astonishment, shock and sadness at the distortion of lofty ideas of communism, the misuse of which he could observe. He judges the situation similarly to Ciliga: Lenin, Stalin and bureaucracy are blamed for everything, not the righteous idea of Bolshevism. The Pole senses the taboo surrounding the operation of Gulag

13 More on psychology and policy of colour, see: J. Gage, *Kolor i znaczenie. Sztuka, nauka i symbolika*, Kraków 2010; also in: W. Kopaliński, *Słownik symboli*, Warszawa 2015.

camps and becomes aware that his guides zealously guard state secrets, showing him only what was intended for the foreigners' eyes. He describes Russia as a country of misery and extreme poverty, a militia regime (where every knocking on the door could herald a search and arrest) and shortages: "a Soviet man is afraid of authority, but the Soviets' greatest fear is hunger" (Słonimski, 2018, 124). In shop windows, you can see ham and sausages made of wood as well as paper clothes. There is a shortage of bread, eggs, butter and other basic products. Members of GPU[14] and Red Army soldiers are seen as social parasites who abuse the privileges of their position. It is no coincidence that writing about the theatre, he calls it "food for the soul and body" as along with the ticket purchased for the performance, the audience had an opportunity to get better meals served at the theatre buffet. Ciliga noted that in grocery shops there was nothing but vodka. Five years of the New Economic Policy (NEP)[15] led to an economic crisis and a collapse of production, which was unable to secure the basic needs (mainly food) of the society.

Both observers look at the situation of women in the USSR, to whom Bolsheviks granted more liberties and made them equal to men in rights. At the same time, another important propaganda slogan was the idea of socialistic morality[16]. However, the theory conflicted with practice and became an infamous taboo. Prostitution flourished in urban nightlife, which was a common phenomenon widely accepted due to economic reasons – "for boosting the household budget"[17]. Even the wives of high-ranking state officials were involved in this practice (Ciliga, 2007, 92). Postrevolutionary societal changes were observed by, among others,

14 (Russian: Государственное Политическое Управление (ГПУ) – Gosudarstwiennoje politiczeskoje uprawlenije – State Political Directorate) – Soviet political police.

15 NEP, the New Economic Policy, a political-economic doctrine (Russian: Новая экономическая политика) https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nowa_Polityka_Ekonomiczna; more on this: (Figes, 2023, 201–221).

16 More on this: Fast, 2003, 210–225, Szperlik, 2014, 117–133.

17 A similar paradox and duplicity of the system is mentioned, among others, by J. Roth in his feuilleton *Kobieta, nowa moralność płciowa i prostytucja* (Roth, 2019, 81–87).

an English governess – Edith Kerby, who wrote that people barely spend time in their homes as they all queue for food. "No longer do we wear hats, only headscarves because Cossacks with whips ramp in the streets and attack all the bourgeoisie" (Pitcher, 2014, 186). Clearly, wearing elegant hats and the aforementioned stiffly starched collars was acceptable only in the painting by Repin.

Fig.2. Ilya Repin (died in 1930), *17th October 1905* (1907). https://pl.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plik:Repin_17October.jpg

During the revolution, the Orthodox Church experienced a deep crisis. Most clergy sided with the Stalinist authority, for the church's future depended on the state authorities, even if they were Soviet. Therefore, the task of the Orthodox church was to spread the faith in God and promote humble behaviour towards those in power. Ciliga notices another paradox: on the one hand, there was a war against religion described as "opium for the masses", while on the other, behind the scenes, Stalin fostered good relations with the Orthodox Church in Russia. The Croat mentions that there were local rebellions and acts of disobedience of popes and other priests, who, as a form of protest, organised a several-hour-long service so that the faithful could not go to work. The State of the Councils gained a new god – Joseph Stalin. Słonimski shares similar observations when he writes about a visit to the "anti-religious

museum", namely Lenin's Mausoleum in the former Sabor. In the government's efforts to secularise the society, another "secular religion" emerged – the cult of political leaders. "After fifteen years of revolution, the Orthodox Church in Russia is as cold as the Acropolis of Athens. You can visit it, but you cannot pray there anymore" (Słonimski, 2018, 89).

Ciliga managed to get close to and establish friendly relations with representatives of various social strata. Słonimski did not have such an opportunity as his personal "guide" – a quite humorously presented party functionary comrade Bronstejn – followed him everywhere. Moreover, many of his interlocutors showed mistrust towards him since they treated him as a visitor from "spoilt bourgeois Poland". Ciliga saw too much and he was too inquisitive, which cost him good relations with his Soviet employers. He wondered why, in its initial phase, the Bolshevik revolution embodied the most advanced progress of its time, yet in its later stages, its foundation became a lie and falsified history, the exploitation of the lowest classes by the privileged caste. Addressing the issue of the rule of law, he observes that "the Soviet Themis is not blind. It keeps one eye open – the left one" (Słonimski, 2018, 118). Ciliga compares the methods used by GPU agents, Checkists and militiamen to those of the Spanish Inquisition and the Jesuit order because they organised "hunts" for ordinary citizens who possessed gold and other valuables: "Later in Siberia, I met people, mostly old men and women, who were left for ten to twenty days in the harsh Siberian cold; they starved them and denied the water only to obtain the gold they apparently had" (Ciliga, 2007, 185). Those methods were reminiscent of the era of brutal and ruthless colonialism carried out by the Spanish conquistadors against Native American tribes. The Soviet state emerges as both a thief and a vampire, exploiting injustice against its own citizens.

