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# **Between the White Eagle and the Crescent: Polish *Go-Betweens* in the Ottoman Empire in the Early Modern and Modern Eras**

(Agnieszka Aysen Kaim, *Ludzie dwóch kultur. Wybrane przypadki transgresji kulturowej Polaków w Imperium Osmańskim w XVII, XVIII i XIX wieku*, Warszawa: Instytut Slawistyki PAN, 2020, 318 pages)

Agnieszka Aysen Kaim's book *Ludzie dwóch kultur. Wybrane przypadki transgresji kulturowej Polaków w Imperium Osmańskim w XVII, XVIII i XIX wieku* ("The People of Two Cultures: Selected cases of cultural transgression of Poles in the Ottoman Empire (17<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> c.)") (Kaim, 2020) is a timely contribution to the ever-growing field of transcultural and transimperial history and engages with the phenomenon of the "*go-between*s" or "transcultural agents". The author presents cases of biculturality in a microhistorical dimension and provides the reader with a fresh perspective on this subject by recounting the trajectories of three case

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studies originating from the lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. She uses these to examine the phenomena of cultural transgression and multiculturalism from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century.

The three figures that the author selected as representatives of their respective historical periods are Wojciech Bobowski (Ali Ufkî Bey, 17<sup>th</sup> century), Salomea Regina Pilsztynowa (18<sup>th</sup> century) and Konstanty Borzęcki (Mustafa Celâleddin Pasha, 19<sup>th</sup> century). As the author argues, the discussed historical actors, who acted as cultural brokers, “set examples of complication of one’s identity on the border of Polish – Christian and Ottoman – Muslim cultures in the cases of well-known Polish figures who represented *go-betweens*, captives, émigré converts and Turcophile travellers who prospered in the Ottoman Empire” (Kaim, 2020, p. 14).<sup>1</sup> By examining these three case studies, Kaim intends to shed new light on the issue of religious conversion and the place of converts in the multicultural, multi-ethnic and multiconfessional Ottoman milieu over the course of three centuries. In this respect, her study inscribes itself very well into the existing scholarship in this field, which includes Nathalie Rothman’s *Brokering Empire: Trans-Imperial Subjects between Venice and Istanbul* (Rothman, 2011) and Tobias Graf’s *The Sultan’s Renegades: Christian-European Converts to Islam and the Making of the Ottoman Elite, 1575–1610* (Graf, 2017) as far as the early modern period is concerned, and Selim Deringil’s *Conversion and Apostasy in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Deringil, 2012) when it comes to the nineteenth century. Kaim’s book complements these works by introducing a nuanced East-Central European perspective.

The author investigates the three afore-mentioned historical actors from the perspective of contemporary cultural studies by applying anthropological theories (cultural syncretism, identity in multicultural societies), with a particular focus on the category of cultural transgression, understood as a bundle of shifting interactions. In the analysis of transgressive processes in the life trajectories of selected individuals, special attention is paid to the issue of religious conversion to Islam, and its circumstances, character, and consequences. As the theoretical basis for the interpretation of the theory of transgression, “A Preface to Transgression” by Michel Foucault (1977) and *Transgresja i kultura* (“Transgression and Culture”) by Józef Kozielecki (2002) are used, and the author defines transgression for the purposes of her work as a process that leads to social development and crosses social norms and boundaries, religious and moral ones included (Kaim, 2020, p. 14).

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<sup>1</sup> All the translations are mine.

The book is divided into four chapters preceded by a concise introduction and followed by a conclusion. The first three chapters provide a necessary historical background for the study of three case studies of cultural transgression that is offered in the fourth chapter.

In the first chapter, entitled “Identity” (*Tożsamość*), the author focuses on the question of identity in the Ottoman Empire. She discusses models of identity in light of contemporary scholarship, with a particular focus on the “lid model” put forward by Cemal Kafadar in his pioneering work *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State* (Kafadar, 1995; cf. Kaim, 2020, pp. 18–19). She also examines the functioning of the millet system (Kaim, 2020, pp. 22–25), conceptualizes interreligious relations in Ottoman society through the categories of “tolerance” and “coexistence” (Kaim, 2020, pp. 26–30), and highlights the phenomenon of polyglotism that was common in the Ottoman Empire (Kaim, 2020, pp. 30–32).

The second chapter, entitled “From Res Publica to the Ottoman Empire” (*Z Rzeczypospolitej do Imperium Osmańskiego*), is a survey of the various ways in which inhabitants of the Kingdom of Poland and subsequently of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth made their way to the Ottoman Empire. In this chapter, drawing on several examples, Kaim sheds light on the various career paths of those who voluntarily or, more often than not, involuntarily found themselves throughout the centuries in the Ottoman realms. She also discusses the reception of converts by society back at home and focuses on the issue of “social death” that many of those who became Muslims experienced in relation to their fellow countrymen (Kaim, 2020, pp. 52–57).