5. Borders within borders: the deadly North, Gulag

During peregrinations over the Russian territory, especially Ciliga presents in his works not only maps or emotive topographies but also significant intersections and constellations of geographic-cultural elements, particularly along the axis: north/south, Russia/Europe, Slavism/

Asia culture. Many passages contain descriptions of crossing various borders: spatial, the author's transgressions in terms of worldview, and internal borders of the USSR. Ciliga, a Croat from Istria, used to Mediterranean climate, writes: "Because of relentless Russian winter, for the first time in my life, I yearned for the sun and sea of the South. Therefore, I decided to go to a village in the Crimea – Koktebel – between Feodosia and Sudak" (Ciliga, 2007, 37). As he travelled across Ukraine, he saw the consequences of the Great Famine (Ukrainian: Hołodomor 1932–1933). In the Caucasus, he travelled through charming Georgia, which has great deposits of natural resources but lacks the technology to mine them. He visited exotic places like Mount Kazbek, the Darial, Tamar, Tiflis, Terek, and two autonomous lands: Ingushetia and Ossetia. The most significant part of his Soviet odyssey was his arrival in the far North as a political prisoner and his confrontation with the nightmare of the gulags. The extensive literature on the phenomenon of Russia (in its negative and disturbing manifestation), concerns mainly the issue of gulags and the discourse of the camp, in which prisons and forced labour camps are portrayed as *a non-place* (*non-lieux*, P. Nora, M. Augé), "another world", "the bottom of hell", "inhumane land"[18]. The notions of Siberia and Gulag constitute an important topos in the discourse of Polish martyrdom. Camp literature addresses, among other topics, the issue of boundaries of humanness, beyond which lies cannibalism, dehumanisation, and a struggle for survival in conditions of hunger and extremely low temperatures. While Słonimski finished his Soviet peregrinations with a safe return to Warsaw, for Ciliga, a new chapter of exploring the State of the Councils began. He argued that the most profound level of his infiltrating the Soviet system was a five-year-long stay in prisons in Leningrad, Chelyabinsk, Werchneuralsk and Irkutsk. Thus, another border emerges: between a relatively comfortable life in freedom and suffering in "the infinite Soviet Hades, in the kingdom of

18 Because of the vast number of testimonies, it is worth mentioning some: Józef Czapski, *Na nieludzkiej ziemi* (Paris, 1949), Gustaw Herling Grudziński, *Inny świat. Zapiski sowieckie* (London, 1951). Study papers: Izabella Sariusz-Skąpska, *Polscy świadkowie GUŁagu. Literatura łagrowa 1939–1989* (Kraków 2012); Zuzanna Bogumił, *Pamięć Gułagu* (Kraków 2012), and others.

a communist Genghis Khan" (Ciliga, 2007, 163). Under the threat of execution. He decided to carry out his "exploratory mission" until the end, ready to lose his life: "My desire to learn this new Russia inside out justified every risk. (...) It was impossible to penetrate this world without going beyond the official and legal life, without entering the world of the convicted, the prisons, and the secret kingdom of the GPU. Only by this means could you know the real Russia, an undistorted reality, as created by «God and GPU»" (Ciliga, 2007, 164). Through Ciliga's account of his camp experience as a prisoner of the Gulag, yet another *limes* emerges – the border of humanness, humanity, the frontier between civilisation and barbarism[19]. While taming unfamiliar space, one needs to have "an integrated perspective of the world, in which geographical or topographical categories can be interchangeable with psychological or anthropological ones" (Margański, 2005, 271). In the context of studies on geopoetics, E. Rybicka emphasises that, as a rule, admiration for a landscape "indicates kitsch or parody" (Rybicka, 2014, 271). In Ciliga's works, they appear to be sincere, even emotionally overwhelming at times. The embedding of internal experiences in landscape descriptions (emotive topographies) relates to the difficult situation of a prisoner exiled to Siberia, far from home. For the Croatian writer, the focus of detailed descriptions became climatic conditions and the deadly harshness of the North; as a result, from that point, the existential experience unfolded along the line of north-south and not, as previously, in geopolitical and cultural comparisons between the east and the west:

> In the meantime, the winter came. The sleigh ride through the neverending snow of the taiga took five days. I felt as though I were in interstellar space, not on Earth. We made stops in remote villages, lost in the icy vastness. (...) The winter in Yeniseysk was harsh. The heavy sky that never cleared, stifled me. The dreadful coldness of winter, which lasted seven months, took away my will to live. My teeth and gums decayed;

19 As a communist, Ciliga was later (1941) a prisoner of Ustasha concentration camp of Jasenovac, which he described in his memoir *Jasenovac: ljudi pred licem smrti. Uspomene iz logora /Jasenovac: people in the face of death. Memories from the Camp* (Zagreb, 2011).