The third chapter, “Conversion” (*Konwersja*), is dedicated to the process of conversion. By focusing on examples from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and from Europe in general, the author examines the motives that accompanied the decision to convert (Kaim, 2020, pp. 66–71) and elucidates the formalities of conversion to Islam (Kaim, 2020, pp. 71–74) and all the rules that accepting the new religion involved, such as the adoption of new attire (Kaim, 2020, p. 76) or circumcision (Kaim, 2020, pp. 77–79).

The fourth chapter, entitled “The Characteristics of Conversion to Islam in the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Case Studies” (*Charakterystyka konwersji na Islam w XVII, XVIII i XIX wieku. Studia przypadków*), is considerably longer than the preceding ones and constitutes the actual core of this work. Each subchapter examines a respective case study that is representative of the seventeenth, eighteenth or nineteenth century and investigates various

aspects of the life trajectory and transgression of each historical actor under scrutiny.

As far as the sources are concerned, Kaim meticulously examines the existing secondary literature that is dedicated to these historical actors yet is largely not known to Polish readers. Extensive use is made of this material, and it is richly complemented with primary source material from archives and libraries in Poland, France, and Turkey.

Accordingly, the first subchapter is dedicated to the seventeenth century figure of Wojciech Bobowski (Ali Ufkî Bey), who found himself at the court of Sultan Murad IV (r. 1623–1640) as a captive and rose to prominence as a polyglot dragoman, a musician whose compositions are considered among the most important in seventeenth-century Ottoman music. Bobowski was also composer of the Ottoman *Psalter*, translator of the Bible into Ottoman Turkish, author of a grammar of the Ottoman Turkish language as well as of a unique description of the *Enderûn*, i.e., “Interior Service” of the Ottoman Imperial Court. Kaim examines these various aspects of Bobowski’s Ottoman career. She analyses him as an example of a *go-between*, investigates his role in diplomatic contacts and the transfer of knowledge, and focuses extensively on the issues of his identity and the allegiances that accompanied his religious transgression (Kaim, 2020, pp. 92–164).

The second subchapter focuses on the ventures of the eighteenth-century Salomea Pilsztynowa – a peripatetic self-taught eye doctor who at the height of her career served as a physician in the imperial harem of Sultan Mustafa III (r. 1757–1774) (Kaim, 2020, pp. 165–208). Pilsztynowa is the only female character under analysis in Kaim’s work and is also the only individual who did not convert to Islam. Instead, the author analyses her life trajectory as an example of cultural and emancipatory transgression. As she argues, Pilsztynowa’s case “confirms how much the Ottoman environment favoured this process” (Kaim, 2020, p. 13). The main source of Pilsztynowa’s ventures is her memoir, entitled *Echo of the journey and adventures of my life*, compiled in 1760, which takes the reader on an unprecedented journey from St. Petersburg in the North, to Kiev in the East, to Istanbul and Sofia in the South, and to Vienna and Wrocław in the West, and which has recently been published in English (Pilsztynowa, 2021).<sup>2</sup> By using Pilsztynowa’s memoir, the author

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<sup>2</sup> For another edited translation of the parts of the diary that pertain to the Ottoman Empire, see: Pilsztynowa, 2017.

explores the various roles of this fascinating eighteenth-century travelling woman: skilful medical practitioner, resourceful entrepreneur, slave owner, mother, wife and lover.

In the final subchapter, Kaim examines the figure of Konstanty Borzęcki, aka Mustafa Celâleddin Pasha (1826–1876), an émigré of the 1848 Revolution in Greater Poland and a convert to Islam who rose to the rank of general and gained posthumous fame thanks to his work *Les turcs anciens et modernes* (“The ancient and modern Turks”; Djelaleddin, 1869).<sup>3</sup> The latter gained him the label of one of “the pioneers of Turkish nationalism” (Kaim, 2020, p. 248). The author examines Borzęcki’s case as an example of transgression resulting from religious conversion based on political motives (Kaim, 2020, p. 13) since – like some of his fellow compatriots who found themselves within the Ottoman borders following the failure of the 1848 Revolution in Hungary – he resolved to convert to Islam to continue serving the Polish cause in the Ottoman Empire and to avoid extradition. She situates his case within the broader milieu of the Polish political emigration to the Ottoman Empire because, for a few decades in the nineteenth century, Istanbul was, next to Paris, the most important destination for Polish exiles from the lands of partitioned Poland-Lithuania (Kaim, 2020, pp. 212–224). In this subchapter, the author also focuses on the figure of his son Hasan Enver Pasha (1857–1929), a general, diplomat, and member of the political entourage of Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909), and examines him as a successor of his father’s work (Kaim, 2020, pp. 253–262).