> I noticed the first symptoms of the scurvy. The North was killing me (Ciliga, 2007, 352).

Descriptions of nature – more frequent in Ciliga's works, as he traverses the interior of the Soviet empire ("from the Adriatic coast to the border with the Arctic" (Ciliga, 2007, 349) – are integrated with his emotional states. In many passages, he does not mask a feeling of loneliness, alienation, depressive states and suicidal thoughts. As a result of his stay in Siberia prisons, he suffered from many illnesses and was in a poor psychological state (he undertook a hunger strike twice and tried to commit suicide by cutting through his veins with a hidden razor blade). In the end, *U zemlji velike laži* changes from a journey memoir into a literary testimony of the functioning of gulags[20] and is ahead of *The Gulag Archipelago* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1973, published also in France) and *Kolyma Tales* by Varlam Shalamov (London, 1978). Ciliga, on the other hand, resembles Nikolai Salmanovich Rubashov, the protagonist of *Darkness at Noon* by Arthur Koestler (*Sonnenfinsternis*, 1940), who, in his prison cell, can expect nothing more than a sudden "dehumanised" death.[21]

6. Disappointments and returns

Ciliga was released from prison on December 3, 1935. He owed his life and the fact he was able to leave the USSR to fortunate political circumstances (the Stalin-Mussolini agreement). As a resident of Istria, Ciliga was, in a sense, an Italian citizen (Istria belonged to Italy since

20 Another Croatian communist, Karlo Štajner, a former prisoner of the Gulag, described a grim truth about Stalinist Russia in his autobiographical novel *7000 dana u Sibiru, 1936.–1956*. (1958, published in 1971). It is also worth mentioning the work by Josip Badalic, *Hrvatska svjedočanstva u Rusiji*, Zagreb 1945.

21 "He knew that executions took place at night, in the basement and that the prisoner is killed with the shot at the back of his neck (…). The death of a communist was not a solemn rite but lacked romantic aspects. It was a logical consequence, a circumstance taken into account (…); they said – «physical elimination». (…) Death as an element of logical calculation lost its intimate/physical dimension" (Koestler, 2019, 118–119).

1918) and had an Italian passport. The final passages read that "the deliverance from Russia is a return to life, to Europe, a return from the land of a big lie. (...) in silence, I lay my beloved myth of infallible Lenin to the grave" (Ciliga, 2007, 360). When disappointment prevailed in his outlook, he wrote later in Paris in 1937: "The myth of Soviet Russia is one of the most tragic misunderstandings of our time" (Ciliga, 2007, 20). The Croat predicted the fall of Stalinism in his work *O bonapartizmu* / *On Bonapartism* (1932). His autobiographical legacy is a vivisection of Bolshevism and its perversion (an Asian variation on a utopian idea). In Ciliga's view, Russians were not capable of implementing the principles of socialist society. Perhaps, a better version of socialism could have been implemented in England or America? Słonimski came to similar hypotheses and conclusions: "If the social revolution had happened not in Slavic Russia but in England, as by the way Marx imagined, who knows, maybe we would already have the socialist United States of the World" (Słonimski, 2018, 134). Also, for Słonimski, the USSR was, in the beginning, a myth and a dream-come-true land. Yet, after his return, he wrote that the journey to Russia proved "the furthest, the most fascinating and the most difficult in his life" (Słonimski, 2018, 6). He expressed it in the column for *Kroniki tygodniowe*, where he wrote about the state of the "red terror" as a laboratory in which a gigantic social experiment is carried out with the use of force, manipulation and falsifying reality. The Skamandrite compares Stalin to a barbarian, troglodyte and the mythical Minotaur who, in his labyrinth, devours his own people and comrades: "The Greek labyrinth was not as dark and windy as the intricate maze of the Moscow trials" (Słonimski, 2004, 245). The Polish poet returned from the USSR dispirited and disillusioned, with a sensation of "mental relaxation after several weeks of tension (...) and deep Eastern sadness," but when asked "how is it there?" he replies: "It is hard to answer in a few words. Both bad and good" (Słonimski, 2018, 137–138). Having published his feuilletons, he was no longer invited to the Russian embassy receptions. Communist circles in Poland accused him of describing falsehoods, whereas the rightists' supporters said that while in Russia, "he misunderstood what he was observing" (Kuciel-Frydryszak, 2012, 136). The disputes surrounding Słonimski and Ciliga last till this day. Their fates as emigres unfolded differently. As a Croatian nationalist

and Soviet dissident, Ciliga lived later in Rome and Paris, among others. Słonimski left for London in September 1939 where, as a Pole of Jewish descent, he escaped the looming spectre of fascism.

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