In the conclusion of her work, Kaim suggests some necessary changes in the terminology concerning converts to Islam in Polish scholarship. Taking cues from Western European and North American scholars, she proposes replacing pejoratively marked terms such as “renegade” (*renegat*) or “a person who has become Turk” (*poturczeniec*) with neutral terms such as “go-between”, “cultural broker”, or “transcultural medium” (Kaim, 2020, pp. 269–276).

The undeniable strength of the work is that by focusing on three different figures whom the author deemed representative of the phenomenon of cultural transgression, she combines in her analysis both the early modern and the modern period – in general and within each chapter. Her goal is to demonstrate the changes over time as well as the continuities from one epoch to the next.

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<sup>3</sup> Reprinted in 1870 in Paris by Librairie Internationale and in Brussels by A. Lacroix, Verboeckhoven.

Owing to the fact that the author combines in her analysis elements typical of transcultural history – microhistory as well as biography – the final result is not only a presentation of the process of transgression, but every character serves as a sort of analytical window by means of which Kaim sheds light on these historical periods as well as the various processes and phenomena that characterized them. Accordingly, the figure of Konstanty Borzęcki, aka Mustafa Celâleddin Pasha, for instance, helps us to understand the complicated process of the development of modern Turkish nationalism. Moreover, in her analysis the author does not limit herself to the selected three case studies. To the contrary, she constantly makes references to many other figures from both the Polish and a broader European context. For example, when examining Salomea Pilsztynowa, she compares her to her contemporary, the renowned wife of the British ambassador to the Sublime Porte, Lady Mary Wortley *Montagu* (1689–1762). In the same spirit, when analysing the trajectory of Wojciech Bobowski, aka Ali Ufkî Bey, she refers to the experiences of other Polish and Venetian dragomans or to those of European captives of Algerian corsairs. Such references undoubtedly help to situate the experiences of the historical actors under scrutiny within the broader context of the relations between the Ottoman Empire (or, more generally, the Muslim world) and Europe.

The book is also a collection of captivating vignettes. Accordingly, through the story of Bobowski the reader catches a glimpse of the seventeenth century *Enderûn*. Thanks to the story of the Borzęcki family, we investigate the stages of the military career in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire. Finally, we learn how Pilsztynowa – a foreign woman in the Ottoman realms – carved out for herself a professional niche and, owing to her status, achieved more than both cultures normally allowed women.

Finally, the human touch is omnipresent in the book as, in her narration on Bobowski, Pilsztynowa and Borzęcki, the author successfully combines the elements of their respective biographies as both public and private figures. This is an indisputable strength of this work since without attempting to comprehend their private sphere of life one cannot understand their motives for transgression and the steps that these actors took.

In the conclusion, Kaim writes: “There were many such Bobowskis, Borzęckis and Pilsztynowas but unfortunately not all of them left behind ego-documents or works that would allow us to examine their transgression from the perspective of their biographical experiences” (Kaim, 2020, p. 276).

One may, however, wonder whether it was only the richness and accessibility of the sources that encouraged the author to select these three figures and not precisely the exceptional qualities of their fascinating life trajectories.

All in all, Agnieszka Ayšın Kaim's *Ludzie dwóch kultur* is a timely contribution to various fields, and both specialist and non-specialist readers will find it accessible and engaging. A translation of this work would certainly be of great benefit to those scholars who do not read Polish.

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## **Między Białym Orłem a Półksiężycem – polscy pośrednicy w Imperium Osmańskim w epoce nowożytnej**

Recenzja monografii naukowej *Ludzie dwóch kultur. Wybrane przypadki transgresji kulturowej Polaków w Imperium Osmańskim w XVII, XVIII i XIX wieku* autorstwa Agnieszki Ayšən Kaim (Warszawa: Instytut Sławistyki PAN, 2020, 318 ss.).

**Słowa kluczowe:** recenzja, Polacy, Imperium Osmańskie, transgresja kulturowa, turkologia, *Ludzie dwóch kultur*

## **Between the White Eagle and the Crescent: Polish go-betweenes in the Ottoman Empire in the early modern and modern eras**

This article is a review of the study entitled *Ludzie dwóch kultur. Wybrane przypadki transgresji kulturowej Polaków w Imperium Osmańskim w XVII, XVIII i XIX wieku* [The People of Two Cultures: Selected cases of cultural transgression of Poles in the Ottoman Empire (17<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> c.)], authored by Agnieszka Ayšən Kaim (Warszawa: Instytut Sławistyki PAN, 2020, pp. 318).

**Keywords:** review, Poles, Ottoman Empire, cultural transgression, turkology, *Ludzie dwóch kultur*

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